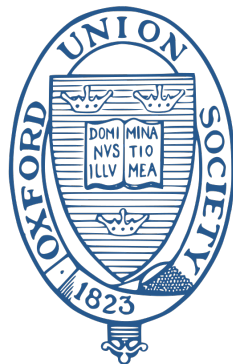


DEBATING AT OXFORD SCHOOLS

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PREFACE

The Oxford Union Guide to Schools' Debating was first written in 2005, and revised in 2008, by Jonathan Bailey and George Molyneaux. At that time, the authors wrote:

“When the Oxford Union Society set up its Schools Debating Competition in 1994 it was an attempt to extend what was, at least at the time, a predominantly university student activity to school pupils across the country. Over the last decade the number of schools involved in the competition has continually increased: each year, the competition now helps pupils from more than 250 schools to develop their debating skills, by providing opportunities to compete against those from other schools.

[...]

However, many schools have asked for something more permanent than a workshop, to serve as a reference work and give continuing coaching assistance. This guide is intended to provide comprehensive coverage of debating in general and the British Parliamentary style in particular. Whilst it does cover the basics of debating and the British Parliamentary style in some detail, we hope there is also enough depth to help even the most experienced school-age debaters.”

Our aims are substantially similar. Though the rules of Oxford Schools have changed little in the intervening years, and the key qualities of good arguments even less so, the norms and standards surrounding schools debating have evolved significantly. Much of that evolution is positive: it reflects the increase in our expectations of schools debaters, in line with the general increase in their abilities. However, the change has rendered large portions of Bailey and Molyneaux's original guidebook dated. The most significant difference, perhaps, is that style, content and strategy are no longer separately evaluated as marking criteria for speeches. To bring the advice in line with modern practice in these and other areas, we have substantially revised this guidebook, so that it might be an up-to-date, introductory guide to BP debating at Oxford Schools.

This guide is not intended to be comprehensive; it could not hope to cover every skill and niche that debating encompasses. Rather, its purpose is as a springboard to other resources. Hopefully, this ensures that someone with no exposure to debating might understand what is meant in an online workshop when, for instance, the speaker says that “it is very important for whips to ensure they give enough time to the extension to weigh over the other team on the bench.” If that sentence is currently incomprehensible to you, then you are the target audience of this guide.

The last major revision to this guide was made in January 2025.

Note: This guide contains many examples of motions, to illustrate the points made. Not all the motions used as examples are appropriate, deep and balanced enough to be set at Oxford Schools, and so should not be taken as indicators of the motions that will be set.

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A BROAD OVERVIEW

The format of debates at Oxford Schools is known as the *British Parliamentary* (BP) format. As the name suggests, it takes inspiration from debates in the House of Commons, though the resemblance is only very superficial. Every debate has a *motion*, which is what the debate is about. Because of its parliamentary roots, BP motions always contain – and typically begin with – the phrase “This House”, often abbreviated “TH”. An example of a motion is “This House would lower the voting age to 16”.

The debate then takes place among four teams, which are the Opening Government, Opening Opposition, Closing Government and Closing Opposition.¹ The two Government teams speak in favour of the motion, while the two Opposition teams speak against the motion. However, the two teams on either side are not working together: the aim of every team is to beat all three other teams in the round. Exactly how a team can beat another team on its own side is covered in Section 2.3. Sides are allocated to teams, they do not choose them.

Each team consists of two members, who speak once each. At Oxford Schools, speeches are limited to five minutes, though at university competitions seven minutes is the norm. Each speaker has a specific title:

- The first speaker of the Opening Government is the *Prime Minister* (PM), and the second is the *Deputy Prime Minister* (DPM).
- The first speaker of the Opening Opposition is the *Leader of the Opposition* (LO), and the second is the *Deputy Leader of the Opposition* (DLO).
- The first speaker of the Closing Government is the *Member of the Government* (MG), and the second is the *Government Whip* (GW).
- The first speaker of the Closing Opposition is the *Member of the Opposition* (MO), and the second is the *Opposition Whip* (OW).

Strange as it may seem at first, debaters really do use these titles! It is common to hear debaters say something along the lines of: “This was the argument given in the PM, and here is how the DLO responded to it.” The speeches are given in the following order: PM → LO → DPM → DLO → MG → MO → GW → OW. Unlike some other formats of debate, no debater speaks more than once.

The motion is announced 15 minutes before the start of the debate. In this time, debaters may only prepare with their teammate. They are not allowed to consult any printed or online materials, nor to communicate with teachers, friends or members of other teams.² Once the debate starts,

¹ Debaters commonly refer to the two *benches*, the Government bench and the Opposition bench, and the two *halves*, the Opening half and the Closing half.

² They may ask clarificatory questions about the motion to the organisers. Generally, only definitional ambiguities will be addressed. For instance, in the motion “TH would abolish grades in schools”, it is a genuine ambiguity whether “grades” refers to exam marks or schooling years (as in the American usage). The organisers will therefore answer questions from teams that pertain to this ambiguity, though of course such a motion should not be set – for precisely this reason. In contrast, motions that require real-world knowledge are set with the expectation that debaters have such age-appropriate knowledge, and so organisers will not answer a question like “What is the Premier League?” More on this in Chapter 5.

everyone present is expected to maintain an appropriate level of decorum while the eight speeches are given. After the debate, the adjudicator(s) will make their assessment of the performance of the four teams. They will then rank the four teams from first to fourth. This ranking is based on the performance of the *teams*, not the *sides*. It is possible, for instance, for Opening Government to rank first and Closing Government to rank last, or vice versa.

The adjudicator(s) may or may not announce the result of the debate, depending on the policy of the tournament and specific round. If they do, they will first offer an *oral adjudication*, which is a summary of the reasons for the ranking given. They will typically then offer some feedback to teams and individual speakers. Otherwise, the debate is over once the last speech has been given.

DEBATING SKILLS

There is really only one debating skill: persuasion. Of course, this description is as broad as it is unhelpful. It is nonetheless useful to bear in mind as we move forward. Often, debaters become caught up in trying to rigidly follow some specific schema for arguments, or structuring their speeches in a particular way. Doubtless those tools can be helpful, but only as means to the end of persuading the judges of your position, and not as goals to be met in themselves.

2.1 MAKING ARGUMENTS

To participate in the debate, you must give arguments for or against the motion. Fundamentally, an argument is a collection of reasons which support a conclusion, which in turn supports your team's position. The strength of an argument therefore consists in (i) the strength of those reasons, and (ii) the strength of the links between those reasons and the conclusion.

Consider the motion "TH would break up large tech companies", and the following two arguments an Opening Government team might make:

A1: Large tech firms have a pernicious influence on society through their propagation of fake news and viral content. Therefore, we should break up large tech firms.

A2: The size of large tech firms means that they face little competition in their particular industry. This allows them to set high prices, without increasing the quality of their products. To improve the market for consumers, we should break up large tech firms.

I hope you agree that A2 is a better argument than A1. But why? First, A2 is *better-explained*. It shows more clearly why the phenomenon it identifies, namely the prevalence of uncompetitive market practices, is a harm that ought to be addressed. In contrast, A1 merely suggests that "fake news and viral content" might exist, leaving it open whether these are significant problems. Second, A2 is more *relevant*. A1 merely shows that large tech firms often act poorly, and fails to link this to the specific proposal of breaking them up. In contrast, A2 shows a clearer link between a societal harm and the proposed policy.

Using examples

Debaters are often told that they must use examples to support the arguments they make. However, not every example is equally valuable; some are not helpful at all.

Very rarely useful are *anecdotal examples* – examples drawn from a debater's own life. Recall that the aim of a debate speech is to convince the judge of something generally true about society. Anecdotal examples, then, almost never fulfil this role, since the experience of one debater is, in general, a poor guide to societal trends.

Similarly, *statistics* are often also far less useful than debaters imagine. The reason for this is that claims in debates cannot be fact-checked: the judge has no access to the internet during the debate, and should they be familiar with a specific statistic that a speaker cites, they are explicitly told to disregard that specialist knowledge in their adjudication. Thus, citing statistics adds little value to arguments when neither the other teams in the round nor the judge can verify them.

The most useful kinds of examples are those that demonstrate a *trend*. For instance, in a debate about austerity and welfare spending, a debater might cite examples of successful welfare policies in various European countries. The function of those examples is to show that welfare policies can be implemented in an economically viable manner, thereby increasing the persuasiveness of the speaker's otherwise purely analytical point. Naturally, some motions admit of examples more easily than others. "TH opposes the Euro" is a debate almost entirely about examples, whereas "TH opposes the narrative that hard work leads to success" is far less so.

Language

It is not the case that a better argument is one formed of longer or more complicated words. In fact, the opposite is often true: debaters use complex vocabulary to mask an actual lack of clarity in thinking, an attempt which judges will almost always see through. Of course, there are times when the precision of a technical term is important – "royalties", when applied to intellectual property, has a particular meaning that is not adequately captured by "payments" or "fees". But even in these cases, it is good practice to also explain a technical term using simpler words, on the off-chance that even the judge is confused by its use.

2.2 REBUTTAL

Rebuttal is the inverse of making arguments: your aim is to show that your opponents' arguments do not succeed. Even more so than arguments, there are myriad ways to construct rebuttals, and every debater will have their own advice on what types of rebuttals work best. Here we offer some very broad advice for how to think about rebuttals.

Listening

In general, the most important step to developing strong rebuttals is *listening closely*. A common mistake debaters make is listening only to the title of an opponent's argument, and writing a rebuttal in response to what they assume will follow in its body. The particulars of an argument matter, however. A speaker who is able to give a specific response that closely tracks the logic of their opponent's argument will always out-perform a speaker who responds only generically to the broad strokes of the other teams.

Challenging reasons

The simplest way to rebut an argument is to show that its supporting reasons are untrue. For example, if your opponent argues that the increased use of social media and the internet is likely to lead to political liberalisation,

you might challenge this claim, and point to counter-examples in China or the Middle East. In this way, you show that your opponent's argument is defective because the premises on which it relies are false.

When rebutting in this way, however, it is important not to fall in to the trap of "counter-asserting". This means simply claiming the opposite of what your opponents have said, without giving any more substantive justification for why your claim is more believable than theirs. Rather than making assertions, try as far as possible to back up your claims with strong reasoning.¹

Assessing the relative importance of arguments

It is not always possible to plausibly claim that an opponent's reasons are all false. After all, if this were true, there would be little need for debates. More realistically, arguments typically fail because, although some of the reasons given in their favour are true, there are *stronger* countervailing reasons which your opponent has failed to mention.

Consider the motion "TH would raise the minimum wage." If you're on the Government bench, it's almost impossible to contest an Opposition team's claim that raising the minimum wage would improve living standards for some low-wage workers, in some ways. Attempting to directly challenge the notion that higher wages are better for most workers seems futile. However, you could observe that the level of a worker's wage is not the only contributor to their welfare. Here, you could bring in concerns about unemployment, or the budgetary burden on governments being passed on to taxpayers. Thus, although you do not directly challenge Opposition's claim that higher wages are better for workers, you show that this argument neglects other ways in which workers' lives might be made worse by the policy.

The important step here is to *weigh*. In debate jargon, weighing is what speakers do when they show that a certain argument is more important than another. This is not about which argument is valid: when a speaker weighs two arguments, they accept that both arguments are valid, but suggest that the outcomes of one are far more important than the outcomes of the other. A speech on the earlier motion might weigh as follows:

"Let's suppose it is true that a higher minimum wage will help workers by increasing their disposable income, but also that it will increase unemployment. Unemployment is clearly the more significant of these impacts, because workers who are unemployed have no way at all to provide for their families, and often lose key benefits such as health insurance. So, even if we accept that salaries are slightly lower with a lower minimum wage, this is not as bad as causing significant unemployment."

In general, weighing is an important skill that judges will look for, particularly at the higher levels of debating. It is more accurate to the real world as well. It is almost never true that all arguments in favour of a certain position are valid, and all arguments against it are not. Rather, it is far more likely that there are valid arguments on both sides, but that the arguments of one side are more important than the arguments of the other.

¹ You might wonder what happens when a debate reaches a factual impasse: where two teams have made opposing assertions, and neither successfully shows that their assertion is better-reasoned. This issue is addressed in our discussion of judging standards, in Chapter 5.

Thinking about burdens

Here we introduce another piece of debate jargon, the *burden*. Roughly, the burdens of a team are the claims they need to prove in order to prove their side of the motion. When it comes to simple motions, that are phrased directly, the burdens are clear. On the motion “TH believes that nationalism does more harm than good”, the burden on the Government is to show that it does, and the burden on the Opposition is to show that it doesn’t.

With more complicated motions, however, the burdens can become much harder to identify. Consider the motion “TH believes that the United States should impose sanctions on Afghanistan.” Here, it is not enough for a Government team to prove that Afghanistan is a dangerous power, nor even that the US should therefore do something to contain Afghan influence. Rather, the Government must show why *sanctions in particular* are a suitable policy tool to address the dangers Afghanistan poses. It is perfectly permissible for an Opposition team to agree with large parts of the Government case, and accept that Afghanistan is a malicious actor, but simply claim that sanctions are the wrong tool for the job.

When rebutting, then, thinking about the burdens of the other team is often a fruitful way to develop your rebuttals. If you successfully identify a burden that the other team has missed, and thereby show that their argument does not connect directly to the motion, then you significantly reduce their persuasiveness. Of course, merely noting that the other team has missed a burden is rarely enough, since that team will usually fix the problem in their next speech. Rather, you want to show why this is a burden that the other team is unable to meet, for all the reasons you provide in your arguments. At the same time, be mindful of your own team’s burdens, and don’t leave gaps in the analysis for other teams to exploit.

2.3 EXTENDING

Having made it this far in the guide, an important question you might still have is: what are Closing teams meant to do? Do they share the aims of their respective Opening teams? In brief, no.

The role of a Closing team is to *extend*. Broadly, this means giving different and better reasons from their respective Opening teams for the same side of the motion. The motivation behind this design of the format is that there are many potential sets of arguments for and against every motion. Thus, teams are incentivised not just to find *some* arguments for the side they are given, but the *strongest possible* arguments.

In practice, a Closing team will usually consider various areas of the debate during their 15 minutes of preparation. Having heard the Opening team’s case, they will then select the strongest possible arguments from their list, which then form their *extension*. For instance, on the motion “TH would remove all barriers to immigration”, an Opening Government team might argue that this benefits both developed and developing parts of the world, by addressing the economic needs of both. To extend, a Closing Government team might then claim that there is a principled right for any person to live where they choose.

Debaters often speak of extensions being divided into two types: *horizontal* and *vertical*. Roughly, a horizontal extension is one that focuses on a completely different content area to the Opening team’s arguments. The preceding example of the extension in the free immigration debate is there-

fore an example of a horizontal extension. In contrast, a vertical extension is one that remains in the broad area of the Opening's arguments, but fills in gaps in the Opening team's analysis, and thereby make the arguments in a better way. A detailed discussion of where these two types of extensions are suitable, and how to construct them in more depth, is much beyond the scope of this guide.

The key to developing a good extension is to ensure that it is both different from and better than the Opening case. In this example, it is clearly quite a different area of analysis from what the Opening covered. The task of the Closing team is then to demonstrate to the judge why these reasons in favour of free immigration are stronger than the reasons the Opening Government provided. To do this, the Closing team needs to weigh the two sets of arguments, in the manner described on page 7. This is the primary judging criterion for Closing teams. When assessing Closing teams, the judge will not consider the question "what did that Closing team argue?", but rather "what *new contribution* did that Closing team make?" A Closing team that largely or entirely repeats the arguments of its Opening team, which in debate jargon is called being *derivative* of the Opening, will be marked down relative to that Opening team. They will not be considered to have properly fulfilled their role in the debate.

You might wonder whether it is harder to be a Closing team than an Opening team. After all, the Opening teams can make any arguments they want, whereas the Closing teams need to sidestep arguments that have already been made. This difference is roughly balanced out by the short-preparation format. Though an Opening team *could* make any arguments, in practice they're restricted by only having 15 minutes to develop their case. The Closing teams need to think more carefully when developing their arguments, but have more time with which to do so. Furthermore, the Closing teams have the added advantage of being able to hear the other side's arguments, which often helps teams refine their own claims.

2.4 STRUCTURING A SPEECH

The structure of a speech – the order in which different claims are made – is an often-overlooked component of good debating. There is no rigid order in which different parts of the speech need to be given, though some ideas on how different speeches might be constructed are discussed in Chapter 3.

Broadly, it is best to ensure that different areas of the speech concentrate on different content areas, without jumping back and forth. For instance, on the motion "TH would ban strikes in essential industries", teams might variously discuss the effects of such a policy on workers in essential sectors, and on the public in general. It therefore makes sense to segment the speech into these content areas as well, rather than moving between arguments in both areas. This makes it far easier for the judge to follow a speech, and enhances its persuasiveness.

2.5 THE NUTS AND BOLTS

Here we will outline what teams actually *do* during a debate.

Preparation

All teams have different methods of handling the 15-minute preparation time, and the best method is simply the one that works best for a given team. Practising debating, particularly in the exact format that is used at competitions, is a useful way to build teamwork in the preparation phase. Here are some general guidelines to consider when preparing.

In the broadest terms, of course, the point of the preparation time is to think about what you will say in the debate. More specifically, debaters often split the preparation time into two sections: one in which they construct their own *case* (their positive arguments for their side of the motion), and one where they consider other teams' possible cases and rebuttals to them.

For Opening teams, preparation is relatively straightforward (though by no means easy). The team will generally first decide on the contents of the first speech (Prime Minister or Leader of the Opposition), and then consider what the second speech will need to cover in responding to the other team.

Preparation is more complicated for Closing teams. The approach most often adopted is to consider various possible extensions (see Section 2.3) that the team could deliver in the debate. Then, arguments from this list are crossed off during the debate as the Opening team makes them. As with the Opening teams, Closing teams will also want to take time during the preparation period to consider how the rest of the debate is likely to unfold. This will help the Whip speaker work out how to properly weigh the extension against the other claims in the debate (see Section 2.2).

During the debate

If you've ever watched a competitive debate, you'll have noticed that most debaters write extensively while their opponents are speaking. This process of recording the points made by the other teams has many names, including *tracking*, *flowing*, and so on. It is undoubtedly important: tracking the arguments of the debate is crucial in allowing you to address key areas of rebuttal. However, there is no method of tracking that works for all debaters, and debaters track to different extents depending on their needs.

Broadly, you will want to focus on tracking the other teams' main arguments, and the reasons they give to support those arguments. It is relatively less important to keep track of the examples used by other teams, or specific turns of phrase they employ. This is because addressing the latter two will rarely put you ahead in the debate.

Your tracking becomes useful when it comes time to write your own speech. In general, the degree to which you can prepare your speech before the debate decreases the later you are in the debate. So the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition can generally prepare almost all of their speeches during the preparation time, while a Whip enters the debate with almost none of their speech pre-written. Later speakers therefore rely on tracking to decide how to write their speeches. It is important to note that the format does not require a speaker to respond to everything that has been said prior to their speech. It does *not* operate on the principle that an argument, if not rebutted, is "conceded" by other teams and so assumed to be valid (more on this in Chapter 5). Therefore, you need to use your judgement to decide which of the other teams' arguments to respond to, and how much time to devote to each.

At the same time, communicating with your partner is just as important as tracking. You need not relay to your partner the entire contents of your speech, but ensuring the key arguments line up across the two speeches demonstrates good teamwork and makes for more persuasive argumentation. This is doubly important for Closing teams, who will only be able to decide what extension to run once the debate is underway.

Writing a speech

Whereas the norm at some speech events is for speakers to read from a verbatim copy of their speech, the short preparation format makes this all-but-impossible for BP. Instead, BP debaters almost always speak from shorthand notes, which record only the broad headings of the points a speech is meant to cover. Debaters then extemporaneously fill in the connecting tissue of the arguments during their speeches.

As before, the degree of detail of the notes that a debater relies on varies from speaker to speaker. This is naturally dependent on how fast the debater is able to write during their opponent's speeches, and how comfortable they are speaking from minimal notes. This is again a feature of debating which speakers will grow more familiar with as they practise.

SPEAKER ROLES

In principle, anything persuasive for a given side of the motion can be said at any point by any speaker on that side. However, the format of BP debates has given rise to a set of norms surrounding what ought be covered in which speech, forming a useful framework for speakers to follow in the initial stages of their debating careers.

Broadly, the norms surrounding BP debating demand a *right of response*. Thus, the major claims made by a team ought to be made as early as possible in that team's speeches, so that the opposing team has a chance to engage with these arguments. Presenting an entirely new argument in the Opposition Whip speech, for instance, is heavily frowned upon, since this prevents the Government teams from having an opportunity to respond.¹

3.1 THE PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister has two main roles. The first is to set up the debate, and the second is to make the key arguments of the Opening Government team.

Setting up the debate

The Prime Minister's responsibilities in setting up the debate vary with the motion. At minimum, the PM is expected to clarify any ambiguities that might exist in the motion. For instance, if the motion is "TH would elect judges", it is reasonable for the PM to point out that the debate is only pertinent in democracies.

Often, PM speeches add useful framing to the situation or problem that the motion is discussing. On the motion "TH would lift sanctions on Iran", it is very difficult for the debate to proceed without the PM first providing context as to the situation in Iran and the problems that sanctions have sought to solve.

Some motions call on the Government teams to defend a specific *policy* – these are typically known as *policy motions* (more in this in Chapter 4). With such motions, the Government teams are given the ambit to prescribe how they would like the policy to be implemented; this is often referred to as the Government's power of *fiat*. In supporting the motion "TH would link teacher salaries to student performance", Government teams are allowed to choose any specific policy measure to defend, provided it is within a natural-language interpretation of the motion. For instance, they might choose to defend a policy which links teacher salaries to the *improvement* of students over time, rather than their unadjusted results. Importantly, this does not apply to all motions. For instance, the Government team does not have the same power of fiat on the motion "TH believes that policies linking teacher salaries to student performance do more good than harm." On this motion, teams must discuss *all* reasonable manifestations of this policy. The PM's role, then, is to set out the policy when necessary.

¹ Judges will not credit such "late" arguments in their analysis of the debate.

Making the key arguments

The PM is then expected to advance the key arguments in support of their side. In general, PMs usually deliver one or two arguments. This is not a hard-and-fast rule, but rather a guideline based on the amount of time PMs have, and the amount of time it takes to deliver an argument convincingly.

3.2 THE LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION

The Leader of the Opposition is much like an inverse PM. However, their responsibilities in setting up the debate are more context-sensitive.

Challenging the definition

Occasionally, the PM provides a definition of a term in the motion that is so unreasonable as to make the debate impossible. For instance, on the motion “TH would abolish exams in schools”, the PM might claim that “exams” refers only to written assessments, and so the Government team’s policy is to simply substitute these for oral assessments instead. This is clearly unreasonable, and not within a natural interpretation of the motion. If this occurs, it is then the LO’s responsibility to clearly state (i) why the PM’s definition is defective, and (ii) what a more reasonable definition might be. However, this is something that happens *very rarely*.

Setting up the debate

The LO sets up the debate in a similar way to the PM. If the Opening Opposition wishes to contest the framing that the PM has given, for instance by disagreeing with the latter’s contextualisation of the problem, then that contestation ought to be made clear at the start of the LO’s speech.

On policy motions, the Opening Opposition enjoys fiat power similar to that of the Opening Government team. Of course, their fiat power is not to enact a policy described by the motion, but to enact a reasonable alternative (known as the *counter-policy*). For instance, on the motion “TH would introduce carbon taxes”, it could be the policy of the Opposition team to subsidise greater investment into renewables instead. The broad principle is that the Opposition’s counter-policy must be roughly equivalent to the Government’s policy in terms of its scope and cost. It would not be reasonable, for instance, for an Opposition team on the same motion to defend the nationalisation of all pollutive companies as their counter-policy. The debate then proceeds by way of comparing the Government policy to the Opposition counter-policy, and not by comparing the Government policy to the status quo ante.

It is not a requirement that the Opening Opposition have a counter-policy, however. The team may decide that the policy suggested by the motion is simply harmful on its own, and therefore a world without that policy is better-off, even in the absence of an alternative.

Refutation and key arguments

The rest of the LO speech is dedicated to refuting the key claims of the PM, and to making the key arguments for the Opening Opposition. Each LO

strikes their own balance between refutation and positive argumentation; however, this balance usually tilts in favour of the latter, as the DLO is equally able to respond to the Opening Government's arguments. Thus, the LO usually only responds to the claims of the PM that "stand in the way" of their own constructive arguments, leaving the rest to their team-mate.

3.3 THE DEPUTIES

The speeches of the Deputy Prime Minister and Deputy Leader of the Opposition are structurally simpler than those of their respective first speakers. Broadly, the deputies have only two responsibilities: first, to defend the key arguments their first speakers made, and second, to rebut the other team's claims.

In most debates, the key arguments of the two Opening teams will cover similar ground in terms of subject matter. Thus, if a Deputy speaker addresses the arguments of the two teams in isolation, there is likely to be substantial repetition across their speech. Instead, speakers often find it easier to group their speech into large content areas. For instance, on the motion "TH would require citizens to pass a general knowledge test in order to vote", a DLO speech might first look at the principled justification for such a policy, and then at its effects on voting behaviour. An even stronger speech might group these points into key questions, showing the judge how the debate ought to be adjudicated. Here's an example:

"In this speech I will discuss two points: the principled justification for this policy and its effects on voting behaviour. I will first prove that the alleged barriers of voters' ignorance do not deprive them of their fundamental right to vote freely. Second, I will prove that this policy will not result in the utopia of reasoned discussion that the Opening Government describes, and instead create far greater political chaos."

Structuring the speech in this way allows judges to keep track of a team's contributions far more easily.

3.4 THE MEMBERS

The Member of the Government and Member of the Opposition open the debate for the Closing teams. Their primary role is to explain the team's extension (see Section 2.3) as clearly and effectively as possible. This role is so important that, at the university level, Member speeches often attempt nothing else, devoting the full length of the speech to their extension and leaving the rebuttal to their Whip.

Explaining the extension

The extension is just a constructive argument, similar to the ones delivered by the Opening teams. Because the Closing teams are primarily assessed on their extension, it is crucial that the Member delivers it well. It is important to go over each of the steps of the argument in detail, and not to have leaps in logic in the name of covering more ground.

Positioning the extension

Recall that the aim of a Closing team is to show that their extension is different from, and better than, their Opening team's case. Thus, a large part of the Member's explanation of the extension is dedicated to proving this. There are two primary ways that Member speakers do this. The first is to weigh the extension against the Opening team's arguments (see Section 2.2), in effect arguing that the reasons provided by the Closing team are more important than those of the Opening. The second is to demonstrate how the Closing team's extension avoids, or addresses, some intuitive deficiencies in the Opening team's case.

Consider the motion "TH believes that feminist organisations should only endorse women candidates for political office." Opening Government makes the claim that women candidates are far more likely to act on women's issues, and therefore that feminist organisations ought only to support them. Closing Government, meanwhile, argues that feminist support for women candidates means the feminist organisation itself becomes more broadly popular. Clearly, this sidesteps a gap in the Opening Government case, which is OG's failure to prove that women candidates endorsed in this way will be electorally successful. Thus, the MG can successfully *position* the extension against the Opening team by pointing this out.²

3.5 THE WHIPS

There are two main ways that Whip speakers tend to deliver their speeches.

By issue

If the debate has clearly defined content issues, then Whips sometimes adopt the approach outlined in the section on Deputy speeches, which is to organise the debate into these broad content areas. Here, the Whips need to analyse the main contributions of each team within each of these content areas, and show why their team's extension is the most persuasive. In the discussion of these content areas should also be direct rebuttal to the two teams on the other side.

By team

On other occasions, Whips find it more straightforward to discuss each of the three other teams separately. The order in which the teams are discussed depends on the debate – generally, Whips prioritise the team believe to be ahead in the debate, and leave for the end the team they think is unlikely to win. When analysing teams on the other side, then, the Whip proceeds with direct rebuttal to their key claims; when discussing their own Opening team, the Whip weighs the extension against that team's contributions in the same way as the Member.

The most important role of the Whip, regardless of which method is adopted, is to show that their Member's extension is the most important and persuasive contribution to the debate.

² Closing teams are not allowed to directly *rebut* the claims of their Opening, for this would give them too significant an advantage. But they can note where the Opening case is incomplete or under-explained, as in this example.

MOTIONS

Different types of motions impose different burdens on teams. While a natural language interpretation of a motion is almost always sufficient to allow a team to understand these burdens, a more rigorous discussion of the types of motions available can increase teams' familiarity with debating. As you will notice, the types of motions we discuss here are not mutually exclusive categories; some motions have more than one "type".

Oxford Schools is primarily a British competition. However, motions are *not* assumed to be place-set in Britain. Unless otherwise specified, motions are to be taken as applying to the world at large.

4.1 VALUE JUDGEMENTS

The simplest type of motion is a value judgement (sometimes called an *analysis* motion). This is a motion which expresses a belief about the world, which the Government teams are required to defend, and the Opposition teams are required to attack. A common type of value judgement motion involves teams discussing the harms and benefits of an issue or phenomenon. For instance, the motion "TH believes that protectionism does more harm than good" imposes clear-cut burdens on the teams.

However, not all value judgement motions have this "harm and good" structure. For instance, the following are all also motions involving value judgements:

- TH supports the increasing distrust of the mainstream media.
- TH believes that reducing income inequality is more important than achieving economic growth.
- TH believes that it is immoral to have children.

Importantly, these motions are *not* questions of what it is most useful to believe. Arguing, for instance, that the world would be better if most people *believed* that reducing income inequality was more important than economic growth is entirely tangential to the core of the second motion. These are motions about what is *true*.

4.2 POLICY MOTIONS

We introduced, and briefly discussed, policy motions in the last chapter. Broadly, these are motions that call on the Government to introduce a specific measure, within the natural language interpretation of the motion. The Opening Government team has the freedom to choose a policy that is within these confines, and the Opening Opposition has the freedom to choose a reasonable counter-policy (this is the power of *fiat*).

For the purposes of policy motions, it is assumed that the Opening Government will be successful in introducing the policy. Thus, the Opening Opposition cannot make the objection that the policy in question would never achieve majority support in Parliament,¹ and therefore never be enacted.

¹ Or other relevant institution.

Many policy motions begin with “TH would”. This signals clearly that the Opening Government team is being called on to defend a specific measure. However, some motions that begin with “TH believes that” are policy motions too. For instance, the following are all policy motions:

- TH believes that declarations of war should be decided by referendum.
- TH believes that the United Nations should develop a standing army.
- TH believes that art galleries should not display the works of morally repugnant creators.

In a debate about a policy motion, both Closing teams are bound by the choice of policy or counter-policy made by their Opening team. A Closing team cannot introduce a new policy in the second half of the debate.

4.3 ACTOR MOTIONS

Some motions call for teams to take on the perspective of a specific person or group – these are referred to as *actor motions*. Here are some examples of actor motions:

- TH, as the government of Taiwan, would dramatically increase military spending.
- As an immigrant parent to an English-speaking country, TH would encourage one’s children to mainly speak English.
- You are a student about to enter university. You can either study for a degree in a high-paying sector, in which you are competent but have little interest, or you can study a degree you are passionate about, but whose job prospects are limited. TH would study for the higher-paying degree, rather than the interesting degree.

In actor motions, teams must always make arguments with reference to the interests and motivations of the actor. On the first motion, for instance, a Government team might be tempted to argue that an increase in Taiwanese defense spending would spark an arms race with China, whose government would then have to spend less on important social programmes. However, this team has not yet demonstrated why the Chinese government’s spending on social programmes is something that should matter to the government of Taiwan. Only if they make this link can the team’s argument be considered relevant to the motion.

4.4 RETROSPECTIVE MOTIONS

Some motions ask teams only to consider an issue in retrospect. In these motions, teams should analyse the phenomenon in question only up to the present, and not its likely future evolution. Here are some examples of retrospective motions:

- TH regrets the decline of socialist parties in the West.
- TH believes that the commercialisation of sports has done more harm than good.
- TH believes that the European Union has failed to improve the lives of Europeans.

On the last motion, for instance, it is clearly outside the scope of the debate for teams to discuss what the European Commission is likely to do in the future, given current trends in Europe.

JUDGING STANDARDS

A motivating principle behind BP debating is that arguments ought to be convincing to a regular person, not just to someone who debates regularly. This is why, although some jargon inevitably develops in our discussion of debates, we try to avoid its use when actually making arguments. In order to properly inhabit this persona, judges pay attention to a number of standards in evaluating debates.

5.1 THE ORDINARY INTELLIGENT VOTER

The “ordinary intelligent voter” is the debating byname for the persona that judges adopt when judging. Broadly, the ordinary intelligent voter is familiar, albeit imperfectly, with the key issues discussed on the front pages of major newspapers. It will not come as a surprise to the ordinary intelligent voter that, for example, the Olympics were held in 2024 or that Britain has left the European Union. However, the ordinary intelligent voter will struggle if asked who placed third in the 2024 Olympic medal table, or when Article 50 was triggered.

The ordinary intelligent voter is also familiar with basic concepts in a variety of academic fields. They know that the scarcity of a good tends to drive its price up, or that Shakespeare was an important English playwright. But they would not be able to explain why prices operate in this way, nor weigh in on debates about Shakespeare’s alleged Catholicism. In practice, many judges know substantially more than the ordinary intelligent voter, particularly when it comes to their field of study. However, judges are required to actively suppress such specialist knowledge, and not consider it when evaluating the debate.

This does *not* mean that teams can only make arguments with reference to the limited set of facts and concepts that the ordinary intelligent voter already understands. Rather, when it comes to this set of facts and concepts, debaters can assume understanding on the part of the judges and other teams. So they need not explain what the European Union is in order to use Brexit as an example, nor explain the fact that a bill requires majority support in Parliament to pass.

When it comes to knowledge outside this domain, however, debaters need to be more careful in explaining their arguments, in order that they be credited. For instance, a team cannot be credited for an argument that relies on the unexplained premise that looser monetary policy reduces a country’s exports, because the ordinary intelligent voter does not understand the interest rate-exchange rate relationship. If the team does explain that process, however, in language that is intelligible to the ordinary intelligent voter, then the argument can receive credit.

5.2 EVALUATING ARGUMENTS

Some debating formats operate on the principle that an argument, no matter how implausible, is “conceded” by other teams if not explicitly responded to. This is *not* the case in BP debating. The BP format allows judges to exer-

cise their common-sense in evaluating arguments, even if the other teams do not make the necessary observations. For instance, on the motion “TH supports lockdown measures during global pandemics”, an Opposition team might claim that such measures may prompt political revolution, because citizens are dissatisfied with lockdowns. This is *possible*, but it is extremely *implausible*. Therefore, judges will discount the argument precisely on those grounds, even if no Government team points out this implausibility.

5.3 EVALUATING DEBATES

A detailed discussion of how judges come to a ranking of teams is beyond the scope of this guide. There are only two important guidelines to bear in mind, for present purposes.

First, teams are evaluated on a holistic metric of persuasiveness, rather than on separate criteria of (for instance) style, content and strategy – as is the case in other debating formats. This means that the team’s only goal is to persuade the judge through the strength of their arguments and responses, augmented by the rhetorical power of their delivery.

Second, judges always consider teams in a *pairwise* fashion when evaluating debates. This means that each team is directly compared against each of the three other teams, and in each comparison the judge decides which of the two teams performed better. This takes into account the direct responses that one team gave to another, as well as the difference in the quality of arguments between them. Then, the first-ranked team is the one that beats all others in pairwise comparisons, the second-ranked team is the one the beats two others in pairwise comparisons, and so on. This reinforces our earlier claim that the goal of teams in BP debating really is to beat all of the other teams in the round.

CONCLUSION

We have attempted to provide a broad overview of the skills necessary for successful BP debating, and the norms surrounding the competition. The world of debating is much larger than could be contained in these pages, and bears exploring for teams that are interested in improvement.

Many debates are recorded and available online. This has become the case particularly after the Covid-19 pandemic, when almost all debating moved online, and there is thus a wealth of high-quality debating recorded and available for free. Many good debates can be found by searching for videos of the World Universities Debating Championships (WUDC) or European Universities Debating Championships (EUDC), among others. The format used at university competitions is identical to the one used for Oxford Schools, except that speeches last seven minutes rather than five. Barring that small difference, university debates are an excellent guide to how good BP debating can be done. Of course, the level of an average university debate is higher than we would expect from a schools debate, and so students ought not be intimidated by what they see.

There is also a large amount of training material available online, typically produced by the organisers of WUDC, EUDC and other competitions, for teams preparing for those events. These workshops typically cover specific skill areas (such as “how to deliver an effective whip speech”) or discuss content issues with a focus on applicability to debating (for instance “how to debate Latin America”). Those workshops can be slightly technical to an audience that is less experienced with debating, which is why one of our main aims in this guide was to present an overview of terms that might allow you to understand those more advanced workshops.

Finally, we hope that teams competing at Oxford Schools never lose sight of the educational function of debating. While there are skills specific to debating, that are unlikely to see much use elsewhere, the core of this activity is developing a curiosity about the world and a willingness to think deeply about its main issues. If at least some teams manage that, then Oxford Schools will have achieved its purpose.