

Yale Invitational 2023

Parliamentary Debate Style Guide¹

We generally follow the American Parliamentary Debate Association (APDA) of which the Yale Debate Association is a member. Their format has evolved over the years, so there are some differences between a typical APDA tournament today and Parli at the Yale Invitational. However, debaters and Judges may find the educational material on the APDA website (<http://apda.online>) useful.

Note this is titled a “guide” not a rule book. It should be interpreted and applied accordingly. Given limited space, it cannot cover every contingency or serve as a complete manual. Please contact the Parli tab staff if you have any questions.

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¹ This was originally based on the Osterweis Style Guide, developed for the Rollin G. Osterweis Debate Tournament held each April by the Yale Debate Association (www.yaledebate.org).

Basic Format

Parliamentary debate features a Government team and an Opposition team, each with two debaters. The Government strives to convince the Judge (formally the Speaker of the House) that the given motion should be adopted; the Opposition to show the motion should be rejected. Teams should expect to stand both for the Government and for the Opposition in different rounds on different motions. During the debate, each team gives three speeches. The Judge decides the winner primarily on the arguments presented but also evaluates the overall skills of each debater. The team that best supports their side in the opinion of the Judge wins.

Choosing the Motion

The motion is a short statement that serves as the topic of debate. The motions will concern issues that should be familiar to the average high school student. Some sample motions:

This house believes that assisted suicide should be legal in the United States.

This house would allow foreign-born citizens to be President of the United States.

This house would use force to spread democracy internationally.

Several common abbreviations may be used at the start of the motion:

- TH: This House
- THBT: This House believes that
- THW: This House would
- THR: This House regrets
- THP: This House prefers
- THS: This House supports

Motions may also include a brief “information statement” that provides background or sets the context for the debate. When present, the information statement may be relied upon by the debaters.

One to three motions will be provided before each round, either publicly to all teams or directly to the Judge, who will then provide the motions to the teams. A different set of motions will be used for each round (or flight if the round is double-flighted).

The motion is chosen as follows:

1. If the motions have not been made public, the Judge reads the motion(s) to the two teams.
2. The Judge flips a coin, and one team calls it in the air. The winner of the coin flip decides whether that team would prefer choice of motion or choice of side (if only one motion, toss is for choice of side).
3. The team that has the right to choose the motion as the result of the coin flip picks a motion.
4. The team that has the right to choose the side then makes its choice of Government or Opposition.

The two teams may mutually agree on the motion or choice of sides rather than go through this process. *If the two teams are present and have the motions, they should go through the process of choosing motion and sides before the Judge arrives and begin prep immediately.*

Choices should be made promptly, deciding motion and sides in no more than a few minutes. The Judge should cut short any long discussion by a team about the merits of the motions or sides. Once the motion and sides have been set, the teams have fifteen minutes to prepare their cases.

Case Preparation

After the motion is chosen the teams have fifteen minutes to prepare their cases for the debate. Each case should consist of several reasons why their side of the motion is correct. Two to four such contentions are typical, but there is no required minimum or specified maximum, nor are teams required to structure their arguments this way.

The Government has the right to set the terms of the debate and should provide a brief interpretation of the motion and/or a definition of key terms. Government may interpret the motion more narrowly than given (e.g., “Court penalties should be determined by Judges, not juries” may be applied only to civil cases, rather than criminal cases) provided this allows a fair debate. The Government interpretation may be novel but should respect common usage and must leave the Opposition reasonable grounds to argue against it. The Government interpretation should not rely on specific facts or information that the Opposition or the Judge are not likely to know.

The Opposition should prepare a case to contest what they expect the Government to present. However, Opposition will likely have to adapt their case to the specifics of the Government’s interpretation of the motion and the Government’s actual case. If the Government interpretation is reasonable but unexpected, the Opposition may have to revise their case entirely.

Opposition may contest the Government interpretation if it is not consistent with the wording of the motion or if it does not allow any grounds for the Opposition to argue against it. If the Opposition intends to challenge the Government’s interpretation, it should do so at the start of the Leader of the Opposition constructive speech, not later in the round.

Research Material

Debaters may not use any research materials—the internet, electronic media, printed material, prepared briefs, etc.—or consult with anyone other than their partner during case preparation. Debaters may not receive help from outside parties during case preparation or during the debate.

Parliamentary debate is intended to be extemporaneous. Debaters must rely on their own knowledge of the motion. Statistics, expert quotes, and remote facts are discouraged because they cannot be readily verified and may be incomplete if presented briefly and out of context. However, debaters are encouraged to use information that one would expect to be familiar to a well-read person, or that they explain in detail.

Note that this prohibition does not prevent debaters from using a laptop or tablet to write their case, take notes during the round, or time speeches. It also does not prevent debaters from communicating with their partner electronically if debates are held online and debaters are not in the same room.

Use of Evidence

The ban on research materials is not a ban on the use of evidence or facts during the debate. The evidentiary standard is “what a well-read person should know” or “*The New York Times* standard,” that

is, what someone who regularly reads a national newspaper should know. (Simply claiming one has read something in *The New York Times* is not sufficient if the information is not common knowledge.)

Debaters may introduce more obscure facts provided they explain them thoroughly, *including any aspects that may weaken their usefulness and benefit their opponents*. As this is difficult to enforce, use of obscure information is discouraged.

As an example, consider a debate about adopting a single-payer health care system. Quoting an expert on the future costs of such a system is not helpful, because that expert's opinion is likely based on extensive study. Unless the full details of that study are included—and there is limited speech time—the other side has no way to contest the underlying supporting assumptions, methodology and data. The Judge has no way to evaluate the claim. However, both sides may reasonably discuss how a single-payer system might impact administrative costs, patient coverage, providers, competitiveness, and innovation in ways that are understandable, persuasive and which could be contested by their opponents and evaluated by the Judge.

In the absence of detailed research debaters may also present “facts” that their opponents will claim are false, or that the Judge does not believe are true. We all innocently rely on what we think we know every day. A Judge may use their discretion in deciding whether and how to consider these facts in awarding the ballot.

Our suggestion is that debates are won by arguments that are clearly explained, illustrated, and weighed in terms of importance against those presented by the other side. In our experience, debates rarely come down to the truth or falsehood of specific data presented by either side. Our preference is that decisions do not come down to a quotation or obscure fact not well-examined.

The Positions and Speeches

On each team, one debater is the lead speaker and the other is the member. The leader delivers the opening and closing speeches for their team. The member presents the middle speech. For the Government, the leader is known as the Prime Minister (PM) and the member is called the Member of Government (MG). On the Opposition team, the debaters are the Leader of Opposition (LO) and the Member of Opposition (MO).

The six speeches proceed as follows:

Prime Minister Constructive (PMC)	7 minutes	Provides an interpretation of the resolution and lays out the Government's case
Leader of Opposition Constructive (LOC)	8 minutes	Lays out the Opposition case and replies to the Government case.
Member of Government Constructive (MGC)	8 minutes	Responds to previous arguments, and may introduce new points while doing so
Member of Opposition Constructive (MOC)	8 minutes	
Leader of Opposition Rebuttal (LOR)	4 minutes	Summarizes the debate from the Opposition perspective, while responding to previous arguments.
Prime Minister Rebuttal (PMR)	5 minutes	Summarizes the debate from the Government perspective, while responding to previous arguments.

Each speaker has a 30 second grace period at the end of their allotted time to finish their speech, after which they are out of order. *This is not intended as an extra 30 seconds of speaking time beyond the limits given above*, but merely a chance for the speaker to finish a sentence or thought rather than stopping mid-word. Grace should not be used to launch another argument.

There is no preparation time or pause between speeches other than a reasonable allowance for the current speaker to be seated and the next one to rise.

In the constructive speeches, each team presents its case and responds to their opponent's case. New arguments may be introduced into the debate, either as independent points or responses to a previous argument.

In the rebuttal speeches, each side should summarize the debate, emphasizing the team's strongest points and explaining why they should win the debate. *New arguments cannot be raised in the rebuttals unless it is the PM's first opportunity to respond to a new point made in the MOC*. New examples to illustrate previous arguments, and connecting and contrasting points already made, are allowed and encouraged.

Questions

There is no cross-examination. The non-speaking team may attempt to interrupt the speaker with three types of questions:

Point of Clarification (POC): At the beginning of the PMC right after the speaker has presented the Government interpretation of the motion — definitions, plan, decision framework, etc. — the Prime Minister may pause briefly and ask the Opposition if the interpretation is clear and acceptable, essentially asking if the Opposition wishes to raise a POC. Alternately, the Opposition may rise and ask for clarification. The Prime Minister must accept these questions.

The clock stops during a POC while the opposing team briefly asks the speaker for further details about their case and the Prime Minister answers them.

POC questions should be intended to make the terms of the debate clear. The Opposition may not introduce arguments or contest the interpretation at this time. The Prime Minister may explain the details of their interpretation of the motion but may not make arguments in favor of the Government's position.

If the Opposition believes the Government interpretation is not consistent with the motion or leaves no room for an opposing case (a "tight case") or relies on specific knowledge unavailable to the Opposition, they should make these arguments at the beginning of the LOC, not during a POC.

Time starts again when the POC has been answered.

Point of Information (POI): During the constructive speeches, a member of the opposing team may attempt to interrupt the speaker to ask a question. Traditionally, the questioner stands with one hand on head (to keep their wig in place) and the other arm outstretched. Standing or simply raising a hand (or, on video, saying "POI" or something similar, loud enough to be heard but not so loud as to interrupt the speaker) is sufficient.

The speaker may accept the interruption, wave it off, take it after finishing a point or simply ignore it. If accepted, the questioner asks a short question or makes a short statement intended to undermine the argument being made. The speaker responds and then continues with their speech. There is no right to follow up with another question, though the opposing team may continue to stand or signal for another POI.

Time does not stop during a POI.

POIs are permitted only during the constructive speeches and are not permitted during the first or last minute of the speech (“protected time”). (A speaker who defers a POI by saying they will take questions at the end of their speech if they have time is ignoring the fact that protected time forbids this.)

A speaker may refuse or defer a POI, but it is considered poor form not to accept some POIs if offered, and poor form for opponents not to offer any POIs.

Point of Order (PO): A Point of Order is raised if a team believes the speaker has violated a rule of debate, for example, exceeding the 30 second grace period at the end of a speech, or presenting a new argument in rebuttal.

The questioner stands, states “Point of Order,” to the Judge, stopping time. The questioner briefly explains the issue. If the questioner calls out a new argument, the speaker may briefly explain why the argument is not new by noting where it was raised in a previous speech, or, if during the Prime Minister Rebuttal, the Prime Minister may explain why this was the first opportunity to reply to a new argument made in the MOC or LOR. The Judge may say “point well taken” if they agree, “point not well taken” if they do not agree, or “point under consideration,” deferring a decision until after the debate has finished. If the Judge declares the point well taken, the speaker should stop presenting it and move on, otherwise the speaker may continue making the point.

Time stops during a Point of Order and resumes after the Judge’s decision, when the speaker continues.

Important Stylistic Differences

Parliamentary debate styles vary widely. At the high school level in the US the major differences are between East Coast (used at the Yale Invitational) and West Coast, and between these and World Schools.

Differences East Coast with respect to West Coast Parli:

- A coin toss process is used to determine both motion and side, rather than tab pre-assigning sides and allowing each team to strike a motion.
- Case prep is 15 minutes rather than 20.
- No internet, research materials, or prepared briefs may be used during case prep.
- Motions are likely to be more broadly based than some at West Coast tournaments, i.e., the “New York Times” standard applies when setting the motions as well as to the arguments presented.
- No exchange of written material during the round, i.e. case outlines may not be given to the Judge or the opposing team.
- Non-speaking debaters may not aid their partner during the partner’s speech, for example, by providing written notes or verbal comments.

Differences with respect to World Schools format:

- No prepared motions.
- Case prep for extemporaneous motions is 15 minutes rather than 1 hour.
- Two debaters per side versus three.
- Two constructive speeches per side versus three.
- No expectation of a new contention in the second constructive speech (though no prohibition, either).

Judging

The Judge (formally, the Speaker of the House) has three basic duties: see that the debate moves along expeditiously, rule on certain issues that arise during the debate, and decide the round by returning a completed ballot.

Judging debate is inherently subjective. Judges are asked to base their decision primarily on the arguments presented by each side during the debate, and not on the Judge's own knowledge or preferences, or simply on either side's oratorical ability.

Starting the Round

One to three motions will be given before each round, and a different set of motions will be used for each round (or flight if the round is double flighted). The process of choosing the motion and sides is described above.

If debaters have the motions and arrive before the Judge, the debaters may go through the process of choosing the motion and sides themselves and begin case preparation immediately. For some rounds—particularly the second flight of double flighted rounds—the debaters may have been given the motion, made their selections and begun case preparation before arriving at the room. If so, the Judge need only wait until their prep time is finished (or start immediately if prep time has expired).

The Ballot

The teams choose the side they will support, and each team decides its own speaking order. The ballot—paper or electronic—will not necessarily reflect these choices. Before the teams begin speaking the Judge should verify which team is on side Government and which on side Opposition, and also verify which debater on each team is speaking first and second. *This information should be entered on the ballot before the debaters begin speaking.*

Electronic Ballots

For online tournaments, and for in-person tournaments when the site has internet access, electronic ballots will be used. Judges will need an internet capable device—laptop, tablet, phone—and have a tabroom account.² Electronic ballots have a “Start” button that signals Tab the round has started and provides access. Judges are asked to press or click “Start” as soon as they get the round assignment to Tab will know the round is covered.

² Paper ballots can be provided to Judges without devices, but this is very inconvenient for both the tournament and the Judge.

Script

The Judge may follow a script, patterned after English Parliamentary practice, though this is not required, and the Judge may alter the wording to their own taste. For example:

- **To begin the round:** “I call this House to order and call upon the honorable Prime Minister to deliver the first speech of the round not to exceed seven minutes, with 30 seconds grace.”
- **Before LOC:** “I thank the honorable Prime Minister and call upon the Leader of the Opposition to deliver a speech not to exceed eight minutes, with 30 seconds grace.”
- **Before MGC:** “I thank the honorable Leader of the Opposition and call upon the Member of Government to deliver a speech not to exceed eight minutes, with 30 seconds grace.”
- **Before MOC:** “I thank the honorable Member of Government and call upon the Member of Opposition to close out the constructive portion of the round in a speech not to exceed eight minutes, with 30 seconds grace.”
- **Before LOR:** “I thank the honorable Member of Opposition and call upon the Leader of Opposition to deliver the first rebuttal speech of the round not to exceed four minutes, with 30 seconds grace. New examples to illustrate previous arguments, and connecting and contrasting points already made are welcome, but new arguments are not.”
- **Before PMR:** “I thank the honorable Member of Opposition and call upon the Prime Minister to deliver the final speech of the round not to exceed five minutes, with 30 seconds grace. New examples to illustrate previous arguments, and connecting and contrasting points already made are welcome, but new arguments are not..”

There is no prep time between speeches. Speakers should rise in turn with only a reasonable delay to collect their papers and move to the podium.

Keeping Time

Debaters will usually time themselves and their opponents, raising a Point of Order if a speaker exceeds the grace period. The Judge should also keep time to monitor the round and note protected time—the first and last minute of each constructive speech—when POIs are not permitted.

Time stops during a Point of Clarification (POC) or a Point of Order (PO), but not during a Point of Information (POI). See the discussion above for more information.

After the Round

After the final speech, the Judge should decide the round and fill out the ballot promptly. Late ballots will delay the tournament.

If electronic ballots are being used, the Judge should enter the decision and scores, submit them and confirm them before giving an oral critique or writing comments. Judges may enter and edit comments on electronic ballots until the end of the tournament on Sunday evening.

If paper ballots are being used, the Judge should promptly return the ballot to tab after brief oral comments to the debaters. Tab can give the ballot back to the Judge for more extensive written comments once the decision is recorded.

The ballot should always include a clear reason for decision, and a justification for any points awarded below 23 or above 28. If a low point win is intended, this should also be clearly explained. Paper ballots should be returned to tab promptly. However, a Judge hearing both flights of a single round may hold

the paper ballot for the first flight and return both ballots when the second flight is over. (Electronic ballots should always be entered and confirmed promptly, even if rounds are flighted.)

Making the Decision

Experienced Judges will have their own approach. If you are unsure, we suggest the following.

First decide which side won. Make your decision based on which team carried the more important issues in the round. The teams should tell you which issues they think are most important during rebuttals, why they believe that they won those issues, and why they are more important than issues they may have lost. If they fail to do so explicitly, then you must use your own judgement and discretion. In a tie—you believe the teams argued to a standstill—the decision should go to the Opposition.

Second, rank the speakers from best to worst. A speaker's rank should consider that speaker's contributions to the round. While not recorded, ranking the speakers will help you in the next step.

Third, assign each debater points from 23-24 (generally weak debater), 25-26 (average debater, average round) to 27-28 (excellent debater), with half points permitted. Debaters may tie in speaker points. Points above 28.5 should be justified on the ballot and may be questioned by the tab director. Points below 23 indicate a debater's behavior should be reported to their coach. These should be rare.

If you are giving a low-point win, i.e., the winning team has fewer total speaker points than the losing team, you should check the indicator on the ballot and include a brief explanation of your reason. Low-point wins are exceptions and should be rare.

The ballot should always have a clear, written reason for the decision. Additional feedback may be provided at the Judge's discretion.

Again, we emphasize the need for Judges to balance their desire to provide detailed feedback with the need to keep the tournament running on time.

Speed, Spread, "Technical" Debate, etc.

Debaters may speak at any pace they like and use any and as many arguments that they believe are relevant and can be presented in the time allowed. However, parliamentary debate is persuasion using the spoken word. We ask debaters and Judges to consider the following.

It is the role of the debater to persuade the Judge, not the obligation of the Judge to be persuaded. We expect the Judge to make an honest effort to hear, understand, note, and appreciate what the debaters have to say, and decide the round fairly from that. However, if the Judge cannot hear, follow, or understand what a debater is saying, that is primarily the fault of the debater, not the Judge.

If a debater is speaking too fast for the Judge to follow, the Judge may—but is not obliged to—ask the debater to slow down. If a debater makes an argument that is unclear, the Judge must use their discretion whether to consider that argument's impact on the debate. If a debater overwhelms the Judge with more information than the Judge can record, the Judge will be unable to apply what falls away. Judges should not ask debaters to clarify their arguments or to provide supporting material beyond what is presented during their speeches.

We know that Judges differ in skill and experience, as do debaters, and that this will affect the tenor of a round. Our preference is for debates that could be presented to and appreciated by a broad rather than a narrow audience.

Online Debate

We prefer tournaments that are in person. If we are forced to use online debate, more detailed instructions and advice will be provided. Some brief suggestions:

- Test your equipment at least one day before the tournament. Check not only that it works, and that the sound and video are adequate, but also consider how you look in picture, and whether you are comfortable speaking for 8 minutes or more.
- Speaking is more difficult than simply breathing; speaking while sitting is more difficult than speaking while standing, as sitting compresses your diaphragm. Giving a speech while sitting can be less effective than speaking while standing. Consider putting your laptop on a box or using a standup desk so you can speak as you would at a regular tournament.
- Re-boot your laptop or tablet the morning of the tournament. The longer the time since a restart, the more likely your computer is to slow down or have other problems. Do not open any applications you do not need for the debate or to communicate with your partner. Unnecessary applications may slow your device.
- When the debate is about to start, the Judge should conduct a brief sound and visual check with all the participants to make sure all can be heard and seen. *It is preferred that all the debaters and the Judge be visible during the round, with video turned off only if there are connection difficulties.* Everyone is visible when we debate in person; online should not be any different.
- Debater and the Judge should agree on a procedure for POIs. While a raised hand (or a “raised hand” icon) may be used, speakers tend not to see them. An alternative is for a debater to say “POI” so all can hear, but not loudly enough to disrupt out the speaker. Other options are possible so long as debaters and Judge all agree.
- Unless you have a headset with a microphone, your laptop microphone will pick up the sound of typing on your keyboard (as well as ambient noise in your environment). If you plan to take notes on your laptop and do not have a headset microphone, you will probably have to mute yourself while the other team is speaking.