

Congressional Debate Prep Guide

Introduction

Welcome to your first Congressional Debate tournament!

You've chosen to participate in this event because you're a curious and insightful young person who cares deeply about the issues facing our nation.

This guide is designed to help you prepare a single congressional debate speech, from start to finish. It covers the basics, but there is far more to learn over the course of your debate career. Use this document to prepare for the Wilson Wyatt Congressional Debate Learn-ament on September 19 and be prepared to dig into the details then!

Step One: Reading the Bill

Usually about three days before a Congressional Debate tournament, you'll be given a packet of legislation that will be debated.

Some pieces of legislation may be student written and some may be provided by the tournament or the National Speech and Debate Association. You can check which are which at the bottom of the page.

Remember: the legislation packet is not the order in which the bills will be debated. That is called the docket, and will be decided the morning of the tournament.

Your first step in preparing a speech is reading the legislation carefully. It's important to note if it is a bill or a resolution. A bill is a legally binding act of congress that requires a majority vote to pass and is assumed to become law upon passage. A resolution, on the other hand, is not technically binding, but merely suggests that the judicial or executive branch take a particular action or expresses a sentiment held by Congress. A resolution requires a two-thirds vote to pass.

It can be helpful to write down a list of questions you may have about the legislation after first reading it. There are no bad questions. In fact, questions as simple as "what does this word mean?" or "how much money will that cost?" are often the most illuminating.

Then, conduct some introductory research on the topic the legislation is addressing. You may already have a level of familiarity with the topic at hand, but it is still worth spending a few minutes brushing up on your knowledge to ensure you haven't missed any key details or changes in circumstance. Spend about 15 to 20 minutes reading as much general information

you can about the topic, until you feel that you could comfortably explain it to a friend in 30 seconds.

Important: avoid opinion pieces as this step, look solely for objective reporting of fact.

Step Two: Answering Questions

At this point, you've got a working understanding of the topic and a list of questions related to the legislation. Now, spend some time finding answers to your initial questions. Seek out definitions to uncertain terms, research the cost associated with the legislation, and try to understand what the benefits and drawbacks to each action taken in the legislation might be.

You may encounter more biased sources at this stage, and that can sometimes help you develop generalized arguments. But be sure not to conflate opinions with fact and remember not to cite opinionated sources as factual in your speeches.

Be sure to take notes as you complete this step.

Remember: avoid confirmation bias! Don't just seek out information you already think is true or search for opinions you already agree with. Cast a wide net and be open to reading things that may make you uncomfortable.

Here's the tricky part: to properly prepare a Congressional Debate speech, you must write for both sides of the argument. That means if you already have an opinion about the topic the legislation is addressing, you're going to have to prepare an argument with which you may disagree entirely.

At this stage, you likely already have a list of generalized arguments on either side of the debate. Write them down and beneath each, leave space for development.

Step Three: Developing an Argument

A good contention has five parts: a claim, a warrant, evidence, an impact, and a link.

- **Claim:** what precisely you are arguing. For example: *banning the death penalty will save money.*
- **Warrant:** the reason your claim is true. For example: *fewer criminals will sit on death row, which is more expensive than regular prison.*
- **Evidence:** the sources that prove your claim and warrant are true. For example: *according to Reuters in 2019, death row costs 3 times per prisoner as regular prison.*
- **Impact:** how people are affected by your claim. For example: *the government spends unnecessary money on death row, meaning there is less money for social welfare programs that could help people.*

- **Link:** how your claim supports the outcome for which you are arguing. For example: *banning the death penalty saves money, opening more opportunities for welfare spending and improving the public wellbeing.*

How well these five elements work together will determine the strength of your contention. It may be helpful to write them out individually in your notes to keep them clear in your head.

Important: while all five pieces of a contention are equally important, evidence is perhaps the most critical. Any time you make a substantial claim (*i.e.* stating that something is true), you **MUST** support it with evidence.

Those five pieces establish one contention, but your speech may contain 2 or 3 contentions in total. It is important that you try to harmonize your contentions by aligning their impacts. If your first contention's impact is human life, and your second contention's impact is economic harm, your speech may seem stretched thin. Try to pair arguments together that have similar impacts, and use your links to tie them to the outcome for which you are arguing and to each other.

For example:

If we're debating a bill to abolish the death penalty, you might pair a contention claiming that the death penalty is overly costly with one claiming that it targets disadvantaged defendants with fewer resources. In either contention, your impacts are distinct, but they both relate to economic justice and efficiency.

You can, in that case, use the links to remind your audience that abolishing the death penalty is a good economic deal for American citizens. In that way, you're establishing a strong case that, in light of each of your individual contentions, the death penalty is bad for the economy.

Step Four: Writing Your Speech

This is the part that's entirely up to you. Nobody will look at the notes you take up to the stage, but everyone will hear the words that come out of your mouth.

When you write the final version of your speech, use whatever method will make you feel most comfortable as a speaker.

You can write the words out in paragraph format, exactly as you intend to say them. But in that case, you run the risk of sounding too scripted and reading too much off the page, disconnecting you from your audience.

You can go up with just some loose notes and fill in the gaps on the fly. But in that case, you run the risk of forgetting key details and stumbling as you try to remember them.

For most debaters, the solution is something in the middle. The key is practicing your speech with different levels of detail and finding what works best for you.

Remember: a Congressional Debate speech is about 3 minutes long. That usually shakes out to about one and a quarter pages single-spaced, 11 point font, depending on your pacing. Try to leave some wiggle room in case you stumble or lose your place.

Once your speech is written, practice it a couple times by yourself or with a friend or family member. This may feel awkward, but it is the best way you can prepare yourself for delivering it.

Step Five: Delivering Your Speech & Answering Questions

The day of the tournament has arrived. You've prepared speeches on both sides of most of the legislation in the packet and now your job is to deliver them with confidence and eloquence.

As previously stated, you'll have about 3 minutes to speak. You'll be able to track yourself with the Presiding Officer's gavel. The gavel will strike:

- **Once** after **2 minutes** have elapsed.
- **Twice** after **2 minutes and 30 seconds** have elapsed.
- **Thrice** after **2 minutes and 55 seconds** have elapsed.
- **Continuously** after **3 minutes** have elapsed.

When you hear the gavel strike thrice, mentally prepare to finish speaking, wherever you are in your speech. Once the gavel begins to strike continuously, quickly finish your sentence and stop speaking.

Congressional Debate is judged both on presentation and argumentation, meaning you'll be scored both on how well you speak and how strong your arguments are.

Everyone has a different speaking style. Some people have accents, some people have speech impediments or vocal tics; these are not things that will hinder your ability to speak effectively. Lean in to what makes you unique and your confidence will show.

Some elements of delivery you should consider as you practice are:

- **Pacing:** how fast or slow you speak. It's important not to speak so fast that no one can understand you, or so slow that you run out of time before you finish your speech. But you can control your pace at various points in your speech to emphasize certain points. If there's a detail you want people to know, slow down and your audience will be more likely to remember it.

- **Volume:** how loud or quiet you make your voice. In most cases, you won't have a microphone, so you'll need to speak loud enough that people in the back will be able to hear you at all times (that's where your judges will be seated most of the time). Just as with pacing, speaking louder at certain points can draw emphasis to important details.
- **Tone:** the dramatic quality of your speech. It's often good to make your speech a little dramatic by adding tonal variation and rhythm to your voice. Basically, try to avoid sounding too monotone.
- **Gesticulation:** using your body alongside your voice. Use the physical space around you to draw people in. Wag your fist when you want people to feel like what you're saying is very important or walk from one side of the stage to another as you transition from one contention to another to denote that you're in a different part of your speech. Play around with what makes you feel comfortable, but this is an extremely important aspect of delivery.
- **Eye contact:** looking directly at your audience. If you spend your entire speech looking down at a piece of paper or a laptop, your audience will feel overlooked and disconnected. A majority of your speech should be spent looking directly at the audience. This can feel strange at first, but practice makes perfect.

Again, lean in to what makes you unique and what makes you feel confident. Don't try to sound like everyone else: sound like you. Congressional debate is all about finding your voice and using it for good, this is where you get to do that.

Important: you may stumble or lose your place from time to time. That is perfectly normal. The best course of action in that case is to pause, collect yourself, and restart from the beginning of whichever sentence you were saying. Don't directly address the mistake by apologizing, just move on and nobody will even notice.

Once you're done speaking, you'll have a 1 to 2 minute period during which your competitors can ask you questions. If your speech is the first or second on the legislation you're debating, your questioning period will be 2 minutes; in every other case it'll be 1 minute.

Questioning is often the most nerve racking part of Congressional Debate for most beginners. But this is why you did that 15 or 20 minutes of general research at the beginning of this process. It's impossible to predict what questions your peers will ask, but having a working understanding of the issue at hand will empower you to answer them with confidence and poise.

In moments of doubt, it's helpful to redirect to the arguments you made in your speech.

If you're asked a question you genuinely don't know the answer to, don't panic, it happens all the time. The best response, rather than admitting you don't know the answer, is something to the effect of: "I'm sorry, Senator, I'm not sure the exact answer you're looking for but I'm happy to look it up later and answer your question after the round is over." That addresses that you don't know the answer, but reaffirms that you're an informed speaker on the subject and can continue discussing it beyond the time that is allotted to you.

Remember: when it's not your turn to speak, try to ask other speakers as many questions as you can. It's a handy way to remind your judges that you're a competent debater even when you're not on stage.

Parting Notes

This guide only covered the basics of preparing a Congressional Debate speech. If you attend the Wilson Wyatt Congressional Debate Learn-ament on September 19, you'll learn a lot more about how to write and deliver a well rounded and effective speech. I hope to see you there!

If you're struggling with conceptualizing what a Congressional Debate tournament will look like, you can watch recordings of national competitions on YouTube. Remember that those competitors are the very best in the nation, so don't be intimidated, but it can be a helpful way to quickly learn procedures and best practices.

If you're struggling with a piece of legislation and not sure where to go, talk to your teammates, coaches, and parents to get inspiration. The people around you can be equally invaluable resources as the internet.

Avoid the use of generative AI when writing your speech. You may think it's a quick way to get words on the page, but its cadence and syntax are easily recognizable and your judges and competitors will be able to tell. We'd all much rather hear what you have to say about the legislation than what a computer program has been trained to say.

As with all things, Congressional Debate takes practice and dedication. Your first tournament is a learning experience, but as you continue to hone your skills and deepen your education, you'll be sparring with the best in no time.

Thank you for choosing to participate in Congressional Debate, and good luck!