



Student Format Manual

Big Questions debating format involves two opposing contestants debating a topic concerning the intersection of science, philosophy, and religion. Topics will address deeply held beliefs that often go unexamined. Students are assigned a side of the topic before each round and present cases, engage in rebuttal and refutation, and participate in a question period. Often, average members of the public are recruited to judge and observe this event.

Partnerships and Individual Debaters Are Welcome

Students will be able to choose whether to compete as an individual or with a partner. This allows for the possibility of one-on-one, two-on-two, or even two-on-one rounds. This flexibility is unique to Big Questions Debates. Students who are competing with a partner will alternate speeches and share their prep time, much like Public Forum or Policy. The first speaker will present the Constructive, participate in the first question segment, and give the Consolidation. The second speaker will give the Rebuttal, participate in the second question segment, and give the Rationale speeches. If an individual is debating, they will give every speech and participate in every question segment. Sides will be assigned prior to the beginning of the round. Tournament hosts may choose to limit their event to one entry type at their discretion, so be sure to check the requirements of the event you are attending.

Considerations for Big Questions Debates

Big Questions debating format is supported by the John Templeton Foundation. Middle school students are welcome to compete, but only high school students are eligible to qualify for grant money. Students, judges, and audience members will be asked to submit a brief, post-tournament survey to help the Association demonstrate and quantify the positive impact of switch-side debate. Because of the research design, there are more competitive limits than debaters may be familiar with in other debating formats, particularly on the negative.

Structure of the Debate

Each side will make an opening presentation, laying out the arguments and reasons to prefer their side of the resolution. These are called the Constructive speeches, and they are five minutes long. The Affirmative side will always speak first. If there is a pair debating, the first speaker will give the Constructive speech. Following these speeches, there is a three-minute question segment. The first speaker in a partnership will participate in the first question segment. During the question segment, the Affirmative speaker will ask the first question. Following the first question, the questioning period is a free-flowing question and answer period where both speakers may ask each other questions.



Affirmative Constructive – 5 minutes

Negative Constructive – 5 minutes

Question Segment – 3 minutes

Following the Constructive speeches and the first question segment, each side will deliver a speech addressing the key claims and contentions of their opponents. This speech will address where there are weaknesses or opposing evidence, identify main areas of clash and how arguments interact with one another, rebuild their own contentions, and offer additional evidence for their position. These speeches are known as the Rebuttal speeches, though their content may not be entirely made up of rebuttal. The Rebuttal speeches are four minutes long and followed by a second question segment, which is identical in form to the first. If there is a partnership, the second speaker will give the Rebuttal and participate in the question segment.

Affirmative Rebuttal – 4 minutes

Negative Rebuttal – 4 minutes

Question Segment – 3 minutes

The Rebuttals and question segment is followed by the Consolidation speeches. These speeches are three minutes long and serve to reduce the debate to its core elements. Debaters will focus on identifying the areas they are garnering the best advantage and strengthening the analysis and argumentation in those areas; the form will not resemble a strict “line-by-line” treatment of the debate. Additional evidence or analysis on existing points of contention will be given, but new arguments are discouraged. If there is a partnership, the first speaker will give the Consolidation.

Affirmative Consolidation – 3 minutes

Negative Consolidation – 3 minutes

Each side will give a Rationale speech – a two-minute summation of the central argument(s) that prove their side and the reasons they have proven them in this debate. No new arguments are offered in the Rationale speech; the speeches focus entirely on the activity that has taken place earlier in the debate. If there is a partnership, the second speaker will give the Rationale.

Affirmative Rationale – 2 minutes

Negative Rationale – 2 minutes



Both sides will receive a five minute period of prep time to be used at any time (excepting in the middle of a speech which has begun) to prepare their speeches. Partners will share their prep time.

Prep Time – 5 minutes / side

The Negative and the Inverse Resolution

Big Questions is designed to pit opposing worldviews against each other in an effort to lead students to explore levels of argumentation that are rarely reached in other debate formats. For that reason, the Negative side is expected to present arguments that the resolution is actively false. Negative speakers should view themselves as the Affirmative on the inverse resolution – *exemplum gratia*, the Negative on “Resolved: Socrates is a man” should view themselves as the affirmative on “Resolved: Socrates is not a man.” Any *prima facie* burdens on the Affirmative apply equally to the Negative. Negatives must do more than refute the Affirmative case.

Argumentation

First, a debater must clearly establish a claim. This is generally a declarative statement establishing the point they are setting out to justify. Second, a debater must clearly establish why their argument is true or based in fact and logic. This is known as the warrant for an argument. Debaters need to go beyond asserting their claims and back them up with analysis explaining why the argument is valid. The warrant can come in many forms, but it is necessary for the development of the argument. Debaters may use logic or research to back up their claims. It is important to note that having an author make an assertion about a topic is not a warrant on its own. Third, a debater must provide an impact for their argument. This means the debater establishes why the argument is significant in the round.

Topicality

Students’ arguments must stick to the specific topic of the debate. The current topic has been designed with input from our pilot debate expert panel to ensure that the debate is timely, relevant, and engaging. Regardless of personal judging preferences, judges are instructed not to evaluate any arguments that are outside of the topic, and tab will automatically forfeit any debater that runs a position that is not about the topic. This rule will be strictly enforced by judges and tournament staff.

Cases

After students have brainstormed topic-specific arguments, it is time to construct cases. While there is no rule requiring a specific structure, there is a traditional approach to constructing a case. Often, a case starts with a well thought out thesis statement as an introductory lead-in to the position. Next, the case would define key terms and discuss the burdens and other metrics for successfully evaluating a round (sometimes called “framework” or “weighing mechanisms”). Following this introduction, the debater would offer contentions, or main arguments. Contentions may include quotes from qualified authors, scientific studies, or students’ own analysis. Given the five-minute time limit, debaters will prefer a two-point case with substantial depth of argumentation. Because of the more complex philosophical and science topics at hand, community judges may require considerable time with a concept to feel comfortable assigning it weight in the round.

Refutation

After presenting cases, students engage in refuting each other’s arguments. Students commonly refute cases by denying the validity of the argument. Additional strategies include, but are not limited to, justifying the reverse of the argument, showing the opponent’s arguments do not carry as much weight as their arguments, or taking out the link between the opponent’s argument and the priority they establish in the round. Students can pre-write their answers to arguments they expect their opponents to make. These are commonly known as “blocks.” Debaters will be expected to cover important arguments and questions in refutation; however, with community judges, a strict “burden of rejoinder” – the assumption that every argument must be explicitly refuted or deemed to be conceded and true – is unlikely to be enforced. A common-person understanding of which arguments are important and which are not is a better method to evaluate what must be refuted.

Flowing

It is important for debaters to learn how to keep track of arguments in the round. Typically, debaters “flow” the debate round—making note of the arguments presented and refuted in the round. This note-taking approach requires students to abbreviate terms, phrases, and ideas so that they can get as much of the debate notated as possible. Here are some tips:

- A-4 size paper. Constructives and Rebuttals are longer speeches. Keeping related notes together increases the chances debaters will remember to respond to important arguments and stay in the central clash of the debate.
- A sheet of paper per contention, plus one for framework. Don’t try to flow a whole case on one sheet – argumentation is too deep and specific for that. Keep track of the different contentions on different sheets of paper.



- At least one pen, but we recommend two, in different colors.
- If the opponent is speaking, write (don't try to determine what's important at the outset—just write as much as you can).
- Orient pieces of paper vertically, like a book. Note that columns will be narrow, which will increase the need for accurate/efficient abbreviations.

Presentation

A well-delivered argument with good use of the performative aspects of speech is ultimately more persuasive than the same argument delivered poorly. Debaters will want to develop good communication habits, including eye contact, a conversational speaking speed and tone, road-mapping (or previewing and reviewing arguments in order they will be/have been addressed), use of space, and rhetorical devices. While reading specific text from authors as evidence is expected, fast-paced recitation of evidence is not what this style is designed to present. Rather, the students' analysis and discussion of evidence will also be necessary. Because community judges will likely judge many rounds, the speed of delivery should be tailored for their comprehension.

Judges

Big Questions rounds are judged by coaches, community adjudicators, and volunteers who believe in the importance of debate and the mission of the National Speech and Debate Association in its Big Questions project. Judges are asked at the end of their ballot to decide "Who did the better debating?". Each judge has discretion to decide what better debating looks like; judges should consider argumentative aspects (important arguments won, number of arguments won, etc.) and may to a reasonable degree also evaluate performative aspects (tone, vocal quality, pace of delivery, rhetorical devices, etc.).

Because of the nature of the debates, judges will undergo a number of de-biasing techniques. Judges will be given instructions that stress the nature of leaving personal preconceptions outside the round. Additionally, judges will be asked to identify their initial inclination on the topic at the top of the judge primer. By making judges aware of their bias, we anticipate judges will evaluate the debate in the more rigorous, central processing method rather than the quicker peripheral processing method.



The ballot will also ask judges to write reasons why each side may have won the debate. By forcing judges to counter-argue their own decision and to make the strongest possible case for the opposite side, judges will reprocess information and may recognize the interaction of bias in their decision.

After these steps, judges will indicate which debater did the better debating and has won the round. While this method does not completely eliminate the issue of bias, the affirmative steps taken by the ballot and primer mitigate the impact of bias on the competitive fairness of the tournament.