

20 Tips and Suggestions for Being a Good Debater

You can use these tips and suggestions as either a lecture or a series of points that you continue to reinforce throughout the season. I use them at the start of the season as a way of establishing common themes and practices that I want all of our debaters to employ throughout the season.

- 1) **Carry a pen at all times – and write everything down.** This is a relatively simple thing to do and the benefits are enormous. Whether we are riding in a van, having lunch, or sitting in a meeting there are always new ideas and arguments that get discussed that need to eventually make their way onto blocks. The best way to ensure that those ideas aren't forgotten is to write them down.
- 2) **Ask questions.** You can never ask a “dumb” question. The more questions that you ask, the more you will know.
- 3) **Talk about arguments constantly.** This is so very important. It is one thing to understand an argument. It is quite another to be able to explain the argument and translate it into an argument that is your own. The more you talk through an idea, the easier it is to explain the idea to others. The most dangerous thing that you can do in a debate is to try to talk through an issue for the first time. While it might make complete sense in your head, it often comes out in a jumbled, inefficient mess the first time you try to explain it. The simple remedy is to practice running the argument prior to the tournament. Unfortunately, there are only so many opportunities to practice before any given tournament and larger squads are likely to generate new arguments at a pace that exceeds their ability to have each debater participate in a practice on every argument. The easiest remedy is to make every conversation an opportunity to practice talking through ideas. Thus, when talking to friends, parents, teachers, and others, one of the best things that you can do is to try to explain a new argument.
- 4) **Do a little debate every day.** This doesn't mean that you need to spend two, five, or even ten hours on debate every day. It does however mean that you should have some chunk of time set aside every day to do a few things. First, *you should speak every day.* One thing I try to encourage my debaters to do is to read some of their readings for their classes aloud. This simple exercise allows them to work on debate by improving their card reading skills while simultaneously studying for their classes. Second, *you should file every day.* With thousands of pages of blocks, there is really no limit to the amount of filing that needs to be done. My definition of filing includes reading the evidence to highlight it for use in a debate, identifying the warrants contained in the evidence and making notes in the margins so that you can use those warrants later in the debate, and finally putting the evidence in a place where you can easily retrieve it. Third, *you should cut some cards every day.* At five to ten high quality cards per day, you can significantly strengthen your files with just a few minutes of card cutting.

- 5) **Think about arguments.** In our daily lives we have a great deal of wasted mental time as we perform the routine tasks of daily life. The best way to capitalize on this time is to train your self to think about arguments. Thus, whether you are riding in the car, taking a shower, walking to class, or cutting the grass, you can use this time more productively if you force yourself to multi-task. By merely focusing your attention at the beginning of an otherwise routine or mundane task, you can accomplish a lot. For example, when I drive to school in the morning, I give myself a goal of thinking of at least one new argument that we can make at our next tournament. In this way, my driving time is used much more productively than it would otherwise be if I had wasted the commute by letting my mind wander.
- 6) **Invent arguments.** Invention – the creation of arguments – has long been recognized as one of the important aspects of the ancient art of persuasion. Debaters who unleash their creative energies by applying their background knowledge about the world are more successful because they are constantly creating new arguments.
- 7) **Stay on top of world events.** Debaters who know what is happening in the world are usually much more successful at inventing arguments. It used to be that the best way to do this was to simply read the newspaper. This is still a tried and true method, although with the internet you now have access to a great many newspapers at no cost. Some of the best new arguments presented in debates have started with the morning paper and they weren't necessarily discovered in articles whose headlines screamed out "read me if you are interested in this year's debate topic." Instead, the beginnings of these articles can be found in often seemingly unrelated articles.
- 8) **Resolve to never lose to the same argument twice.** This may seem like something that is relatively straightforward, but it is so easy to find yourself in a situation where you have lost to the same argument for the second, third, or even tenth time! I like to remind my debaters that it is okay to lose to something that we weren't prepared for the first time we hear it. However, if we lose to the argument a second time, we are exhibiting either our inability to prioritize and focus our efforts or our laziness about doing the work that we need to do to win debates. If you don't prioritize your work following a tournament and you don't follow through by putting in the time to fix the problem, you are likely to find yourself in the embarrassing position of having lost to the same argument more than once. Hard work doesn't necessarily guarantee a victory the next time you hear the argument, but it at least gives you a better opportunity to be successful.
- 9) **Take calculated risks.** To be a successful debater you need to take risks. This means, for example, that you need to be willing to put all of your eggs in one basket in the 2NR or that you kick out of your case and go for turns to a disadvantage. Of course, these risks are calculated risks in that they give you the best chance of winning and as you develop as a debater, they won't seem like risks at all. Rather, they become prudent strategic choices.
- 10) **Be organized.** In debates where two evenly matched teams square off, I would guess that more often than not, the biggest factor in determining the winner and loser involves

one or more organizational issues. There are so many ways in which organization weaves itself into the game of debate. At a most basic level organization involves keeping track of numerous sheets of paper – whether pages of your flow or dozens of pages of blocks. There is no short cut to filing your evidence and those that have organized files win more debates because they can easily access their entire set of arguments.

- 11) **Set goals for yourself.** You need to set three kinds of goals: short term goals, long term goals, and high goals. You need short term goals to measure your progress and prioritize your efforts. You need long term goals that keep you on track over the course of your season. Finally, you need to set high – seemingly unachievable goals. If you don't set your goals high, you will never reach your potential because you will always settle for something less that you might otherwise have accomplished.
- 12) **Ask why and dig for warrants.** It is a truism that warrants win debates. Judges compare and contrast warrants and the team whose claims have more developed warrants usually win. Debaters who develop warrants for their claims speak in complete arguments. Those that don't merely have a collection of unsupported assertions to defend their side.
- 13) **Don't assume you are winning everything.** One of the biggest mistakes that young debaters make is that they think they are winning everything. Successful debaters recognize the strength of their opponent's position(s) and find ways to win despite of this. "Even if" is a powerful phrase used in debates to acknowledge the fact that you won't win every argument. The acknowledgement that you aren't winning everything gives you the freedom to explore the reasons why you ought to win the debate despite the fact that you opponent might win their strongest arguments.
- 14) **Keep the values of debate in mind.** Arguments about the rules of the game (aka theory arguments) are arguments about what makes for good debates. To clearly articulate the reasons why a particular practice is good or bad for debate involves an understanding of the values that underpin the activity. In this regard there are two primary values that underpin the activity: educational values and game values. The more you are able to impact your theory arguments by making specific and precise explanations about how the practice in question intersects with these values (in positive or negative ways) the more successful you will be as a theory debater.
- 15) **Fake confidence and reassurance.** All of us have doubts about our arguments. Successful debaters are able to temper outward displays of these doubts by exuding confidence. Half the battle involves maintaining high ethos (perceived credibility and trustworthiness). If a speaker is self-assure, a judge is more confident about voting for them. Thus, even if you aren't satisfied with a speech or feel that you did a particularly poor job, you can never let the judge in on your secret. Of course, he/she may ultimately see the weaknesses in your arguments, but you shouldn't make it any easier for them by outwardly projecting your own uncertainties and doubts.

- 16) **Balance in all things.** While many of us coaches may think that there is nothing besides debate, the fact of the matter is that the best debaters need to find a healthy balance between debate and the other aspects of their lives. This means getting enough sleep, exercise, and a health diet. It also means having a life outside of debate and maintaining high standards of excellence in the classroom. And even in debate, balance is important. For example, you need to reach a balance between cutting more cards and re-doing a rebuttal.
- 17) **Think and speak metaphorically.** The most persuasive, and ultimately, the most successful debaters employ a healthy dose of metaphors (and similes) to illuminate their arguments. Metaphor involves an implicit comparison between things that on their surface appear dissimilar, but which have shared meaning when placed in relation to each other. Metaphors help us understand ideas or concepts in new and more meaningful ways and they increase our efficiency and word economy as speakers. To illustrate the power of metaphor, you should have your students read a copy of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream Speech." A careful investigation reveals layer upon layer of rich and illustrative metaphors that pack a powerful set of ideas into a concise series of words.
- 18) **There are no shortcuts.** While you might be able to steal a victory here or there, it won't do you much good over the long haul. The best way to reach your high, long-term goals is to dig in your heels, roll up your sleeves, and get to work. Hard work usually solves most problems and there really is no substitute. For example, you might be able to speak faster by learning to raise the pitch of your speaking voice to an unnaturally high (and often unpleasant) level. The problem is that this doesn't make you a better speaker in the long run. Instead, you would be much better served by training yourself to speak more quickly at your natural pitch. Similarly, standing up and reading 20 new case arguments in the 2NC might win you a few debates at the novice or junior varsity level. However, over the long run, you are short changing yourself because you aren't learning to develop robust explanations for your arguments in the negative block. If you try to get away with thin argument development in the block at the varsity level, you are unlikely to be very successful.
- 19) **The measure of speed is the number of ideas effectively communicated to the judge per minute.** This may be one of the most important things that Ross Smith taught me as a young debater at Wake Forest University. And it is so true. It isn't necessarily how many words you speak that matters. Being fast can only get you so far. Instead, it is the warranted arguments that the judge understands that matter most. If it doesn't make sense on the judge's flow, it is unlikely to factor into the decision.
- 20) **Treat others the way you would want to be treated.** Whether or not the activity of debate is fun and rewarding for all of its participants is directly related to whether or not we treat each other with respect. This means reigning in the ego, checking the attitude, and controlling your emotions. If a debate doesn't go the way you wanted, you are the only one who stands to lose twice if you persist in badgering your judge (once on the ballot and a second time in the court of public opinion). Similarly, if you find yourself in a debate where you are severely overpowering your opponent, you need to remember

what it was like to be in their shoes not so long ago. Here is a goal if you ever find yourself in such a mismatch: your opponent should say “thanks, I learned a lot” rather than “get me out of this room, I am so humiliated.” The things that you do and say go a long way toward determining their reaction.