



queenslanddebatingunion

Coaches Guide

If you're new to debating coaching, this guide is designed to help you make sure the team receives the best advice possible. If you're a bit more experienced, the guide also contains some example topics that you could use to help your children practice and learn.

The most important rule of coaching-do practice debates!

There is no getting around the fact that the easiest way to improve someone's debating is to have them debate, which is why the easiest and best way to improve a team is to have them do a practice short preparation debate against each other. Lists of topics that you could use are found at the end of this document. If you don't have six team members, don't worry-just do a 2v2 debate that doesn't feature 3rd speakers, or do a 3v2 debate that doesn't feature a third negative speaker. Let the team prepare for an hour and then watch them debate. Encourage them to treat every practice debate as seriously as a regular debate-they should use palm cards and time themselves with stopwatches as normal. That will improve both their long preparation and their short preparation debating skills.

If you're short on time, be innovative! It's better to train for 2 hours once a fortnight than it is to train for one hour or less a couple of times a week. Alternatively, consider emailing the team a topic at the start of their lunch hour and watching them debate that afternoon. If you're still short on time, try some simple alternatives-give the team a topic and give every team member 30 minutes to prepare a first affirmative speech (a surprisingly difficult task). You could skip the debating part entirely and just watch the team in their preparation time to get an idea of how the team dynamic is working (don't do that too often though-practicing giving a speech on short notice is more helpful than just prepping).

The idea of spending your limited training time practicing short preparation debating may seem wasteful, but it's an incredibly productive way of facilitating fluent speech and encouraging a range of thought about different topics. There's lots of time at the beginning of the year before debates start and the draw is even out to get a few practice debates in. Alternatively, there's at least 3 weeks between every debate in the rounds; use your training time on one of those weeks practicing short preparation. No matter what year level or skill your student is, practice truly makes perfect.

Other tips and tricks

1. Don't write your students' cases or their speeches for them. No one benefits from that practice-it'll take up heaps of your time, your students won't learn anything, and they're likely to fumble as they present the material and end up not doing too well. Your role as coach is to guide students to making reasonable arguments, not to think up their case for them.



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2. Preparing rebuttal word for word is risky. It tends to cause speakers to say odd things at odd times. Instead, ask your team to brainstorm as many arguments as they can think of that the opposition might make, and have a discussion as to how they might respond to that material, without putting pen to paper. Add your own ideas for opposition arguments if you think your team has missed anything crucial, but let them decide how they will respond.
3. Sometimes you might think a topic we've set seems really tricky. Often there's a simple solution-Google. If we set a tough topic, or one that seems unusual, we'll make sure that there's plenty of available information on the internet to help provide context and background into arguments that can be made.
4. It can be tough when your team loses, but bad mouthing the adjudicator rarely helps. It's better to describe going down as unfortunate, but a learning experience from which everyone can improve.
5. Make sure you understand the rules and practices of the QDU to make sure all your advice is up to date. Debating isn't exactly the same activity that it was 30 years ago (or even as it was 10 years ago). A QDU handbook is a helpful guide to understanding what you need to do and what you don't need to do.

Some example topics

To help coaches who are looking for ideas, here's a set of topics that we've used in the past in different year levels. All of them have been well received and are suitable for practice debates.

Year 5 and 6:

- That Pocket Money should be earned.
- That fairy tales set us up for disappointment.
- That we should ban children from competing in reality TV competitions.
- That students should write report cards for their teachers.
- That all students should be required to take self-defence classes.

Year 7:

- That boarding school is better than day school
- That we should punish bystanders who do not report bullying.
- That school holidays should only last 4 weeks per year.
- That we should replace all assignments with exams.

Year 8:

- That students should never be assessed in groups.
- That we should shut the zoos.



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- That we should make playing sport on the weekend compulsory for all children.
- That we pay our sporting stars too much money.

Year 9:

- That all Australian families should only be allowed to own one car.
- That we should allow all parents to have complete access to their children's social media accounts.
- That children in early high school should be allowed to opt out of core subjects and choose subjects based on their interests.
- That schools should teach Harry Potter instead of the classics.

Year 10:

- That we should ban all forms of gambling.
- That emergency service workers should not have the right to strike.
- That clickbait (e.g. buzzfeed) is bad for journalism.
- That we should ban negative political advertising.

Year 11:

- That we should ban the payment of ransoms.
- That we regret the rise of social media.
- That we should ban prenuptial agreements.
- That students should pay more to attend university.

Year 12:

- That the government should not fund the arts.
- That we should ban holocaust denial.
- That economic sanctions on rogue states do more harm than good.
- That employers should not have access to the criminal records of their prospective employees.
- That feminists should boycott Disney Princess Films.

Senior A:

- That left wing parties in western liberal democracies should distance themselves from unions.
- That the gay community's fight for marriage equality has been a waste of resources.
- That we should publish the salaries of all workers (not anonymised).



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Example Debate

The example debate is available for viewing here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGPflwZqRMk>

The debate took place this year at the World Schools Debating Championships in 2016 between Croatia and Singapore. The debate is in the Senior A format, which means it features 8 minute speeches with Points of Information and Replies. Even if you are coaching a younger year level, the debate is still worth watching, as it displays the interplay of a number of complex issues well, and how to structure argumentation clearly.

The World Schools Debating Championships is largely very similar in style to the QDU, although there are 4 crucial differences I'll draw your attention to:

- The speakers time on the affirmative themselves with phones. This is not allowed in the QDU as electronic devices are banned at the table. However, it is perfectly acceptable to use a stopwatch (as done by the negative team), or, more commonly, a wristwatch with a stopwatch function.
- Some speakers use sheets of A4 notepaper, rather than palm cards. The use of A4 paper is ONLY allowed in the Senior A competition. It is not allowed in any other year level or competition-you must use palm cards.
- Both teams have only 3 arguments across their first and second speakers. We recommend that teams in the QDU make 4 arguments. Both teams also outline all of their arguments at the start of their first speech, which is unnecessary. Rather, each speaker should outline their own arguments at the start of their own speech.
- The negative team uses a team line. You do NOT need a team line.
- The affirmative is called the "proposition", and the negative is called the "opposition".

In all other respects, this debate is a model QDU debate that is largely well argued. That said the debate isn't perfect, and both teams would do well to work on their manner-the affirmative comes across as a little flustered and the negative at times comes across as a little robotic.

FAQ's:

But wait-why didn't the teams have splits or themes? In modern debating it's generally accepted that splits and themes are not necessary. Instead, speakers should simply explain what they interpret their side of the case to mean, which both the first speakers do appropriately.

But wait-sometimes people offered points of information by saying "On that point"? That's ok-you don't need to only say "point of information". You could say "Sir", "Madam", "On That" or simply stand in your seat (provided the speaker can see you). The speaker can then simply wave you down, or say "I'll get to you in a second".

But wait-the speakers sometimes said an argument had no response. Is that allowed? It's not only allowed, it is actively encouraged. Speakers should remind judges when a team has ignored their arguments.



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An example of what an adjudicator might say after they watched this debate:

Hi everyone, and thanks for coming along to this debate. It was extremely high quality and relatively close, but ultimately I awarded the debate to the negative team from Singapore. Congratulations to them!

To explain that decision further-largely the debate fell down to 2 issues:

- i) Which policy is the most appropriate form of democracy?
- ii) Which policy guarantees the best form of free trade?

On the first, the affirmative team argued that free trade needed to be put to national referenda because they had a unique degree of importance into the long term, and because it could change a nation's long term capacity to make decisions for themselves.

The negative team had two main responses. The first was to argue that the negative team failed to draw a clear line between which issues were of such national importance that they required a referendum, and which issues were not (e.g. a water pipe). Although the negative team made a reasonable point, at times this argumentation was a bit simplistic (comparing an FTA to a water pipe was clearly reductive). The affirmative team's response was at times confused, but they were ultimately able to convey the concept that that they thought FTAs were more important than other decisions (even military decisions) that they required public input.

The second response of the negative was far more effective, which was to point out that although democracy may be important, it is unlikely that this vote would adequately reflect the will of the people. They demonstrated this by pointing out:

- i) Free Trade agreements are complex and difficult to understand, so people couldn't vote according to what they want,
- ii) Corporate interests are likely to play a large role in campaigning and cause people to make bad decisions.
- iii) FTA's have concentrated costs to a small number of industries (like the car industry in Detroit), but diffuse benefits. That means voter turnout is likely to favour opposing FTA's because the costs are more clearly felt, even though that is not the true will of the people.

The affirmative team's response was that you didn't need to understand everything in a policy to vote. This seemed inadequate given the extent of the lack of understanding people were likely to have, and given that the affirmative team were not asking for a general vote (such as in a parliamentary election), but a specific vote on a specific policy.

Largely, this meant that while the affirmative team's analysis about democracy was strong, it was unlikely that the power of the people would be meaningfully implemented. Moreover, the issue was a relatively unimportant one in the course of the debate, because the affirmative team themselves seemed unconvinced about the importance of democracy, conceding that many people voted on strange metrics at all times.



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The second issue was which policy guaranteed the best form of free trade, which the negative team won more clearly. In it they proved that beneficial free trade agreements were less likely to eventuate if this policy were adopted.

Their first claim was that free trade agreements were less likely to take place. They pointed out similar issues to their issues with democracy-that corporate interests swayed the vote, and that diffuse benefits and concentrated costs would cause a backlash. The affirmative team's response was that FTAs had been ratified before in Switzerland, but the negative was able to point out that that single example was unlikely to be representative of a broader trend, so I was convinced free trade agreements were less likely.

It was a problem that FTAs would no longer exist, because those FTAs were beneficial. They could:

- i) Reduce costs to consumers by making economies more efficient (their material on comparative advantage). The affirmative team's response was to say that cheaper goods were likely caused by worker exploitation, but they were not able to demonstrate why that would be the case.
- ii) Increase the net number of jobs in the long term.
- iii) Facilitate more complex political agreements between states (this was the negative team's second speaker material, which received no response).

The affirmative team responded by claiming that in the short term, jobs were likely to be lost (They pointed to The North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA). However, the negative team were able to mitigate this material by claiming that they stood for retraining programs to limit the effect of free trade on vulnerable industries, which meant that while this harm existed, it was insufficient to justify the harm of losing free trade.

For that reason, the negative was able to adequately limit the affirmative team's benefits to democracy in the first issue and point to substantial harms to global trade in the second issue, which meant they ultimately were able to win the debate.

Note the adjudicator in your debate would go on to provide some more general feedback-this is just an example of how the explanation of the decision might play out.

Some other thoughts

1. Note that the negative team was highly structured and very clear. Sometimes they bordered on being too clear-they said things like "The thesis of this argument is that free trade is always beneficial, and is less likely to eventuate on the proposition's side". You can say things like that too if you want, although personally I find it a bit robotic. That said, the clarity of the negative team is a huge point in their favour and you should strive to be that clear.
2. The negative team engaged in aggressive "Burden Pushing", which is to say they asked questions like "Prove to me that all voters are able to understand Free Trade Agreements", which is clearly a ridiculous expectation that no one has of the affirmative team. This CAN be an effective strategy if you have demonstrated why it is true that voters do in fact need to



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understand a free trade agreement, but since they hadn't done that it came off in my opinion as a bit unnecessary. The affirmative team dealt with the burden pushing reasonably well, by simply claiming that it was not their job to prove the things requested of them by the negative team.

3. Sometimes, teams rebutted rebuttal. For instance, the first negative argued free trade reduced costs. The second affirmative responded by saying it reduced costs because the people producing the goods you were buying were being abused. The second negative then responded back, saying there was no reason to assume that would be true, because the goods were cheaper in one country due to that state's comparative advantage (e.g. It's cheaper to produce rice in Vietnam than it is in Australia because they have more rain there, so Vietnam has a comparative advantage in the area of rice growing, and not necessarily because the workers in Vietnam are exploited). It is GOOD to rebut rebuttal. Don't let your argument die just because someone opposed it!
4. Sometimes the speakers were a bit rude to each other. It is ok to call an argument silly if you genuinely think it is that, but it went a bit far at points in the debate (Particularly during the second negative speaker).
5. In the adjudicator's speech, they don't just decide which team won both issues-they also point out that the first issue wasn't very important (because the affirmative team's argumentation was a bit confused). Understanding which issues are important and which issues are unimportant is crucial to winning debates-if you think an issue is of particular import, you should tell an adjudicator that, and then tell them why. It is an excellent excuse for an adjudicator to give a debate to you even if you only won some of the issues in that debate.
6. The affirmative team made in my opinion a strategically unwise decision in their first affirmative speech by only discussing principled issues (i.e. issues about the principle of democracy, rather than about the tangible effects that might occur to free trade). It is important that first speeches in debates try to cover as much ground as possible, and that includes consideration of both principled issues (in this debate, democracy), and practical issues (in this debate, which team gets better free trade).

If you enjoyed watching this debate, there are plenty more on Youtube like it to watch. Try to watch them with a critical but also non-partisan eye. By that I mean to be critical of the arguments and try to decide whether you think they're any good, but at the same time don't let your pre-existing political opinions colour whether or not you think the speakers are strong.