



Brighton & Hove Debating Society

Guidance for Speakers

v1.0 Aug 2010

© 2010 Anthony Harris / Brighton & Hove Debating Society

Introduction

The Brighton & Hove Debating Society has been active in the area for over 50 years, promoting all forms of debate and discussion through our regular monthly debate and other special events. We are a diverse group with members of all ages, backgrounds, interests, careers, political and religious beliefs. Our membership truly reflects the cosmopolitan mix of the Brighton and Hove area and as Debaters we strongly believe everyone has the right to air their views as long as they in turn listen to and respect the views of others who may disagree with them.

Our main speakers are drawn from our membership and from time to time we are joined by external speakers who are specialists in their areas. To some new speakers the thought of leading a debate may seem daunting, but this booklet sets out our debating procedure and provides some helpful guidance on how to prepare and present their contributions. In reality giving your speech and setting out your views is no more difficult than if you were having a conversation about the topic with your friends – only this is a big conversation with a lot of listeners!

What is a debate?

A debate is a chance for people to speak passionately on either side of a specified topic – known as the “motion”. The motion is a carefully worded statement and one speaker will prepare a case in support (the “proposer”) whilst another will take a stance against it (the “opposer”). A Chairman runs the meeting and makes sure everyone gets a fair chance to speak.

What’s really important is that Debaters always respect one another’s views, even when they may disagree with them. No matter how much we take opposing sides during the debate everyone walks out the best of friends afterwards!

Debating Format

Every Debating Society has slightly different rules. Here is the format we use for all our main debates:

- Both speakers get **15 minutes** to set out their argument, starting with the Proposer.
- After the main speeches the debate is opened to all those in the audience (the “floor”). Members and visitors alike are welcome to speak for up to **three minutes** on either side of the motion.
- When everyone who wants to has had their say, the main speakers will sum up their side of the motion for about **5 minutes** each. By tradition the Opposer goes first and the Proposer has the last word.
- The Chairman then calls for a vote of all those present, including visitors. A simple show of hands in favour of the motion, against the motion and those abstaining is taken, after which the result will be announced.

We are a very friendly society and you can be assured of an attentive and well behaved audience. Unlike some formal debates, we don't have “Points of Information” or “Points of Order” so you won't be interrupted part way through your speech.

Debating is not a public speaking competition and the audience is expected to cast their vote based on their views not on the quality of the speeches or the arguments outlined. Although of course the better the speaker the more likely they are to sway peoples views to vote for them!

Topics

We debate anything and everything! Each of our programmes includes a wide range of subjects, with as much balance as possible to provide something for everyone. Some motions cover topical issues and current affairs but we also debate moral and religious issues, philosophical topics and of course something more light hearted at Christmas time! Although our programme is planned six months ahead, we often have an uncanny knack of predicting what will be topical during the course of the year.

A debating motion is always phrased as a simple statement, never as a question. Some Societies start all their motions with “This House Believes...” and although we don’t write that explicitly it should be implied. So for example, a motion could say “*Euthanasia is the right of the individual*” but not “*Do individuals have a right to commit Euthanasia?*”

An ideal motion should be clear enough for everyone to understand but have enough depth and interpretation to keep the discussion interesting for the whole evening. It needs to be something that people are likely to have differing views upon – if everyone agreed from the start it wouldn’t be a very good evening! And finally it should be as unambiguously worded as possible – we would prefer to debate the actual subject than different interpretations of what the wording of the motion means.

Most speakers will volunteer for a particular topic that interests them, and choose whether they speak for or against depending on their personal views. Sometimes however, members will be prepared to speak on a different side, either because there was a shortage of volunteers or because they felt like more of a challenge. Debaters should always appreciate that the debates are intended as a fun intellectual exercise, and not assume that a speaker always believes everything they may say during their speech.

Whilst the committee does its best to select topics it is incredibly difficult so we always welcome suggestions. Send your ideas to topics@debsoc.com.

Preparing Your Speech

Before preparing your speech in detail, you need to be sure you have decided how to interpret the motion, and have a rough plan of what aspects of the topic you will address.

There are many ways to address any motion. Some are very clearly worded and leave little scope for misinterpretation, whilst others may be more vague or philosophical in nature giving you wide freedom to address the subject in any way you see. Even with the more straightforward topics, you might think of a clever or unexpected way to interpret the topic that will bring some variety into your speech. However, it will usually make for a better evening if both main speakers are addressing the same core issues, so whilst it may be helpful to introduce some tangential thoughts, try to stick fairly closely to what you think the audience will consider the main thrust of the argument.

Some speakers try to deconstruct the motion and explore the meaning of each word or phrase before launching into the main body of their speech. Although this is a valid debating style, our members have often commented that they find this approach a little boring and prefer speakers who set out their case and get quickly into the heart of the topic. Of course, if the motion uses a specific phrase that needs explanation, this shouldn't stop you from spending a few moments clarifying things for the audience.

Research

Unless by chance you are already incredibly well informed, all but the most abstract topics will benefit from your doing some detailed research on your subject. Typically you should consider demonstrating the depth of your knowledge by including quotations, statistics and other such evidence.

Remember too that you must demonstrate credibility – giving the audience good reasons to believe what you say and consider you an expert on your subject. For example statements like “my mate thinks...” are not particularly persuasive when compared to something like “In the words of Winston Churchill...”. Likewise a generality like “...surveys have shown...” is not as persuasive as a more specific reference to “...the Mori poll published in last weeks Times...”

If you have access to the Internet it will be a great source of research. But as ever, do be selective about what you read and be sure to verify facts and quotations from more than one source. Remember that even sources like Wikipedia can be wrong or present one individuals distorted viewpoint!

To ensure you are ready to respond to those who take the opposing view, be sure to research the arguments both for and against the topic.

It is important to research many types of information relevant to the topic. Don't assume you should simply bombard the audience with detailed statistics or results of opinion polls – they will soon get bored! Make sure you also find a good mixture of relevant stories, anecdotes and quotations.

Structuring your speech

When setting out your speech, you should always structure it around three parts – the beginning, the middle and the end! These are summarised below and discussed in more detail on subsequent pages.

Beginning

There are many techniques for a good opening – perhaps telling a story, giving a quotation or asking a rhetorical question. Whatever you do make sure it is delivered confidently and will really grab the audience's attention.

Middle

This is where you must set out your views, the supporting evidence and develop your case in support or against the topic. You need to build a logical flow through your various remarks so the audience is clear where you are going and how you are getting there – rather than a random collection of statements that will confuse them!

Every view or opinion should be backed by some supporting evidence from your researches.

End

It's vital to leave time for a proper conclusion at the end of your speech. Fifteen minutes is quite long enough for the audience to forget some of the early points you made! So spend at least a minute recalling the major items you included and leave the audience very clear about where you stand on the topic.

Opening remarks

Your opening words give the audience an opportunity to form an immediate impression of you. Be clear and confident... if your first words are “um, er, hi...” then you are unlikely to grab their attention!

Fortunately there are many different way to make an effective start. Which you choose depends as much on your personality and style as a speaker as it does on your subject. You must be comfortable in what you are doing if you are to relax easily into your speech.

So, for example, if you are not by nature a dramatic person, you are unlikely to feel confident attempting an overly dramatic story-telling introduction.

The headings below suggest several possible ways to start your speech. There are far more options than we can cover here, these are just some suggestions:

Use a Quotation or a Sound Bite

If you have found a particularly apt quotation that sets the scene for your remarks, you could start with that. Do at some point make it obvious that these are not your own words so the audience is not confused and keep quotations reasonably brief.

- “Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. In the words of William Shakespeare: ‘...’”

You might even start with a quotation that goes completely against your own views, this can sometime be a humorous way to get started:

- “‘{Quote}’ according to ... - what utter rubbish! Today I intend to show you the error of his judgement...”

When opening with a quotation you should vary your tone and use pause to make it clear which words you are quoting and which are your own.

A sound bite is similar to opening with a quotation, except that you are the one making up the phrase yourself! Think of something suitably bold and dramatic. Maybe even radical or controversial! As with quotations, keep it brief and make it clear by varying your delivery when you are moving on to start the main part of your speech.

Tell a Story

Audiences always respond well to a story – when you paint a picture they can relate to, they will immediately be curious to see where it is leading, what is the punch line, and what does it have to do with the subject? Personal stories are particularly effective because it demonstrates your connection with the subject and your passion for it.

Equally, you could relate a story you have encountered in your research or even make up something – nobody will ever know!

Ask a Rhetorical Question

A rhetorical question is one that does not expect an answer, certainly not from the audience. It may be a question where the answer is impossible, or perhaps one where the answer is obvious. The question may follow a statement, or may lead to a humorous follow up. At first glance the question may seem irrelevant to your subject, but that in itself will grab the audience's attention as they then listen intently to see how you will make the connection.

Developing an argument

You probably have about twelve minutes for the main part of your speech, once you allow time for the opening and closing remarks. That might sound quite a long time when you first sit down to draft your speech, but once you start practicing, you will realise there is only time to do justice to a relatively small number of separate points. The audience will get lost if you bombard them with a vast array of disjointed information. So you need to select just the best points from all the material you have researched and arrange them in a logical order that leads to your conclusion.

Structure

There are many different styles that speakers can adopt when delivering their speech.

Some will impose a very formal structure on their speech... “Today there are three main issues I intend to cover...”. This has the advantage of warning the audience what is coming and means you can very obviously tick off the points as you go through (“My second point is that...”). Some speakers also find this approach helps them to remember their speech and not lose their train of thought part way through.

The disadvantage is that it can seem a little “formulaic” and requires that you focus almost exclusively on your specific points. It can be harder to work in comments looking at the opposite side of the topic since you may not want to emphasise this as much as those points which support your view.

If you do announce up front how many points you have, make sure that you do stick to that otherwise the audience will get confused!

Other speakers take the audience on a more free flowing journey through their material. They may use an ongoing story or theme to relate the various points together. Rather than saying “My third point...” they will use phrases like “so now we have looked at... let us move on to consider...”.

It’s vital to use the full range of delivery techniques such as pause and variation in tone or pace to make it clear to the audience when you are wrapping up one line of thought and proceeding to the next. Use phrases like “next let us...”, “we can also consider...”, “as we move on...”.

Content

There is definitely no prescriptive rule about how many points to cover and how to organise them. But consider these extremes:

- If you rely on just one or two key arguments you are probably not taking a broad enough view of the topic, Even if you cover them in depth, the audience may suspect you have not researched enough sources to be considered a true expert and will be unconvinced by your argument
- If you try to cram in more than half a dozen main points, you are unlikely to have time to really do justice to any of them, or to demonstrate how they relate to each other.

Just as important as the number of areas you cover is the sequence in which you cover them and how you link from one to another. If you jump rapidly between different aspects of the topic, the audience will get confused or lost. But if all your points are too similar they may lose interest or not realise you have moved on.

During your preparation, sketch out the various key points you want to make, then consider the most logical order in which to tackle them. Look for ways

you can link them together to lead to your conclusion. If you find you have some points that do not really fit in, consider replacing them and taking a different, simpler, approach instead.

Evidence

Your speech must persuade the audience of the merits of your view on the topic. You are expected to sound like an expert. In an earlier section we have already discussed the need for thorough research and evidence to back up your statements.

Avoid statements like “lots of people think”... it only begs the question “who?” or “how do you know”. Refer to your research, which may include surveys or other statistics. You can also use quotations from well known sources, references to academic papers or perhaps recent television programmes.

There is a balance though – avoid bombarding the audience with too many detailed statistics or they will most likely switch off. You may find it is enough to refer to an appropriate survey without actually quoting it in full.

Conclusions

The final few seconds of your speech are arguably the most important... they are what the audience will remember when they leave.

Timing

Any good speech must always have a conclusion and it must always be obvious to the audience when you have really finished. Even if you are running out of time towards the end, don't just stop talking after your final point and sit down – the audience will be very confused as to why you stopped so abruptly.

Ideally, you will have rehearsed your speech well in advance and timed yourself so it is perfect. But perhaps you got carried away and said more than you planned on one point – or perhaps the audience spent too long laughing at your jokes... what can you do? The Chairman will probably give you a warning sign when you have only a minute left. If you spot this, you should:

- Wrap up the current point as quickly as possible – perhaps omit some evidence that will take time to explain.
- Omit any points that you haven't even started yet. Perhaps you could make a comment like "There are several more aspects of this topic we should address but in the interests of time we will have to cover those another day..."
- Move directly to your prepared conclusion, shortening that too if necessary.

Content

Make sure the audience realises you have covered all the aspects of the topic that you wanted to... take a long pause after your final point. Some speakers introduce a final anecdote – often an amusing or thought provoking one – with which to end. Equally, a quotation may be a good way to wind up.

Then you might consider saying something like:

- "So let me now remind you why I believe we should..."
- "Let us finally review the evidence I have presented to show..."
- "As we have seen, it is clear that we should ..."

Make sure it is very clear to the audience which side of the motion you are on! Although you must reach some kind of a conclusion, you can certainly apply "conditions" to it – for example you might conclude that you:

- Support the motion but only given prevailing circumstances or pre-conditions. You are stressing to the audience that if they agree with these assumptions they should vote with you
- Oppose the motion in principle, whilst acknowledging there are practical difficulties in meeting this ideal. You are asking the audience to vote on those principles, and not on the practicalities
- Accept that the proposal is a laudable aim but concede that it will not be financially viable for some time. Again, you are asking the audience to examine their conscience and vote on principle not on what is practical.

Any of these approaches may lead to an interesting exchange of views from the floor in the second half of the debate.

Whatever conclusion you reach, don't attempt to repeat all your points, just quickly remind the audience of a couple, and summarise the related evidence in one sentence. Remember you will have a further opportunity for a summary after all the contributions from the floor.

Delivery

Your closing remarks need to sound upbeat... convince your audience that your side of the motion is the right one and they must vote for you at the end of the evening! Make sure you rehearse these last few sentences really well so you can deliver them word perfect.

Remember that even with a great speech, some of the audience may have found their minds wandering part way through. Look straight at them, increase the volume slightly to project your voice right around the room, and really grab back their attention as you reach the conclusion. Where appropriate, put as much passion as you can muster into some punchy sound bites.

Writing Style

Always remember that this is a speech. In a conversation you break all sorts of rules which apply to written work and very often they provide a link to what you want to say next. So do not be afraid in the formal conversation you are having with your audience to begin a sentence with "and" or "but". "So" can be a particularly good word as you start on your closing sentences which sum up what you have just proved in the rest of your speech. When you read through your speech, ask yourself "Would I say that?"

And finally there is the "Rule of three". Notice how many good speakers present ideas to their listeners in threes. Your conclusion to your speech may well be based on a rising pattern which says (not necessarily explicitly) "I have told you this. I have told you this. But above all I have told you this."

Summing Up

Each speaker gets five minutes at the end to summarise their case for or against the motion. This is your opportunity to respond to points made by your opponent and by the speakers from the floor. This should be a mixture of prepared remarks and more spontaneous reaction to what you have heard.

It is not necessary to respond individually to everyone who has spoken. Single out some members of the audience where they have made specific points that you can clearly respond to. Often several people will have made similar points and you can cover all of them together.

Take notes during your opponents speech and the contributions from the floor, but make sure you listen carefully to what they say and don't try to capture every point or you will get too distracted and not take in what you are hearing. Try to structure your notes as you go by spacing them out and then fitting related ideas together - you might even find using different coloured pens is helpful.

If you find the spontaneous nature of the summary too challenging, then you can minimise this by preparing more of your remarks in advance. For most topics, you can probably guess the most likely arguments that will be made by your opponents and draft your response in advance.

You might want to introduce a little new material in your summary – perhaps an additional anecdote or more statistics that support your case. Unless necessary to respond to a specific challenge from your opponent you would not normally introduce a whole new line of argument. Focus instead on reinforcing the message you presented earlier, and leaving the audience very clear as to the key reasons why they should support you.

Just as with your main speech, make sure you have a really punchy final line to end on, and deliver it with all the conviction you can muster.

Delivery

Pace, tone and pause

Setting the right pace, and varying it when necessary is a vital skills for any speaker. Speak fast enough to cover your material but not so fast that your listeners find it hard to follow what you are saying and the direction of your argument and they have no time to absorb what you have said and remember it. They will not be persuaded by a speech delivered at breakneck speed just so that you can include everything you have researched.

Vary the pace

Your listeners will find it difficult to follow a speech delivered at a consistently even pace. It will fail to grab their attention. Vary the speed according to the material. It is very effective if you slow your words down at the point of emphasis. Or you can pause briefly afterwards.

Pauses are particularly important. If you write an essay your readers can go back over bits they have not understood. They cannot do that with a speech so not only must you make your argument easy to follow by structuring it well, but adding pauses at the end of each major section of the speech gives them time to absorb what you have said before you move on to your next point.

Pauses are also very important when including humour – if you are expecting to raise a laugh from the audience, make sure you allow time for them to get the joke before moving on to the next point.

Vary the tone for emphasis

In a short speech your ideas are bound to be compressed and every sentence will have its point. Usually there is a word or a couple of words that make the point. Make sure you emphasise them. Emphasis does not necessarily mean saying something louder.

Similarly each section of your speech should contain one of the key ideas you want to put over to the listeners. Build towards that (usually towards the end of the section) and emphasise it with a telling phrase so that they get your message.

No matter how passionately you feel about your subject, you cannot emphasise every point you make! The audience will feel they are being bombarded! Always build in some lighter, quieter sentences between the key messages. Also vary the tone of your voice when you are including a quotation or telling a story to illustrate one of your points. This helps the audience to make sense of what they are hearing – in the case of a quote the change of tone signifies these are not all your own words.

Gesture

Gestures spring from your determination to persuade the audience to your point of view. An obviously rehearsed gesture can convince an audience that yours is nothing but a dramatic performance and even you do not necessarily believe a word you are saying, so why should they?

It is better to leave your arms loosely by your sides than to thrash them about meaninglessly.

Gestures to avoid

It is much easier to highlight some aspects of gesture that are to be avoided than it is to prescribe good techniques! Consider these points:

- Do not get into a repeated gesture. If you jerk your hands continuously in time with your speech your listeners will not be able to decide which words are important and the effort of trying will mean they will stop listening. You can use a gesture to emphasise a few points but if you use it too often the audience will feel they are being harangued.
- Some repeated gestures may be unintentional for example those with longer hair needing to flick it clear of their eyes – and then it just falls back down again. If you know you tend to fiddle with things, avoid carrying a pen or other distraction when you get up to speak.
- Do not make arm gestures with your elbows tucked in to your sides. Gestures should be from the shoulder otherwise you may look a bit like a penguin.

Don't be afraid to continue a gesture through a whole sentence if necessary. Staccato movements are only effective rarely.

Stance

The way you stand at the lectern also impacts the way your audience receives your message.

You may think that walking up and down continuously is a better way of reaching all parts of the audience in a large auditorium, but in fact they will become mesmerised by following you backwards and forwards!

Sticking your hands in your pockets may seem a good way to avoid deciding what to do with them but presents an overly casual and laid-back appearance for a formal occasion – and of course means you can no longer gesture at all. Grasping the lectern firmly with both hands makes you look nervous and in need of support, and similarly restricts your ability to gesture.

Just try to relax and be as natural as you can under the circumstances!

Use of humour

A well-chosen joke can make your point clear or it can give your listeners that moment of relief from concentrating on your argument. But it needs to be well done.

Most audiences would appreciate a speaker who introduces a lighter side to almost any topic no matter how serious. It helps to show the speakers personality and build a rapport with the other participants and the audience.

However, it is important to ensure that any jokes are appropriate, inoffensive, well delivered... and of course funny! There is a difference between private humour among a group of friends and public humour in a speech. The comments below provide some examples

Be appropriate

Make sure that nobody in your audience could be offended by your remarks. Avoid any racial or religious humour that could be misconstrued. It's also best to also avoid any national stereotyping unless it is extremely relevant to your topic.

You are usually fairly on safe ground by poking fun at so-called celebrities, public institutions, inefficient bureaucracies, tabloid journalists etc, though you might want to check your opponents profession and background to make sure they are not likely to be offended!

Be Relevant

There is no point throwing jokes into your speech just for amusement value – with the possible exception of a light hearted event at Christmas time, most debates are not meant to be a stand up comedy event and the audience may not be impressed with a speaker who takes their subject too superficially or light heartedly. Make sure all your remarks are relevant to the subject or to the context of the event. Here are some ideas:

- Include a short story that exemplifies one of your points but has an amusing ending
- You could check a dictionary of quotations to see if anyone famous has made some light hearted comment that would lend itself to your topic... “As the great Winston Churchill once said...”
- Consider introducing one of your points with a brief but amusing “sound bite” – think in the dramatic style of a tabloid headline writer!

Delivery

Make sure that the audience knows when you are joking! That may sound obvious, but sometimes you may make fun of your subject with a statement that could be taken the wrong way! The audience may need a clue from your facial language that a joke is coming. Otherwise a delayed laugh, when they realise it was a joke, may ruin your next point! Also use the tone of voice and gestures and any other non verbal indicators to make it clear that you mean your remarks to be taken in fun.

Pause is usually very important when delivering humorous remarks. If you have a “punch line” then take a very brief pause to make sure people are ready for it. If you are expecting the audience to laugh, again take a moments pause before proceeding with your next sentence.

Use of notes

The way you use notes is critical to your success in speaking. Nobody expects you to learn your speech off by heart, indeed there are many disadvantages to doing so. But equally, if you are too dependent on your notes it will be hard to demonstrate the sort of confidence and style that is required to be seen as an effective speaker.

Don't Recite

In Drama, actors learn their lines and are expected to repeat them flawlessly each time. But when giving a speech, the audience don't expect a dramatic performance – they want to see that you are a real expert and are passionate about your subject, not merely that you can recite some pre-prepared remarks.

You might just want to learn the opening lines and final part of your conclusion so you can be sure to deliver these critical parts of your speech word perfect.

Don't read

At the other extreme, a speaker who is so reliant on notes that they read their speech will lack effectiveness for many reasons:

- It is much harder to introduce appropriate variation in tone and pace when reading, and you are likely to take pauses in the wrong places
- If you raise your note card in front of your face, or spend the whole speech looking down at the lectern, it will stop the audience seeing your facial expressions as well as actually blocking the sound and making you harder to hear.
- If constantly raised and lowered or waved around, or if you keep walking back to peer at the lectern, your notes may become a distraction to the audience who will not then be paying attention to what you actually say.

Getting it right

Here are some tips for getting your notes, and the way you use them, just right

- Use notes that are not too big or too small. If they are too large then they will be distracting but if they are too small you may find them hard to read and even lose your place mid speech
- Don't try to "hide" note cards. The audience will realise you have them anyway, so hold them naturally and refer to them casually rather than trying to be furtive!
- Have just the right amount of detail on your cards – not too much or you will start to read. See below for more hints.
- Lay out your notes thoughtfully so that any page turning coincides with moving on to a new aspect of the topic. It can be another non-verbal clue for the audience as to the structure of your speech.

Content

Your note cards should contain:

- Headings to remind you of the main sections in your speech
- Key bullet points for each section – don't be tempted to write out too much detail or you will start to read it
- Any statistics you intend to include – don't try to learn them because it can actually look more authoritative if you refer to your notes at this point.

**We always welcome new members and visitors.
Visit our website for more information
including our latest programme with details
of all our debating and social events.**

www.debsoc.com

**There is also a two page summary
of this guide available.**



© 2010 Anthony Harris / Brighton & Hove Debating Society

All rights reserved. No part of this publication
may be reproduced without permission.