

A Coach's Notes¹

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October 1, 2011

Resolved: The U.S. should significantly increase taxes on the rich.

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Introduction

This is the second edition of the 2011-12 CDA season. Previous editions and previous years can be found through the "Training Materials" page on the CDA web site at <http://ctdebate.org>. Accompanying this document are my notes from the demonstration round in two formats, transcript and flow chart, and a copy of the packet from the tournament. I try to post these on the web site within two weeks of the tournament.

These Notes are intended for your benefit in coaching your teams and for the students to use directly. I hope that you will find them useful teaching tools. Please feel free to make copies and distribute them to your debaters.

I appreciate any feedback you have, good and bad. The best comments and suggestions will find their way into subsequent issues. I would also consider publishing signed, reasoned comments or replies from coaches or students in subsequent issues. So if you would like to reply to my comments or sound off on some aspect of the debate topic or the CDA, I look forward to your email.

Getting Novices Started

The best way to learn how to debate is to just do it. After all, high school freshmen have been talking for over a decade, probably non-stop if you ask their parents. It's only when they become teenagers that they stop talking to their parents entirely.

So inexperience is no reason not to debate. Brand new novices almost certainly won't win every round, and they may get crushed in some rounds, but they probably won't lose every round either. If they are reasonably confident, they will be able to handle the losses

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and they will learn so much more by doing than by simply listening. A student who is constantly speaking out in class is ready to debate, even if they have never done it before.

However, most coaches will want to prepare their new debaters before throwing them to the lions. The [Training Materials](#) page on the CDA website has materials that can help you. What follows are some suggestions for using it as part of a Novice orientation. You may be able to squeeze the first four meetings into a one-hour period, but one and one-half hours would be better. Meetings with full debates will require at least two hours, more to facilitate discussion.

Introductory Meeting

You need (and have already had) an “Introduction to Debate” session where you’ve talked about what debate is, the Connecticut Debate Association and the CDA tournament and debate format. It may have been part of your orientation or recruiting meeting for new debaters.

The students will probably be interested in the CDA calendar for the year, which can be downloaded from the [Schedule](#) page. At the bottom of the page is a typical tournament day schedule. Finally, you will want to have a copy of the timing of a round either from the CDA Handbook or the Judges’ Workshop handout.

The piece [Preparing for Extemporaneous Debate](#) is a good basis for discussion for the remainder of the meeting. It explains the three critical skills of general knowledge, speaking and listening and how debaters can practice them on their own. You can leave it with your team to read on their own for the next meeting.

Finally, look through the list of past CDA resolutions and choose one of the packets from the past year or two. Select one and distribute it to the debaters, also to be read before the next meeting.

Second Meeting

The next step is to discuss the process of using the packet to develop cases to support and to oppose the resolution. There are four items on the web site that can help.

The [Coach’s Notes for November 2008](#) has an article titled “60 Minutes” that provides a strategy for using the one hour period at the start of the tournament when debaters read the packet and prepare their cases. You won’t want to rush your novices through the process in one hour, but you will want to discuss the steps in the process. The team may decide they prefer a different strategy, but they should agree on how they intend to use their time, even if they choose to modify those in the article.

Since your debaters have already read the packet you assigned at the last meeting (okay, I’m an optimist), the rest of the meeting can be spent working on each step in your chosen preparation strategy. The [Coach’s Notes for October 2009](#) discusses characteristics of good contentions. The [Coach’s Notes for March 7, 2009](#) discuss the proper structure of an argument. The [Coach’s Notes for December 2009](#) discuss templates for [Definitions](#) and for [Contentions](#) that the students may find useful. They should work as a group to define terms and develop contentions and supporting arguments for both the Affirmative and Negative sides of the issue.

The students may not complete their cases during the meeting. Each team should leave with the assignment to finish their Affirmative and Negative cases and be prepared to present them at the next meeting.

A second item to leave them with is a piece titled [What Happens During a Debate](#). This is a fairly long piece that walks through the order of speeches in a round. It is a solid basic outline of what they should be doing during each part of the debate, including cross-ex. It also discusses the appropriate use of the six minutes of prep time each side gets during the round. Finally, it emphasizes the importance of working as a team and not as two separate individuals. Short of actually watching a debate, it is the best way to get a feel for how to debate in CDA.

Third Meeting

The next step is to have your debaters present their cases. Each team should have a set of Affirmative and Negative contentions, so each debater can present. It would probably be best to alternate Affirmative and Negative, with debaters from different teams, to get them used to the rhythm of a real round. The speeches should be timed, but no one should be expected to use the full six minutes.

Each speaker should receive a brief critique. The other debaters should provide the initial comments, to get them used to reviewing their own performance. The critique should address an agreed upon list of items: presentation style, organization, quality of the contentions (wording, do they support or oppose the resolution as appropriate, were they presented in the best order), quality of the supporting arguments for each contention. The team should discuss these criteria before the first speaker so that everyone understands what they should be looking for as they listen. Note taking should be encouraged!

Fourth Meeting

There are three additional skills (four if you count note taking) to learn: rebuttal, summarization and cross examination. These are difficult to practice outside the context of a debate, but if you shorten the debate, you can squeeze them in.

You can arrange these shortened “rounds” a number of ways. For example:

Team 1 Speaker 1: Presents one contention

Team 2 Speaker 1 or 2: Asks one question with a follow up

Team 2 Speaker 1: Presents a rebuttal to the contention, ideally using the answer to the question.

Team 1 Speaker 2: Summarizes the debate from Team 1 perspective

Team 2 Speaker 2: Summarizes the debate from Team 2 perspective

None of the speeches should go over two minutes, and the summaries could be as short as one minute. The contention can be an Affirmative or Negative one, and should be alternated from one “round” to the next.

You will want the other debaters to provide a short critique, here focusing on the question asked, the rebuttal and the summary. Is the question directed at a weakness in the contention or its supporting arguments? Does the rebuttal respond to the question? Do the summaries fairly wrap up the arguments for each side? As before, you will want to

discuss and agree to the questions before you begin the exercise, so everyone knows what they should be looking for as they observe. And, as before, note taking should be encouraged.

Fifth Meeting

A full debate takes a long time, figure two hours at least. Only four debaters can actually debate unless you have extra judges; a coach certainly can't observe more than one debate at a time. For established teams, experienced varsity debaters can judge the novices. But you can't use complete debates as your primary training tool, any more than a football team can use a complete game as its primary practice. Devising exercises like that described in the last section, or some of the ones described below is the best use of your team meetings.

But it would be best for you novices to experience at least one full debate before their first tournament. The annual Novice Scrimmage is one opportunity for your novices. Otherwise you may want to take a long afternoon or even a Saturday, get some additional judges (it's a good opportunity to train your judges) and have your novices square off against each other. If you have the luxury of taking a three or four hour period, you can even go through the entire process starting with a new packet and resolution, with an hour to prepare cases.

You can also do this serially with two teams volunteering to go first. Those not debating should take notes and judge, providing a collaborative critique at the end. It does need to all happen at one go. Your students won't remember enough of the debate to be able to discuss and critique it if they wait a week or even a day for the second half.

The First Tournament

And now your Novices are ready to debate! Probably not, but it's time for them to start. If you've followed the steps above, you will have given them a plenty to work with. Facing other debaters will teach them the rest.

Debate Team Meetings

I expect that most debate teams hold weekly meetings lasting an hour or perhaps more. Debate coaches rarely seem to be able to command the same time commitment that a sports coach can. A full debate will take two hours, so practice debates will be rare occurrences.

Some time will need to be spent on administrative matters: attendance, planning for the next tournament, fund raisers (possibly), finding judges (certainly). But most of the time should be spent developing skills. I have four suggestions. You can either devote an entire meeting to one, or do a little bit of each at each meeting:

Debriefing

After a tournament you should spend time discussing the resolution, your students' cases, the cases they saw from their opponents, their ballots and judges' comments, and the final round. My debaters are always asking me questions like: how to I write better

contentions? How do I ask better questions in cross-ex? How do I prepare better rebuttals. My answer is always, review every debate you are in, every debate you see. It's no different from learning to write a good essay: you write them, you read them, you critique them, you rewrite them.

The most important thing your debaters need to learn to facilitate this review is to take good notes. It's hard to discuss what happened during the debates at the last tournament if no one remembers them in detail. The most valuable exercise is to have all your debaters (and you too, Coach!) take notes during the Varsity final round. It's the only debate the entire team will see together. They can compare the quality of their notes, compare their own cases to the cases presented by the finalists, critique the quality of the rebuttal and cross ex, in short discuss every aspect of the debate.

If you have a large team, it will be hard to discuss every round and ballot for every team. You might try breaking up into groups and have two or three teams work together, or have the varsity debaters lead smaller groups. My partner and I used to review every round together after a tournament. Ideally, each debater should learn to be their own best critic.

You might also focus on one particular aspect of debate at each tournament, cases one month, rebuttal another, cross-ex another, summary another. The more time you have for team meetings the more you can do together. The less time you have, the more your debaters will have to find time to do this work on their own.

The only way to learn a skill is to practice and review your performance. Failing to review every one of your debates is like handing in an essay that the teacher never returns with comments and a grade.

Casing

“To case” is a verb I learned from the Yale Debate Association. They compete in parliamentary style debate which is fully extemporaneous: you don't know what the topic is until you walk into the room. They practice by developing cases and then trying them out on each other.

CDA tries to stay reasonably close to the news. One of the recommended activities for debaters is to make sure they follow current event by reading the paper or a news magazine, watching the news on television or listening to it on the radio, or browsing news sites on the internet. Your meetings could feature some time for debaters to suggest possible resolutions and briefly outline cases for and against.

Their work can be the basis for a more debate-like exercise. Have each debater bring in one balanced (or two opposing) short articles on a topic to the meeting. Pick one, read it, develop one contention cases, discuss and repeat. You can probably do two or three in an hour, or do one every meeting along with other things.

The trick is to get them used to reading material quickly and convert it into useful arguments. This is directly applicable to what they need to do during the preparation hour, and during a debate if their opponent presents something they do not expect.

Note: the New York Times web site has a section called [Room for Debate](#) where they print short articles from five or six experts on a topic. There is a new one topic every day, and they go back to January 2009. It's a great source of topics and material.

Casing is directly relevant to what debaters have to do in the hour before the first round in every tournament. Indirectly, of course, it helps to increase their background knowledge on a variety of subjects. If your team is familiar with the topic, they will find it easier to read through the packet, easier to develop their cases, and easier to counter their opponents.

Skills Practice

The important skills can be hard to practice outside the context of a full debate. You need someone to present a case before you can cross-examine them or present rebuttal, and several speeches before you can summarize the debate. One approach is to use something similar to the "short round" suggested for the *Fourth Meeting* discussed above.

You can probably think of any number of similar exercises yourself. For example, students could read a short text to practice their speaking skills. They could present a brief summary of an article or assigned topic and answer questions on it.

You could work on a chain of argument: one student presents an argument; the second presents a counter argument; the third presents a counter to the counter argument. See how long they can keep the chain going without repeating an argument. If you divide the team into two sides it can be a contest where the first side that can't extend the argument loses. Alternatively, you could stop after a specific number and have the last student summarize the chain. The exercise can be extended by giving each side one question (or one question and a follow-up) before they present their argument.

Full Debates

As noted above, full debates are tough because they take so much time. There is the hour to prepare cases from the packet, which you can finesse by letting them prepare on their own outside of practice. Then the debate itself is close to 1.5 hours, and you probably need additional time for a critique and discussion, so 2 hours total. And you can only listen to one at a time. This is why going to the tournament and actually debating is the best thing students can do: it's the only way to get a realistic practice in for all of your debaters at one time.

Other Ideas

I would love to hear how you run your team meetings and share your ideas with the rest of the league. Send me an email.