

A Coach's Notes¹

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Resolved: The U.S. should repeal all estate and inheritance taxes.

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Introduction

This is the first edition of the 2010-11 CDA season. Previous seasons can be found on the CDA website, <http://ctdebate.org>. Also available are my notes from the demonstration round in two formats, transcript and flow chart, and a copy of the packet from 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. Your comments and suggestions often provide ideas for new articles. I would also consider publishing signed, reasoned comments or replies from coaches or students. 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.

Twelve Tips for Novices

Tourist: "Officer, how do you get to Carnegie Hall?"

Policeman: "Practice!"

There is no secret formula for becoming a good debater. But there are a number of things you can do to improve your chances of winning. These suggestions may seem simple, but many rounds are won by debaters consistently applying basic techniques, before, during and after the round.

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Things to Practice²

1. Exercise your voice. You may be the most talkative kid in school. You may have started arguing with your parents at the age of two. But this is not the type of speaking you do in a debate.

Debate is formal speech. A good debater uses complete sentences and whole paragraphs that flow. Words are well chosen and precise.

Scientific research that suggests we don't simply learn or read single words, any more than we learn individual letters and build up each word we see by reading it one letter at a time. The more we read, the more easily we read because we learn to comprehend phrases and sentences in one glance.

This is also true with speech. If you practice speaking in whole sentences and paragraphs, these patterns are stored in your mind. Published works provide a great source of those patterns. Rather than simply read, spend some time each day reading aloud. You will be surprised after a time at how much easier the words will come when you need them.

2. Exercise your hands. If you have lousy hand writing, now is the time to do something about it. You will need to take notes to follow the round. Your partner will need to be able to read those notes in order to communicate with you during the debate. Talking while the other team is speaking not only annoys the judge but distracts you from following their arguments. You also will need to be able to read those notes days after the tournament in order to evaluate your performance and figure out how to improve. (More on that below.)

Your handwriting doesn't have to be textbook perfect; it does have to be legible. It doesn't have to be cursive: print if it's faster or easier to read. If need be, find a text on handwriting at the library and practice.

3. Exercise your ears. The purpose of writing legibly is to take notes during the round. The best way to practice your note-taking and hand-writing skills is to take notes.

Note taking isn't simply transcribing what it said. You must analyze what you hear, summarize it so you can write down quickly and synthesize a fair reconstruction of your opponent's argument. And you have to be thinking of what you plan to use as a counter argument at the same time.

You should have ample opportunity to take notes in class. You can also take notes during news programs or documentaries as practice. You should never observe a debate without taking notes and practicing your flowing skills. If you take notes during the final round of a CDA tournament you can compare them with your teammates, decide who does the best job and look for ways to improve.

Take a look at some of the sample flows of final rounds on the CDA website for examples of what you should be able to accomplish.

² See the item labeled "Prepare for Debate" on the Training Material page of the CDA website, <http://ctdebate.org> for the paper "Preparing for Extemporaneous Debate," a more detailed description of the material in this section.

4. Read widely. CDA debate is extemporaneous debate. Each tournament will use a new resolution. You will have one hour and a limited amount of information to prepare to support both sides of the topic. The more you already know, the better off you will be.

The best debaters are well-read. They follow the news in print, on the web, on TV. They read a paper every day, or a newsweekly every week.³ They don't just read the headlines, but the in depth stories on the inside pages.

Certain topics show up regularly in CDA resolutions. There is a file of past resolutions on the CDA web site that can guide your reading. A basic understanding of certain subjects—law, government, economics, philosophy, ethics, science—can be applied in many circumstances, and are a necessary, useful background for debaters.

Things to Know

5. Know the basic rules. There are five basic rules common to most forms of debate. The first is that the Affirmative has the burden of proof.⁴ They must provide a convincing reason to adopt the resolution. The Negative does not have to provide a convincing reason not to adopt the resolution, though they may do so. The Negative need only show that the Affirmative's reason is not convincing. This is similar to a trial, where the prosecution must prove guilt, but the defense need not prove innocence. One of the most useful questions either side can ask when preparing a case is whether the Affirmative has supported the resolution.

The second rule is that the Affirmative has the right to a reasonable definition of terms.⁵ The Negative may object if that definition is unreasonable: if it violates the usual meaning of the words, or if it interprets the resolution in a way that leaves the Negative no viable position to argue. However, the Negative cannot challenge the Affirmative's definition simply because they would prefer to define the terms another way. If the Affirmative fails to define terms, the Negative may offer its own reasonable definition (which may in turn be challenged by the Affirmative). However, the Affirmative may implicitly define terms by using them in their arguments, though this is not recommended unless the meanings are obvious.

The third rule is that both teams have the burden of rejoinder.⁶ This means that if one team presents an argument, the other team is required to reply to it, and cannot simply ignore it. This is what we mean when we talk about clash: responding directly to the arguments made by your opponent. The judge may count an unanswered argument to the benefit of the team that presented it.

The fourth rule is that new arguments may not be introduced in rebuttal. Note that a new example, new evidence or a further explanation of a previous argument is not a new argument. Also, a team has a right to reply to any argument in rebuttal if the rebuttal is the first opportunity to do so. For example, if the Negative presents a new argument in

³ Many news sources are available on the internet for free or after simple registration.

⁴ See "Burden, Burden, Who's Got the Burden?" **A Coach's Notes**, November 2006, which discusses the burden of proof and how it shifts during the debate.

⁵ See, "Defining Terms and Arguing about Definitions," **A Coach's Notes**, October 2006, which discusses why and how to define terms, and when to argue over them..

⁶ See, "Burden, Burden, Who's Got the Burden?" op cit.

the Second Negative Constructive, the Affirmative has no chance to reply until the First Affirmative Rebuttal, and may present a new argument to counter the Negative in that speech.

Fifth and finally, evidence and arguments cannot be introduced in cross-examination. Cross-ex is for asking and answering questions, and should not be wasted making speeches or reading evidence.

You can use these rules to your advantage if you know and understand them.

6. Know the basic strategies. There are two basic cases the Affirmative can run. The first and simplest is a comparative advantages (or disadvantages) case. This consists of a series of contentions that show good things will happen (or bad things will be avoided) if the resolution is adopted, or that the opposite will occur if the resolution is not adopted.

The second is the traditional case: harm-inherency-solvency. The Affirmative presents a problem (harm), explains why it cannot be solved by the current system without adopting the resolution (inherency), and shows how adopting the resolution will solve the problem (solvency). These three pieces are interdependent, in that if any one fails, the whole case fails. Note the Affirmative can present advantages and disadvantages along with the traditional case.

The Negative has a range of strategies it can use in response. The first is direct refutation: one or more of the Affirmative arguments are simply wrong. If the Affirmative is running a comparative advantages case, then the advantages (disadvantages) won't be realized or are not significant. If the Affirmative is running a traditional case, then either the problem does not exist or is not significant, the problem can be solved by means other than adopting the resolution, or adopting the resolution will not solve the problem.

The second Negative strategy is to present comparative disadvantages to adopting the resolution or advantages to not adopting the resolution. These would be different from the Affirmative's advantages or disadvantages. The harms and benefits of the Affirmative and Negative advantages/disadvantages must be compared in order to win the debate. Which are more likely to occur? Which have more significant consequences.

A third Negative strategy is to run a counterplan. The Affirmative is required to support the resolution, but the Negative is not required to support the status quo. The Negative may propose a course of action different from both the resolution and the current state of affairs that it believes is superior to both. In this case the debate becomes one between the resolution, as interpreted by the Affirmative, and the counterplan as proposed by the Negative.

Too often debaters present contentions without understanding how to use them to win the debate. Simply presenting a contention is not debating. You need to explain how that contention will win the debate for your side. That depends on the strategy you chose and how the contention fits into that strategy.

7. Know the structure of an argument.⁷ While there are many forms of argument, one of the more useful was described by philosopher Stephen Toulmin. In his schema, an argument consists of an assertion, which is backed by evidence in the form of examples or expert testimony, tied together with a reason (Toulmin calls this reason a warrant) that explains why the evidence supports the assertion. An argument may be further qualified by describing how likely it is to be true, because most arguments about the real world are not certain or not always true.

If you listen to many debates, in CDA or elsewhere, most arguments consist of nothing more than an assertion, with no supporting evidence or reasoning. Unless the assertion is one that almost everyone knows or would agree is true, your first thought is (or should be), why should I believe that?

When you develop and present an argument, be sure to identify each part and to present it clearly. When you rebut your opponent's arguments, you can choose which part to attack. If the argument is simply an assertion, you can point out it is lacking any support. You can explain why the evidence or examples are not appropriate, or you can present your own evidence and counter-examples. Best of all you can find a flaw in their reasoning or reinterpret your opponent's evidence to support your side of the resolution.

8. Know the parts of a debate.⁸ A debate consists of four parts: constructives, rebuttals, cross-ex and prep time. You should be doing different things in each one. Knowing what to do when is important.

The first two constructive speeches are primarily for presenting your case. The last two rebuttals are primarily for summarizing the debate. What you do in the two constructives and two rebuttals in between is a bit more complicated and depends on the specifics of each debate. Cross-ex is for asking questions with the aim of exposing weaknesses in your opponent's case, or giving answers that strengthen your own. Prep time is to organize your speech. You should always take at least a minute of prep time whenever one of your speeches follows after one of your opponent's speeches.

Take some time to develop a plan for using each speech, whether you are on Affirmative or Negative. When you debate, stick to your plan. As you become more experienced, review and revise your plan to take advantage of what you have learned.

And take some time to plan how you will use your time before and during a debate. How will you use the one hour preparation period before the tournament begins?⁹ How will you take prep time during the debate? What will you do between rounds to absorb what you learned in the round you just finished? There is no reason you can't revise and improve your case between rounds based on what you just heard. Unless you have a plan to use this time wisely, it will go by without any use at all.

⁷ See "Making an Argument," *A Coach's Notes*, March 7, 2009, for a discussion of Stephen Toulmin scheme for arguments.

⁸ See the item labeled "What Happens During a Debate" on the Training Material page of the CDA website, <http://ctdebate.org>, for an article of the same name discussing these matters in detail.

⁹ See "Sixty Minutes," *A Coach's Notes*, November 2008, for a discussion of how to use the preparation period before the first round. See "Templates," *A Coach's Notes*, December 2009, for templates you can use during the preparation period.

Things to Do

9. Work with your partner. CDA debate is a team sport. You only make half the speeches, ask or answer half the questions, provide half the smarts. You need to rely on your partner for the other half. In order to work together effectively, you need to spend time with your partner and get to know each other's strengths and weaknesses.

Who is the better speaker? Who is better coming up with ideas? Who knows more about what subjects? Who would be better in which speaking position and why? Think about it.

10. Case. Using a noun as a verb is bad grammar. But I was introduced to this term by parliamentary debaters at Yale. Parliamentary debate permits even less time for preparation than CDA does, typically only 15 minutes. And there are no research materials to use. "To case" is their term for practicing how to develop and respond to resolutions.

It is actually very easy to practice debate. Find a short article on a controversial subject and make four copies. Get three team members together, suggest a resolution and go to it. If you can find another teammate to judge, that's good. If not, you will all have to critique yourselves. You can shorten the speeches a bit if your time is limited. This way you should be able to have at least one practice round in every week.

"Casing" in this way helps you to learn different topics, practice developing arguments with limited time and information, and present it in a competitive setting.

11. Debrief after every debate and tournament.¹⁰ The key to improvement is to review your performance with a critical eye. What did you do right? What did you do wrong? What could you do better? What do you need to practice? What do you need to learn more about?

The key to being able to debrief is to take good notes (see above). After most debates the only observers who can provide feedback are you and your partner. The other team is at another school, as is the judge. The ballot may have useful comments, but comments about the debate may make little sense if you don't have a good record of what was said by both sides.

You and your partner will have to learn to review most debates by yourselves. Your coach may be able to help now and then, or answer particular questions. But no coach has the time to review every debate for every team on the squad.

12. Flow the Final Round.¹¹ Most CDA debaters—other than the four debating—watch the final round without taking notes. Every one of those observers would probably give an opinion as to who won the round if asked. As a debater, what do you think about a judge who decide your rounds without taking notes? How can you have an opinion on who won the final round if you didn't take notes? It's impolite for a debater to watch a round without taking a flow.

¹⁰ See "Reviewing the Most Recent Tournament Results," *A Coach's Notes*, October 2006, for suggestions on how to debrief after a tournament.

¹¹ See "Getting the Flow," *A Coach's Notes*, March 7, 2009, for suggestions on taking notes during a debate.

It is also a wasted opportunity. Final rounds are a chance to practice your note taking skills. Because your whole team can observe the round, you can check your notes against those of your teammates and see what you missed.

Your notes of the final round can serve as a starting point for your debriefing after the tournament. How do your Affirmative and Negative cases compare to those presented by the two 3-0 teams in the final round? What did they do that you did not? What did you do that they missed? The final round is the only debate that you, your coach and all your teammates can view and review together. Don't waste that opportunity!