

A Coach’s Notes¹

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Computers and CDA

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Preface

This is the second part of my special edition of Coaches Notes on AI, computers, and debate. It discusses the issues with allowing debaters to laptops, and why the best course is to educate

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debaters on proper use rather than ban them. The first part is a primer on what AI is and how it can be best used.

I may write some commentary on the motion at a later date.

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. 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.

History of Computers in CDA

When I joined CDA in 1997 there were no rules about the use of electronics simply because it wasn't an issue. Laptops were clunky and expensive, cellphones were rare and had limited functionality, and wireless internet was rarely available. The original ban on electronics in the mid-2000s was driven by concerns over equity: some schools and some students had them, many or most did not. Even if their utility was still limited, there could be an intimidation factor when a laptop and cellphone armed team walked into the room to face an opponent with only pen and paper.

There were other concerns about research resources and fairness. Again, in 1997 debaters could bring whatever resources they could carry to the tournament and refer to them during case prep. Some teams brought reference books, I remember one school whose team always brought a crate full of past Newsweek issues. There was no indication that these additional resources provided any advantage. However, these were also banned and debaters limited to the motion packet/dictionary/almanac/Constitution.

In 1997 hosts chose the debate topic and could choose to pre-announce before the tournament. Like electronics and reference material, this practice was also banned on the grounds of fairness. It was felt that students who had more time to devote to debate would gain an advantage from being able to devote more time to building their cases prior to the event.

Laptops and tablets improved and became widely available. Wireless was more widely available, but not in every school. Prior to COVID (the 2019-20 season and earlier), electronics—laptops, tablets, cellphones—were still banned, though cellphone use as a timer had crept into accepted practice without any formal permission or rule change.

Exceptions were made for students who required a computer to debate, but these were quite rare. I cannot recall there ever being more than one such debater at any tournament, and most tournaments had none.

All research material other than the motion packet, a dictionary, an almanac, and a copy of the US Constitution was also banned.

Online debate is impossible without computers, so their use became universal for two seasons, 2020-21 and 2021-22. Students in general became more accustomed to using computers for schoolwork and many schools were online in whole or part during these years.

With most debaters operating from home, there was no ability to surveil their actions during case prep. One might have thought the quality of CDA debate would change radically as debaters took advantage of the relative freedom to use whatever resources they chose. While some likely did, there is no evidence that it was widespread or significantly changed the tenor or quality of CDA debate.

The great majority of debaters continued to use computers with the return to in-person debate in 2022-23. There was no formal decision to permit them; use simply carried over. That first year back CDA also had trouble finding host schools, with only one host for five tournament dates. The scrimmage was held online, and one tournament was held online due to the weather.

Concerns about possible abuse prompted a vote on whether to ban electronics at the end of the 2023-24 season. Coaches voted 13 to permit use, 9 to ban, and 3 indifferent. At the time of writing, most CDA debaters use laptops rather than pen and paper.

Evidence and/or Lack Thereof

Evidence of abuse is lacking. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, and there is certainly some cheating going on. Detection admittedly is difficult. The question is whether abuse is widespread and also whether it has a significant impact on the integrity of the competition.

Commonly Cited Behavior

Most examples of behavior cited as evidence of cheating have more mundane alternative explanations:

- Reading verbatim from the computer is no different than reading verbatim from a sheet of paper. Reading, as opposed to speaking extemporaneously from an outline, is considered poor debate, but it is not prohibited. Many debaters, especially novices, write out their speeches. Most students type faster than they write by hand, and a keyboard may make written speeches more likely. But reading is rare in final rounds suggesting debaters move away from reading as they develop.
- Typing while one's partner is speaking is cited as evidence of prompting the speaker with arguments or facts they may have missed. However, it is as important to flow one's partner as it is to flow one's opponents. What a speaker planned to say, should have said, and actually did say are three different things. Without a complete flow, a team cannot reliably debrief after the round or tournament. Some leagues permit a debater to prompt

their speaking partner either with a written note or speaking out loud. The effect on the speaker is usually disconcerting rather than helpful.

- Exceptional facts, statistics, or arguments are not evidence of the use of banned resources. Many teams prep topics as part of their practice, and CDA emphasis on current issues is well known. Many students take AP courses or engage in various study that introduced them to subjects in depth.
- Pausing mid-speech to look at the screen is no different from pausing mid-speech to look at one's written notes. A pause is best practice if you are momentarily confused or unsure what to say next or simply tripped over a word. Saying nothing is better than saying the wrong thing. This is sometimes cited as an indication that the speaker has received an electronic prompt from their non-speaking partner. But as noted above, prompting is more likely to startle to speaker rather than simply cause a pause.

Perhaps the most common evidence mentioned by a coach, judge, or debater is that they have seen a debater use a laptop “to look something up.” I can recall two formal complaints at a tournament citing this type of violation. Surprisingly in both cases the debater admitted doing it, didn't know it was banned, and was looking up an unfamiliar word.

An internet lookup is forbidden. My guess is that this is the most common sort of violation simply because we are all now accustomed to using the internet to verify things we don't know. The question to ask is whether looking up a fact or a statistic during a round would really have much impact on the outcome.

Use of AI

If use of AI in its current manifestation, large language models (LLMs) were common, one would expect several things.

First, debaters talk to and emulate each other. I've always been convinced debaters learn much more from each other than they ever learn from even the best coaches. If using LLMs were effective, someone would boast about it. Others would hear or suspect and try it themselves. The practice would spread, and likely become visible.

CDA permits all the debaters from one school to collaborate during case prep. One debater on a team accessing ChatGPT or Gemini or CoPilot or whatever would have a hard time hiding their use or sharing the results. Below I will note that this one debater threatens the integrity of all his teammates.

Second, CDA permits coaches to work with their debaters during case prep. Some do; others do not. Debaters all work in the open. Coaches often wander about the room. If use of AI were common or widespread, it again seems unlikely that it would go unnoticed. I would hope that coach would report it, or at least, if it were their own students, stop it.

Finally, the most common concern cited about the use of computers is that they will have an impact, presumably negative, on the quality of CDA debate. I have been with CDA since 1997, and many things have changed, particularly the size of our league and the greatly improved quality of our debaters. You will have your own opinion, but I have seen no evidence that CDA debate has changed since computers became widespread due to COVID in 2020-21.

I do judge several times a year in two other leagues, typically at online tournaments where the use of computers is necessary. The New York Parliamentary Debate League does not permit any research materials, and changes motions each round. NYPDL holds two tournaments each month, and their members often debate at tournaments outside their league. NYPDL quality is on average higher than that in CDA, but simply because they do more debating. I do not see cases or arguments that would suggest the debaters have violated their research rules.

I also judge at a few National Parliamentary Debate League tournaments, whose rules permit the use of prepared cases, the internet, and any source other than a human being who is not the debater's partner. The motion changes every round, and prep time is limited to 20 minutes. It is very clear when a team is using a prepared case. Some schools maintain libraries of them, and one school even made their library available to others for a time.

The NPDLD discourages but does not ban the use of LLMs. Debaters may now be using LLMs to help develop their case libraries. But the debaters I have seen using prepared cases all seem to have a good understanding of what they are presenting, so I doubt the use of LLMs during the 20 minutes of case prep is common.

NPDLD rules do not permit internet or other research while the round is going on. I have not seen anything that leads me to believe this is common.

Lack of Complaints

If cheating is widespread, as noted above that is inconsistent with the lack of formal complaints, or even casual reporting such activity by debaters and coaches. Over the past 15 years I have received about one formal complaint every one to two tournaments. Most of these have been from debaters who feel they were treated unfairly by a judge. Two, cited above, were about looking up information during a round. In discussion, the debaters admitted doing so, said they were checking on a word, and didn't know that was forbidden.

The one AI-related complaint was resolved by speaking with the team involved. I walked through their case with them, asking questions about terms and arguments not explicit in the motion packet. In every instance, they were able to both explain them and provide a source. Many CDA members are high performing high schools with a variety of AP courses and other study opportunities for their students. It should not be surprising that what they know about many topics would surprise you.

Possible explanations

Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. I have given several reasons above that “it’s hard to detect the use of AI” is unlikely to be the reason we have not received more reports of debaters violating the rules. There are a number of other possible explanations for the lack of complaints/reporting to consider:

- Debaters don’t know the rules or are afraid to complain. Many novices are uncertain about what is or is not permitted. Even at the novice level there are enough debaters in their second year, or who debated in middle school, to provide a critical mass. Debaters tend to be very competitive, and sensitive to unfair treatment. This should make complaints more likely rather than less.
- Coaches suppress complaints, either to avoid making waves or to avoid admitting activity by their own debaters. Possible, but unlikely.
- Abuse is very common, everyone does it, and so no one cares. This also seems unlikely. Students talk, and someone would boast about how clever they were.
- An alternative version of “abuse is common” is that many debaters have tried it and found it ineffective. Again, you would expect students to talk.
- There is no abuse at all, again, possible but unlikely. 100% compliance is rare in any situation.
- ***The level is low and does not have a significant impact on results.***

The last is my best guess given that there are regular complaints on other grounds.

Teachers everywhere report that AI is being abused in their classrooms. Why would AI use in CDA differ from its use by students in school? I think there are four important differences between CDA competition and the classroom that discourages cheating and increase the likelihood of reporting.

First, debaters, like most competitors, self-select from those better able to debate. Debate is a voluntary activity, taking significant time including entire Saturdays away from other activities. Debaters are more likely to accept the rules voluntarily.

Second, debate is a competition against opponents from other schools. If a student knows a classmate is cheating, they are unlikely to say anything because of the social consequences. A complaint about another school’s debate team violating of the rules is socially acceptable and expected in a competition.

Third, in a classroom everyone can get an “A”, at least in theory. As students, debaters tend to be more academically able, so another student’s cheating not only does not prevent them from achieving a high mark, but it is also less of a threat to their class grade standing. Debate is a zero-sum game: cheating by an opponent may result in a debater losing the round and failing to trophy.

Fourth, a student caught cheating in the classroom faces less severe penalties. Except in extreme cases, they cannot be expelled. A debater in violation in one round will forfeit that round. They may end up forfeiting all rounds. Worse still, given CDA allows all debaters from one school to prep together, their action may cause all teams from their school to forfeit rounds, as explained above. The school may be asked to leave.

The incentives in CDA are aligned to give debaters an incentive to be honest themselves and to see their teammates are honest.

Proposed Remedies

If use of LLMs or the internet were widespread and having a significant impact on CDA debate, or if the risk that such would develop, there are several remedies that might be considered.

Ban Computers

The one most often proposed is to ban the use of electronics other than cell phones used to keep time. This would certainly prevent the most obvious suspected abuses. There are several problems.

Debaters clearly prefer using laptops to pen and paper. One need only look around at any CDA tournament. Debaters are also voting with their fingertips in my experience outside CDA. (Use in other leagues, NYPDL, NPDL, is also close to universal.) A ban would be very unpopular among debaters.

Would CDA also ban accommodation for students who need a laptop or tablet in order to debate? This was permitted even prior to COVID. Given schools have paid less attention to handwriting than in generations past, and students increased preference for keyboards, these requests might become more common. This would require its own rules and enforcement.

Advances in technology will gradually subvert the effectiveness of the ban. Many LLMs now take verbal input. Cell phones differ from laptops and tablets only in screen size, often being equally powerful. Smart glasses are improving—Ray Ban is working with Meta, for example. A debater could deliver prompts by speaking to a cellphone or smartwatch and listen to the reply by earbud or read it on smart glasses.

High-end tablets permit one to “write on glass” with a stylus. It takes a bit of practice but is improving rapidly. I no longer carry around my large artist pad and flow all rounds on an iPad Pro. It eliminates lost notes and permits conversion of the handwriting to text for later review by the debater and others. This developing technology would be unavailable.

Submit and Review

A second possibility is to require all teams that choose to use computers to have revision history turned on and submit all their work at the end of the day. This would be easy to do as the collection can be done by email or google and the amount of data is small. Outside review could be limited to those occasions when a complaint was made. There might be random checks, or every case might be scanned automatically.

CDA would probably need confirmation that this was permitted. A formal policy would have to be developed and agreed to by the member schools. Coaches and students would have to agree to its use, possibly by accepting it at the beginning of the season. CDA would need to acquire AI detection software and receive training in its use.

Even if scans were rare, collection of casework would likely serve as a deterrent. There are workarounds to defeat review, but they are cumbersome. Students could create and submit dummy cases different from the ones they actually use. A debater could turn off revision history at certain points, though this might be detectable.

I find this solution distasteful. I never had a desire to be a policeman.

Train and Trust

My preferred remedy is to permit use; to better train debaters, coaches, and judges as to the rules and best practices; and to trust debaters to behave ethically. If we cannot do this, the problem is not simply the debaters or AI.

As noted above, debaters are high ability students engaged in a voluntary activity. The nature of the CDA debate provides an incentive to follow rules and to report those who do not. The evidence we have is consistent with this being largely effective over the last six years.

This solution may be naïve, but I have been working with CDA debaters—and others further afield—for 29 years. To date I have been impressed by both their ability and their honesty.

Allow use of Internet/AI

There is a fourth solution that we have not discussed in CDA and which I am not proposing at this time. That is to permit the use of internet and/or LLMs during case prep and/or during rounds. The packet might be retained or might be dispensed with and debaters left to do all their own research.

The National Parliamentary Debate League, following West Coast norms, permits the use of the internet and prepared material² during a 20-minute case prep period. I have no information as to whether these debaters are also using LLMs to generate cases, though at the last tournament I

² The motion is new each round. Debaters will not know the precise topic, but past motions are readily available, and topic areas frequently repeat.

judged a note to debaters said its use was “highly discouraged”. At some tournaments laptops are also permitted in the round; in others any material used in round must be copied to paper prior to the debate.

Judging in these tournaments I have not seen any noticeable difference to CDA, which limits research material, or the New York Parliamentary Debate League which bans research material in any form.

Most probably think free use of AI would be the downfall of debate, but that is unclear. LLMs are another research tool. Different debate leagues and formats differ as to what resources and how much time may be given to research. The contest remains by spoken word.³

Like any tool, LLMs can be very useful, if you know how to use them well, or harmful if abused or used incorrectly. Learning to use an LLM effectively given limited time is a useful skill we might want to support. Learning that one can waste precious time going down a research rabbit hole is also a useful lesson. This is a technology that is not going away.

The quality of debate will likely be unchanged. LLMs may be able to speak, but a voice coming out of a box would violate the rules. Trying to debate by letting an LLM feed you the words through earbuds or rolling up on a screen is unlikely to be effective.⁴ CDA might be a good environment to let students experiment with the technology.

³ There are some debate competitions in which teams exchange written briefs which are evaluated by a judge and a decision rendered. For example, see the [International Public Policy Forum \(IPPF\)](#) contest.

⁴ This is an experiment you can try yourself: try to repeat a podcast while listening, or to present an unfamiliar document while it is scrolling up your laptop screen. Public speakers do use teleprompters, but generally only for material they have written, reviewed, and rehearsed.

