

So You Want to Start a Debate Team...

Welcome to the Connecticut Debate Association! This note will give you some idea of what to expect as a new coach and some suggestions for what to do.

No background in debate? Very few current or past CDA coaches were high school or college debaters. They learned along with their students. We are here to help!

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Joining CDA

If you are thinking of starting a debate team at your high school and interested in competing in the Connecticut Debate Association tournaments, joining CDA is easy. Simply email your intention to the Executive Director and start coming to the tournaments. We need the name of your school and the name and email address of your coach to make sure you get all of our announcements. If your students maintain a team email address, we can put that on our mailing list for tournament information so you can let them handle some of the administrative burdens.

Dues for the year are currently \$300 per school. You do not need to have paid dues before you begin to compete. Sometimes it can take time to get your school office to write a check or to hold your fundraisers. We only ask you try to pay by December 31. If you are late, we will send you reminders.

Your dues cover attendance at all regular CDA events: the pre-season Novice Scrimmage, all monthly tournaments, and the year-end State Finals for those teams that qualify. You may bring as many teams to each tournament as you like, limited only by your ability to find sufficient judges and our ability to find enough classrooms.

If you are undecided about joining, send us your name and email address and we will put you on our list of prospective members. CDA will do its best to answer any questions you have by email or phone. Better yet, why not attend one of our tournaments and see what our debaters? If you or your students would like to attend one of our tournaments as observers, let us know and we will make arrangements.

Building Your Team

Your first major task will be recruiting and training your debaters. Don't be discouraged if you only have a few debaters at first. Most CDA schools started with only two or three teams (four to six students). Debate is contagious, and once a few students come back from their first tournament and tell their friends, your team will grow. And bringing home a trophy always helps!

The [Training Materials](#) page on the CDA web site has resources to help. This piece can be found there, as well as a piece titled "Training Your Team" with suggestions on how to get your debaters ready for their first tournament and beyond. The amount of time you will have for practice is limited, so there is a third piece for debaters, "Preparing for Parliamentary Debate", with things debaters can do on their own to hone their skills. Finally, there are links to several excellent debate textbooks which can be found free online, and additional online resources such as training videos and recordings of actual debates.

The [Training Materials](#) page has sections for coaches, debaters, and judges. You should review the judge's instructions to prepare yourself for judging debates. You should provide the material to your volunteer judges before their first tournament to educate them. We hold training sessions for judges at every tournament, but we cannot cover everything in one hour. You should also discuss the judge's material with your debaters so they will understand what the judges are looking for when deciding a round.

We release the motion—the topic to be debated—at 9AM on the morning of the tournament with a packet of background material to help the debaters understand the issues. The [Training Materials](#) page has a file with all the CDA debate resolutions going back almost 30 years. Copies of the debate packets given to the debaters are available going back almost 20 years. Reviewing these will give you and your debaters an idea of topics we debate and the materials available to prepare their arguments. The packets can be used for discussion, to practice case preparation and as the basis for a practice debate. There are also notes on the final round for many tournaments, so you can see the types of arguments CDA debaters presented. The commentary available on issues that arose during these tournaments will help you and your debaters deepen your understanding of debate strategy and tactics.

Recruiting Judges

Every coach will tell you that the hardest part of the job is recruiting enough adult judges for each tournament. CDA asks you to bring one judge for every four debaters or fraction thereof, plus one additional judge. (The additional judge helps ease the constraints on the tournament scheduling algorithm and helps make up for the coaches who help run tab and host the tournament.)

Most judges are parents of debaters. Many coaches require their debaters to ask their parents to volunteer for one or more tournaments per year in order to support the activity. Some parents will find they enjoy judging and will volunteer on a regular basis. If you have a group of debaters who compete regularly, and if each debater has a parent volunteer for 2 tournaments during the year, that will cover your team's judging burden.

Former students who have graduated, college students, or adult volunteers are also allowed to judge. We do not let current students judge.¹

You should think about your strategy for recruiting enough judges early in the season. One recommendation is to hold a meeting for parents and let the students explain debate and put on a demonstration round. You also may want to talk to some of the other coaches and ask them for their strategies.

If you don't have enough judges, you may still bring your debaters to the tournament and hope other teams will have brought extra judges. We cannot guarantee that we will have enough judges to cover your teams. On the bright side, so far we have never had to turn debaters away for lack of judges (though we have had some close calls).

Most teams will be short judges at some tournament during the season. Knowing this, most coaches will bring extra judges when they have them. We try to support each other and the league so that every student who wants to debate can debate.

Your First Tournament

The most important thing you will do as a coach is to get your debaters to the tournaments. You can prepare all you want, but your team will learn more at their first tournament than at all the practices you ever hold. And they will keep learning every time they debate.

Transportation and Timing

Think about how you will get everyone to the tournament and home again. Some schools permit students to come in their own cars or in cars driven by their parents or other responsible adults. Some schools require approved transportation, which means you will have to arrange for a bus. Make sure

¹ There is one exception to the student judging rule. We do let experienced Varsity debaters judge Novices at the Novice Scrimmage, our first event in September.

everyone knows where the tournament will be, and when and where they are going to be picked up and dropped off.

The tournaments start promptly at 9AM when we distribute the resolution and information packet. We try very hard to stay on schedule and finish by 5:30PM. Ask any of the coaches—we have a very good on-time record.

You should plan to be at your assigned host school no later than 8:30AM so your students can grab a donut and get settled. Remember buses don't travel as fast as cars, and some students have a hard time waking early on a Saturday morning, so allow enough time and make sure you have phone numbers if you need them. If you need to arrange a pick-up time, you can safely assume you will be able to leave the tournament by 5:45PM.

Online Debate

With COVID we spent two years holding tournaments online. You can find a detailed "CDA Online Procedures Guide" on the [Training Materials](#) page. We prefer to debate in person, but if COVID, weather or other circumstances prevent that, we may hold tournaments online.

Student Needs

The CDA and the host school cannot take responsibility for your students. You should have emergency contact information, permissions slips and anything else your school requires for trips to competitions. If students have medical needs, you should consider how you will meet them. You may also want to think about how you will deal with a student who falls ill during the day.

If you have a student with special needs, let us know. We cannot alter the format of the competition, but we will do what we can to accommodate them. For example, we cannot allow one speaker more time than the others, but we can keep a team in the same room or close to the cafeteria to minimize the amount of walking.

We understand that students have many activities competing for their time and that weekends can be busy. Your debaters should be committed to staying for the entire tournament, including the final round and the awards ceremony. If a student does leave before the three rounds are completed, that team (just the one debater and his or her partner) will forfeit any remaining rounds. If a Varsity team makes the final round but cannot debate, the third place Varsity team will advance to the final and the forfeiting team will fall to third place. Ballots and trophies are generally not available until the awards ceremony. If you must leave early, you will have to collect these at the next tournament or CDA event.

What to Bring

Your students should have highlighters, paper and writing instruments to take notes. The CDA [Training Materials](#) page has templates for definitions and contentions that you may want to print out and copy for use at the tournament. None of this material will help unless the debaters have a plan for using it that they have practiced before the tournament. Even blank paper requires a strategy for taking notes. The CDA web site has suggestions that will help.

The CDA permits debaters to bring a dictionary, an almanac (useful for general information and statistics) and a copy of the US Constitution. These can be quite useful for some topics, but only if the students are familiar with their contents beforehand. The one hour of preparation is not the best time to try and learn Constitutional law or find out what's in a 1000 page almanac. No other research materials are permitted.

Many debaters find they speak more effectively if they time their own speeches to pace their arguments. Most debaters use cellphones, but they may bring a stopwatch or other timing device. There are nice timing apps for cell phones which show the time remaining in large numbers, so the debater can put the phone on a desk or podium and see it while they speak. It is recommended they have a charger for any device they bring.

The CDA has no formal dress code, but students should present a neat appearance. Some of the men will wear jackets and ties, and many of the ladies will wear dresses or jackets with a skirt or pants. But we also have teams that compete in jeans and polo shirts. We do caution the judges that a student's appearance should not affect the decision or score, but as a practical matter anything that gives a good impression will help a debater.

Most schools provide complementary donuts or bagels, juice, hot chocolate, and coffee on arrival. For lunch, the host school will usually have pizza and soft drinks. Lunch tickets are usually sold the hour before the tournament begins. Students may bring their own food, and students with special dietary needs should bring their own food. Most schools do not have restaurants nearby and the time for lunch is short, so students and judges should not expect to have time to leave the school to eat. Some schools sell candy or baked goods during the tournament, but students may want to bring snacks for between rounds. Debaters should have a water bottle to stay hydrated during the rounds.

Providing for Your Judges

Like the debaters, judges will need writing material to take notes and a stopwatch or cellphone and timer app to keep time during the round. If we can use electronic ballots, they will need a laptop or tablet. At every tournament during the time the debaters are preparing their cases, we hold a judges' workshop to orient and train any volunteer judges. These workshops are attended by both new and veteran judges and are an opportunity to ask questions and clarify judging expectations.

However, we cannot fully train a new judge in one hour. Your judges will be more comfortable if you spend some time preparing them prior to the tournament. The CDA [Training Materials](#) page has a number of items to help. Every judge should come already familiar with the tournament and debater format, how to access and fill out a ballot, how to use a flow chart to take notes, and the rudiments of judging a round. The handout we use at the Judges Workshop, which is a short explanation of how to judge, is on the CDA website. There is also a longer piece that closely follows the format of the Workshop that you can give your judges to read the week before the tournament or use to hold your own judges' training session.

The CDA appreciates the work of all our volunteer judges. We could not hold tournaments without them. They will be more better judges—and more likely to return—if you prepare them before they arrive at the tournament.

The Tournament

At most of our tournaments, half the debaters are Novices. At the first tournaments of the year, most of the Novices have never debated before. So you can honestly tell your students they are starting off even. We strongly recommend you attend the pre-season Novice Scrimmage to see a live debate and to participate in two practice rounds. It is the best introduction to the debate that we can provide.

All the debaters from your school may work together during the case preparation period. Novices on established teams do benefit by working with their Varsity teammates preparing cases. If your team is small, we can arrange for them to work with another team for their first tournament. While most teams focus their practices on debating, practicing for the preparation period is equally important. Debaters have one hour to read the packet and develop their arguments both in support of and against the resolution. They will need a plan to allocate their time and someone responsible to keep track and move them along from task to task.

You will want to attend the Judges Workshop at your first tournament. It is a good chance to get a feel for the other judges and ask questions about the tournament. In later tournaments, you can work with your team during preparation. We don't encourage coaches working with their debaters during case prep, but we have no rule against it, and many coaches do work with their teams. As your team gains experience, you will find that they will want to do more on their own and will only use you as a sounding board. Based on experience, help from a coach during prep does not seem to have much impact on performance.

Make sure your debaters understand the structure of the tournament: preparation, round 1, round 2, lunch, round 3, round 4, final round. Since round 2 follows immediately on round 1, you will find it hard to check up with them before lunch. You may want to arrange a brief rendezvous in case they have any questions. Lunch is a good time to talk about what they have seen in the first two rounds, and how they might apply that in rounds 3 and 4.

You should feel free to discuss any aspects of the debates with your students between rounds or during lunch. But remember we have a tight schedule. Don't be late for your next round!

If you have any questions about the tournament or if your students have questions about the conduct of a round that you can't answer, please come to the tab room² and ask one of the CDA staff. We will try to help.

Your debaters should and hopefully will make friends with debaters from other teams and get to know the other coaches over time. They will compete against the same teams for four years, and their

² The "tab room" is where we set up our computers to manage the tournament and tabulate the results. One person, designated as the Tab Director, has ultimate authority over the event.

acquaintance may continue in college. Debaters learn as much or more from their peers as from their coaches.

However it is a competition and there will be tense moments. Your students and you will not agree with every judge's decision. Students and judges may say things that are misinterpreted or unintended, and they may not always choose their words carefully. *If you one of your students has an issue with another coach, debater, team or a judge please don't confront them.* Come to the tab room and let the Tab Director sort it out.

You should prepare your students to accept the judges' decisions and learn from them. Judging is inherently subjective. The only witnesses to most rounds will be the two teams and the judge. Other than obvious ballot errors, there is no way to "correct" a judge's verdict. The CDA is reluctant to do so because even experienced coaches will disagree about the outcome of a round. Your debaters should approach each ballot with the question, "What can I do to be better next time?" If you have questions about a ballot or a decision, the Tab Director or the CDA Executive Director will be happy to discuss it with you.

Above all tell your students to relax and have fun. Everyone is nervous, everyone makes mistakes. But most learn a lot and are eager to come back.

The Final Round

Plan to stay for the final round, even if you only have Novices and no one can qualify. Sit together in the auditorium as a team. Make sure everyone takes notes. Plan to discuss the final round at one of your practices after the tournament. As the only debate you and your entire team can watch together, it is an important learning opportunity for debaters and for you as a coach.

Debaters can practice taking notes without the pressure of having to get up and speak. They can compare their notes with their teammates to see what they have missed, misinterpreted, or misunderstood. They can compare their own case and arguments to that of the finalists. They can see how experienced debaters conduct themselves. They can make their own decision as to which team won. Learning to debate well requires learning to judge debate well. This is their chance. Why not have them fill out a ballot and explain their decision?

The Ride Home

After the final round we have an awards ceremony. The last thing we do is pass out an envelope containing copies of the ballots for each team. Your students will probably want to see their ballots immediately, but it is probably better if you wait until you are on the team bus and heading home before passing them out. (It is a time-honored tradition to complain about judges on the ride home.)

Make sure you collect the ballots before the end of the bus ride! Students will want to take them home, but that increases the chance they will be lost. You can make copies to give to your debaters at your next team practice. Your debaters should understand the ballots are a team resource. The ballot and your students' notes are the only record of the debate. Debaters need to learn to critique their own performance using these materials as part of a debriefing after every tournament. You should ask them

to explain why they won or lost each round, and what they can do to improve the next time. Remind them it is their job to persuade the judge, not the judge's job to correctly interpret what they are trying to say.

If you take a bus back home, have the students update their parents (via cell phone) on the pickup time as you get close to home. Then you won't have to wait around for late parent pick-ups.

Please Come Back!

We hope you and your team will enjoy debating in the CDA. We try very hard to provide an educational and competitive experience that will benefit the students throughout their lives.

If you have any comments or questions, before or after the tournament, please email us. We are always looking for ways to improve our tournaments. As debaters ourselves, we believe we should be able to explain what we do. Even if we disagree, we can discuss and understand.

As a coach, you have a voice in setting CDA policy. Our most important meeting of the year is the Spring Coaches Meeting where we plan for the next season and elect officers. But we have many informal discussions during the year, and we occasionally experiment with policies and procedures during the tournament season.

Finally, we are also always looking for new members. If you know of other schools that might be interested in debate, please encourage them to contact us: [CDA Inquiry](#).

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