

## **PHSSL Guide to Parliamentary Debate**

### **Introduction:**

The impetus for Parliamentary Debate in PHSSL came from a desire of the Executive Board to expand debate opportunities for students. Five years after the inception of the event – at the Summer 2014 PHSSL Executive Board meeting – we reviewed a survey of PHSSL members and made changes in the event. It was the Board’s intention to retain this argumentation event without erecting high entry-level barriers that would keep schools or individual students from participating. We continue to base our event on the annual international competition called the World Schools Debating Championships (<http://www.schoolsdebate.com>). Our rules and guidelines vary from theirs but we acknowledge our debt to them for many of our ideas. We understand that this event will continue to evolve as PHSSL fashions its own brand of parliamentary debate.

### **Motions:**

The topics for parliamentary debate are stated as general beliefs of the parliamentary house that is debating them. The judge(s) and the six students form a legislative body. The team in favor of the motion is known as The Government. The team opposed to the motion is known as The Opposition. Arguments flow pro and con on the motion at hand and then a decision is rendered in the form of a vote by the judge(s). Judges are expected to set aside their personal beliefs and vote to accept or reject a motion based on the arguments made by the debaters. There is no need for The Government to advance a plan of action or to be bound in their arguments to a specific country or a specific time period.

### **Format:**

After all speakers have spoken once, the first or second speaker for each side gives a reply speech, with The Opposition’s reply happening first and The Government’s reply second. Speaking time for speeches is 6 minutes, and for reply speeches 3 minutes. There is no extra preparation time provided.

It is important that teams split their argumentation effectively. Care should be taken to structure the three speeches so that they are neither repetitive nor unconnected. Each team member has a specific part of the team case to present, and must also attack the other side and defend the team from attack. The debate begins with a speaker whose arguments are entirely new. As the debate progresses, more and more time must be spent dealing with issues already raised in the debate, and less and less time must be spent on new arguments and issues. By the end of the debate there is no new argument, and the speakers deal only with what has gone before.

Clash between the teams is vital. However, individuals do not have a burden to respond to any specific number of arguments. Adding additional argumentation to the debate is far more important than pointing out arguments that went unrefuted by the other team. Judges should have the sole discretion to determine what arguments were dropped and what arguments were responded to.

The suggestions below are not meant to be a list of defined burdens or a prescription for success – they are just some guidelines to get started:

The First Speaker for the Government defines the motion, outlines The Government's case announces the outline or case division, and presents her or his part of the case.

The First Speaker for the Opposition deals with the definitions if they are a problem, and explains the important differences between the two teams' cases and presents a part of The Opposition's case. The approach may be one of straight refutation of The Government's case or The Opposition can propose a competing viewpoint.

The Second Speaker for The Government defends the Government's definition (if required) and The Government's case from attacks, rebuts The Opposition's case, and proceeds with his part of The Government's case. Somewhere around 2 to 3 minutes into the speech the speaker will turn from attacking The Opposition to presenting the new part of the argument.

The Second Speaker for The Opposition does much the same her counterpart from The Government. If The Opposition is presenting its own alternative case as well, this speaker will turn from attacking The Government's case to presenting the new part of the argument somewhere around 3 to 4 minutes into the speech.

The Third Speaker for The Government is going to spend a large part of his time attacking the other side. However, he can have a small remaining part of The Government's case to present - perhaps 1 or 2 minutes at the most.

The Third Speaker for The Opposition is going to spend most of her time attacking the other side, rather than presenting significant new arguments. She can have a small part of The Opposition's case to present. Note that The Opposition reply speech follows this speech, so it is better for the Third Speaker for the Opposition to deal with the detail of The Government's case and leave the broad overview to the reply speech.

The reply speeches are not going to delve into fine detail, but will take a broad approach to the issues of the debate. They should also summarize their own case either as part the analysis of the issues or towards the end of the speech as a separate section. For obvious reasons the reply speeches cannot introduce new arguments. Not only is this unfair but a complete misunderstanding of the role of reply speeches. The reply speech is a summing up of the whole debate, not a chance to introduce new ideas.

### **Points of Information:**

A Point of Information is offered in the course of a speech by a member of the opposing team. The speaker may either accept the point or decline it. If accepted, the opponent may make a short point or ask a short question (15 seconds or less) that deals with some issue in the debate (preferably one just made by the speaker).

Points of Information bring about a major change in the role of speakers in a debate. In parliamentary debate each speaker must take part in the debate from beginning to end, not just during her own speech. For example, the First Speaker for The Government continues to play an active role in the debate even when the Third Speaker for The Opposition is speaking.

The speakers play this role by offering Points of Information. Even if the points are not accepted, they must still demonstrate that they are involved in the debate by at least offering them. A speaker who takes no part in the debate other than by making a speech should lose marks for content and strategy - content for failing to take advantage of argumentative opportunities, strategy for failing to understand the role of a speaker in parliamentary debate.

Equally, speakers must ensure that they accept at least some Points of Information during their speech. In a 6 minute speech, taking at least 2 would be expected (depending, of course, on how many are offered). A speaker who fails to accept any Points of Information must lose marks for content (failing to allow the other side to make points, thus reducing the amount of direct clash between the two teams) and particularly strategy (for not understanding the role of the speakers in parliamentary debate style). Of course, a speaker who takes too many will almost certainly lose control of the speech and thus lose marks for style and probably also for strategy (poor speech structure) and content as well.

A Point of Information is offered by standing and saying "Point of Information." The speaker on the floor is not obliged to accept every point. He may ask the interrupter to sit down, may finish the sentence and then accept the point, or may accept the point then and there.

More than one member of the opposing team may rise simultaneously. The speaker on the floor may decline all or some, and may choose which one to take. The others then sit down. Opposing speakers must sometimes tread a fine line between the legitimate offering of Points of Information on the one hand, and overwhelming the speaker on the other. The fact that Points of Information must be offered makes the parliamentary debate more aggressive and more prone to interruptions. However, continuous offering by a team really amounts to excessive interruption. This should incur penalties in style for the team members involved.

It is impossible to put a figure on how many Points of Information a team may offer before its behavior needs to be penalized. Judges should determine when the offering of Points of Information, instead of adding to the debate, begins to infringe on the right and/or ability of the speaker to address the audience. This determination requires sensitivity to the context of the particular debate: two well-matched and highly-skilled teams may offer each other many Points of Information without disrupting the debate or unsettling the speaker on the floor, but Points offered at this same high rate to a speaker who is less confident may need to be penalized.

In general, speakers should not offer Points of Information only a few seconds after a previous offer has been declined or while the speaker on the floor is clearly in the early stages of answering a Point of Information he just accepted: frequent violations of these principles might reasonably be penalized.

The Point of Information may be in the form of a question to the person making a speech, or it may be a remark addressed to the speaker. The Point of Information must be brief. 10 to 15 seconds is the norm, and over that the interrupter should be told to sit down by the speaker. As well, when the person making the speech understands the point, he can tell the interrupter to sit down - the speaker does not have to let the interrupter complete his point in all cases.

Always remember that the speaker who is making the speech has complete control of Points of Information - when to accept them, whether to accept them and how long they should go on for. This, of course, puts a premium on clear simple points.

An example: in one World School debate the interrupter began by saying "I may be particularly dense..." and paused, whereupon the speaker said "Yes, you are!" and continued with his speech. This was a waste of a good opportunity, all because the interrupter chose to indulge in pompous oratory rather than a crisp clear point.

Points of Information are the only type of interruptions of the flow of debate that are provided for the PHSSL rules.

### **Winning the Debate:**

Each team must persuade the audience that its argument is superior. To do this it must present sound logical arguments, it must present them in an interesting and persuasive speaking style, and it must structure and prioritize its arguments. All three aspects of debate are given emphasis. This competition does not encourage just pure argument or pure rhetoric on their own -- but an effective blend of both.

The ballot is divided into three broad categories: Content, Style and Strategy. The speaker receives a mark in each category. The total points of the winning team must be higher than the team. Each speaker is ranked on his team: 1st, 2nd or 3rd.

### **Content:**

Content covers the arguments that are used, divorced from the speaking style. It is as if you are seeing the arguments written down rather than spoken. You must assess the weight of the arguments without being influenced by the great delivery of the orator that presents them.

Content will also include an assessment of the effectiveness of rebuttal or clash. This assessment must be done from the standpoint of the average reasonable person – rather than a content expert.

The judge's job is to assess the strength of an argument regardless of whether the other

team is able to knock it down. If a team introduces a series of weak arguments, it will not score highly in content even if the other team doesn't refute them.

**Style:**

Style covers how the speaker presents himself. The speaker takes on the role of an advocate. Enthusiasm, humor, effective use of language, and good delivery skills all matter. Problems with audibility – whether because of volume or pace – should be penalized in this mark. Speakers, in general, should not read their speeches, but should use notes that they refer to only from time to time – the overall goal should be an outstanding extemporaneous delivery as opposed to a polished oratory. Speakers should be marked down for distracting speaking skills or mannerisms that get in the way of enjoyable communication.

**Strategy:**

Strategy covers three concepts: the speaker's understanding of the issues of the debate, the structure and timing of the speaker's speech and the speaker's use of Points of Information to advance the debate.

- Understanding the issues -- speakers should understand what the important issues are in the debate. It is a waste of time for a rebuttal speaker to deal with trivial points if crucial arguments are left unanswered. By contrast, a speaker who understood what the important issues were and dealt with them thoroughly should score well in strategy.
  
- Structure and timing – a good speech has a clear beginning, middle and end with signposts for transition along the way. The sequence of arguments is logical with each argument having some support to make it credible. Timing includes consideration of how the speaker manages the time period that is assigned to the speech. There is no grace period at the end of the allotted time – the speaker should, however, be given the courtesy of being allowed to finish his sentence. Timing also includes consideration of the time that a speaker allots to each main issue of the debate. Spending much time on trivial issues should be penalized.
  
- Points of Information – Points of Information are an important part of the clash between the two teams. If Points of Information are posed during the protected time (first and last minute of each main speech and the entire reply speech), speakers should be penalized here. How a speaker poses and answers a Point of Information can be evaluated in the strategy mark.

**Ballot (attached)**

**Judge Information Sheet (attached)**

**Added Resources:**

The entire website of the World School Debates contains great background information on this event. (<http://www.schoolsdebates.com>)

General site with videos in several formats: <http://debate.uvm.edu/wsdcvideo.html>

Sample debate in World School Debate format: Doctors should not lie.  
<http://vimeo.com/68972229>