

Seminar Content

In any debate, debaters should demand of themselves several critical skills and abilities. This is not only for them to triumph in a debate, but also to add life and energy into what is an intellectual discussion between critical minds. In the *Student Foundational Debating Skills Workshop*, we hope students can take away experiences and knowledge that would enhance these fundamental skills of a dynamic debate, and upon which, students would build their style and character as a debater.

A. Listening

One of the most essential skills in debating is the ability to pay attention and listen. It is a fundamental misconception that debate is all about presenting your prepared speeches and material. We hope that students can learn to not only be able to pay attention and listen carefully to the speeches and arguments of their opponents, but also to take notes effectively during a debate.

The principle reason to be able to achieve the objective mentioned above is that it is important to expediently capture and understand the essence and the main logic of the opposing case. Being able to do so

offers the opportunity to draw up rebuttals and counter-arguments during the course of the debate. As dynamic interaction is crucial to a good debate, achieving this will be tactically advantageous.

B. Delivery

As a public speaker on stage, it is important to maintain a presentable appearance, as it is not only the voice that the audience could hear but also you that they are also looking at. Thus it is as much a visual performance as it is a rational discussion. To be “presentable”, students must learn to be confident as they speak and to be able to speak in a composed manner.

As mentioned previously, the audience is listening to you; you are communicating your ideas to a group of people who has never read your speech before. Thus attention must be placed on how you verbally and effectively communicate your message, your argument. The first key to this issue is the element of the voice. Students should pay attention to how they use their voice; important aspects would include the *speed* or the *pace* with which you speak, and the *audibility* of your voice – these two aspects, however, only ensures that the audience would hear you reasonably clear. To be able to make the audience and the adjudicators

understand your argumentation, students should grasp the concept of *variation* and modulation of the pace and loudness, as slowing down and occasional loudness would be able to produce an emphasis effect on certain critical points that would be articulated clearly to the audience, thereby helping them to better understand the totality of your message.

The importance of the above skills in appearance and voice allows speakers to overcome the natural tendency of audiences to lose attention and patience, it is the responsibility of a versatile debater to be able to extend the attention span of the audience for the duration of his/her speech; to be able to capture their attention.

C. Case Treatment

When we look at motions, the first thing one should keep in mind is the concept of “spirit of the motion”. What is meant by the spirit of the motion is that whenever a motion is formulated and drawn, the author intended a certain area to be discussed, or a certain controversial issue to be put under the spot light. Most of the time, this “spirit” is very obvious to people with some common knowledge of the world and current affairs, as it is often the case that the motion would link itself with real world issues.

After identifying the spirit of the motion and the relevant area of discussion (and of course knowing which side you are on), it is important to formulate a case either for or against the motion as necessary. One concern that students should keep in mind is the importance of “causation”, as certain given perspectives of an issue offer generic points of argumentation, but debaters must be reminded that they need to pick points that would be the strongest and most direct logical linkage with the position they are preparing.

Once the theoretical framework of the argument is well placed, the last but not least important task to perform is the requirement to prepare factual evidences: real life cases and relevant numbers and statistics to substantiate the logic and reasoning of your case. Care must be given as to selecting the most suitable and most relevant material to be used. Furthermore, validity and authority of the factual evidence also contributes to the persuasiveness of your case. However, students must remember that your ideas and arguments still remain central to your argumentation – evidence is only there to make it look nicer, but not to steal the spotlight.

D. Matter

The skill of matter concerns how you present your content in terms of structure. Unlike poetry or random comedian performances, debate argumentation demands a high degree of logical clarity and coherence, as well as a certain degree of simplicity. What debaters must understand is that they are possibly presenting materials that the audience is not familiar with. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the debater to be able to present his/her material in an understandable manner; to ensure that as you play out your logic, your audience can follow. Furthermore, to reinforce the structure of your speech, students should learn to “signpost” or to present a brief table of contents at the beginning of your speech and continue to refer to this table of content structure so as to allow audience a higher ease to follow.

E. Teamwork

Last but important is the virtue of teamwork. Inherent in every debate is the pinnacle essentiality of cooperative team effort. What a team should keep in mind is the necessity of consistency. To achieve this effect, a team is required to formulate a “team line”, a central principle that every member of the team can refer to and maintain coherence to.

Furthermore, beyond maintaining the coherence and consistency of individual speakers, speakers must remember that their speeches should be interconnected, that their argumentation should contribute to building each others' case. During the process of the debate, debaters must remember that they not only needed to rebut the opponents and maintain coherence, but also to defend against rebuttals that may come from the opponents; response to these criticism is important as it would maintain the validity of the materials that was presented and general position of your team.

Finally, debaters should remember that they need to leave a lasting impression in the minds of the adjudicator and audience, which would contribute to the final adjudication. A simple but hard trick to master is to create labels for certain critical arguments you have, to use such labels or slogans to imprint onto the minds of adjudicators, adding to the essence of your argument.