

A Do-It-Yourself Summer Debate Workshop

Personalized Independent Debate Study

By Jason Baldwin

Whatever their academic merits or demerits, traditional summer debate workshops are expensive. When airfare and spending money are included, the cost of a two-week workshop can easily top \$2,000. Workshops also run on inflexible schedules that may not be compatible with a student's family, work, and school obligations. But if you are academically ambitious and self-disciplined, the inability to attend a workshop need be no barrier to significant debate improvement over the summer.

This article suggests activities you can combine to create your own, personalized debate independent study. The seven exercises I describe below do not aim to generate arguments or evidence on upcoming debate topics; they aim instead to help you build skills and knowledge that will make you a stronger debater on *any* topic. I am confident that a student who pursued such a course of study for at least 80 hours over the summer would gain more academically than do many students who attend traditional workshops.

Because of my background, some details are specific to LD, but students of other debate formats should be able to rework them to meet their own needs. I assume you are working more or less alone, but obviously a group of students, with or without a coach's direction, could pursue these activities together. Some of the activities involve items (especially books) that you may want to purchase. If you buy everything I suggest new online, the total should be under \$300, and your purchases will remain useful to you throughout the school year and beyond. But you can spend less by substituting materials you already own, buying used, borrowing from a library, or printing free online texts.

Before turning to the suggested activities, let's start with a few points about your work habits. There are important parallels between the kind of debate exercise

we are discussing and physical exercise. Without tracing these parallels in detail, I will simply state their practical upshots. First, you must study regularly to see meaningful improvement; I recommend scheduling work time five days a week for as many weeks as you can devote to the project. Second, you should not try to study too much at once—your brain will get tired, and you will cease to benefit from the work. Therefore, I recommend working on debate for from between one and four hours a day, with time normally allotted to activities in one-hour increments. Third, you should have clear goals in mind and schedule in advance both the work times themselves and the exercises you will complete in those times. I recommend making a calendar for this purpose, planning a minimum of a week in advance. Do not move too quickly or try to do everything in a single summer, much less in a single day or week. Choose a few exercises you think will help you the most and plan sufficient time to do those exercises thoroughly. A sample schedule (which could be followed for a week or more) might be:

Hour 1: Do sentential logic reading and exercises.

Hour 2: Redo rebuttals from old flows to practice issue selection.

Hour 3: Revise a case draft on a possible fall resolution.

All the exercises I suggest below require your full concentration to yield their maximum benefit. That means you should do them in a quiet place where you are not distracted by a computer, cell phone, or iPod.

1. Study Logic. Studying formal logic is difficult, but more than any other activity mentioned below, it will build raw mental muscle. In particular, it will help you break down debate arguments quickly and home in on their weaknesses.

Purchase a used formal logic textbook online or from a used bookstore, or ask if

one is available free from the Philosophy department of a local college or university (professors are constantly throwing away textbooks that publishers send them). There are many good logic books on the market. Look for one in at least its second edition, and be sure the book you use has a key to the exercises in the back, since you'll want to check your work. The books by Harry Gensler, Stephen Layman, and Virginia Klenk are reputed to be user-friendly for self-study. Or download Paul Teller's book for free at: tellerprimer.ucdavis.edu. If you're working with a group, be sure everyone gets the same edition of the same book.

You want to read this book on your own and do all the relevant exercises. *You will not really learn the material without doing the exercises.* Much of the work will remind you of math. Focus on the introductory chapters and chapters on propositional (sometimes called sentential or truth-functional) logic, predicate (or quantified) logic (including identity), and inductive or causal reasoning. Propositional logic can be studied productively by itself even if predicate logic proves too time-consuming or difficult. There may be specialized chapters toward the end that can safely be skipped (e.g., on modal logic or metatheory). The author will often tell you which chapters are most important in the preface.

Finally, if you are intimidated by formal logic, consider studying Anthony Weston's short introduction to informal logic, *A Rulebook for Arguments*. Although the book lacks exercises, it contains much good advice on constructing arguments of all kinds.

2. Study Philosophy. You should constantly try to deepen and expand your philosophical literacy for at least three reasons. First, aside from the content of specific works, sparring with great minds will

make you a stronger thinker overall; you can learn as much from philosophers about *how* to argue as about *what* to argue. Second, a first-hand knowledge of major theories will help you make better sense of contemporary topic-specific literature that relies on those theories. Third, you may be able to apply the philosophy directly to certain debate topics and arguments. Note that none of these benefits requires you to mine philosophical works for quotations. There is nothing wrong with bracketing possible quotations while you read (assuming it's your own copy!), but your primary goal should be to understand the work as a whole.

Notice that I suggest you *study* philosophy, not just read it. It is relatively easy to move one's eyes over lines of text. It is much harder but much more valuable to wrestle with a text, mark it, reread it, outline and summarize it, question and criticize it, and apply it to debate issues. Good philosophy reading is slow reading that involves a lot of rereading and writing along the way. In fact, it is almost impossible to grasp serious philosophy on a first read; as one of my most learned teachers says, "You haven't read a book once until you've read it twice." I recommend you keep all your philosophy reading notes in one notebook or file where you can easily review and add to them.

But what exactly should you read? There's a lot of great philosophy out there, and you may already have ideas about what you'd like to read or reread. My suggestions are simply jumping-off points. Every LD student should read John Locke's *Second Treatise* and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* in their entirety; although the style of both works may be challenging, the ideas are fairly accessible. If you have mastered these works, you might want to try an anthology that includes excerpts from many important sources. Two good ones are *Moral Philosophy: A Reader*, edited by Louis Pojman, and *What Is Justice?*, edited by Robert Solomon and Mark Murphy. Either of these books would by itself be a hefty dose of philosophy for one summer. Finally, if you want to see how philosophers apply theories to contemporary issues, look at Peter Singer's *Practical Eth-*

ics and Jan Narveson's *Moral Matters*; it might be productive to read both of these books to compare and contrast how a utilitarian (Singer) and a libertarian (Narveson) approach many of the same issues.

3. Practice Topic Analysis. Of the seven exercises described in this article, this is the one I am most reluctant to discuss. I don't have a simple recipe for sound topic analysis, much less one that I could set down briefly in print. And I believe firmly that topic analysis is best done with the help of others, not alone. Nonetheless, I believe equally firmly that topic analysis is one of the most underdeveloped skills in contemporary debate and that better topic analysis would yield huge in-round benefits for many debaters.

I think of topic analysis as having two related goals. Generally, it aims to discover what the resolution means. Specifically, it aims to discover what each speaker can or must prove in order to win the debate—i.e., what each speaker's burdens are. I say these two goals are related because the second may be thought of as an elucidation of the first: knowing what a statement means involves knowing under what conditions it would be true and under what conditions it would be false, that is, under what conditions it should be affirmed and under what conditions it should be negated.

Good topic analysis requires *time* more than it requires any specific technique. Once you have chosen a practice resolution, you can learn a lot about it simply by writing it down and staring at it for extended periods of time. You could easily devote three to five hours spaced over one or two weeks to meditating on a single resolution. Ideally, some of your meditations will be done alone (to give your own insight the freest play), and some will be done with others (to correct the errors of interpretation to which each of us individually is prone). You may find that these meditations seem to confuse more than they clarify, raising doubts and questions about meaning that you did not have when you first read the resolution. Such puzzlement is actually a good sign. Many resolutions *are* unclear in ways that are not obvious at first glance, and you cannot choose the

most reasonable interpretation for your own positions or anticipate your opponents' likely strategies until you become aware of the full range of interpretive possibilities. What is crucial is that you *not* spend this time looking for "what to run." You are ready to seek arguments for or against a resolution only *after* you know what it means.

If my advice to stare at and think about resolutions strikes you as less than helpful, here are some more specific ways to spend your topic analysis time. Look up definitions of major terms in multiple sources (be sure that you're defining the proper part of speech and that your definitions don't contain forms of the words being defined). Paraphrase the resolution in as many different ways as you can imagine and ask yourself how each of your paraphrases changes the meaning or emphasis of the original resolution. Isolate one major term of the resolution at a time and then fill in a variety of alternatives for that term (e.g., different agents of action, different evaluative terms, different verbs); get a better idea of what the actual resolution means by considering how each of these substitutions changes its meaning. Find (or construct) concrete, real-world examples of the conflict of the resolution and then determine what each side must say about those examples. Brainstorm as many names, concepts, titles, examples, and other possible resolutional tie-ins as you can generate. Try to imagine the craziest, most extreme interpretations that affirmative and negative debaters might adopt; then think about what is wrong with those interpretations and what more reasonable alternatives would be. Show the resolution to literate non-debate people and ask them what they think it means and what examples of conflict occur to them. Try to list every circumstance under which the resolution would be false—i.e., every reasonable negative strategy. Free-write about every question you have about the meaning of the resolution and every way you think it might be misinterpreted.

4. Build Research Skills. Strong debaters typically do a lot of research. They do it themselves, and they do it in libraries,

not just online. You should make it your goal to become better acquainted with the resources of the best research library in your region. If you live near a college or university, use that institution's library; otherwise, choose the largest local public library.

A productive research trip requires three to four hours. If you make library research one of your skill foci, you should plan at least two or three such trips. You should go armed with a notebook and a flash drive. Before each trip, choose two or three practice resolutions to research; naturally, LD students will draw on NFL's list of possible upcoming resolutions. You should not research a resolution until you have spent some time analyzing it as discussed above. You will devote a section of your notebook and a folder on your flash drive to each practice resolution. (It makes sense to do your topic analysis writing and research notes on a resolution in the same place.)

Here is a five-step routine to follow for each practice resolution that will build good research habits and also jump-start your topic-specific preparation; it should take two to three hours per resolution:

First, identify reference works, including specialized dictionaries, encyclopedias, and bibliographies, that will be helpful on the resolution. These are usually the best place to start when you are seeking a broad understanding of a topic area, and they will lead you to other important sources. For example, on a resolution about capital punishment, you would want to consult the *Encyclopedia of Crime and Justice*. Ask a reference librarian if you have trouble finding promising reference sources on your topic. All LD students should acquaint themselves with the *Encyclopedia of Ethics* and the *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*. When you have identified and examined reference sources useful on your resolution, record their titles and call numbers in your research notebook.

Second, perform key-word searches in the library catalog to identify the call numbers where books on the resolution are clustered. As you skim search results, jot down the beginning of the call number

(nothing after decimal points) for each title that sounds useful. You will quickly see patterns emerge—two or three call numbers where all the best-sounding titles seem to be. You should write down these call numbers in your research notebook. Then go to those areas in the stacks and do some preliminary browsing. Scan titles on the shelf and skim the tables of contents and introductions of those that look promising. If any are clearly “must read” books for the resolution, write down their titles, authors, and full call numbers in your notebook. But your primary goal is simply to know where, in general, to look for books on that resolution should you have to debate it.

Third, use catalog searching and snooping in the stacks to locate at least one good anthology on the resolution or general topic area. Anthologies are a debater's best friend, because a single, knowledgeable editor has collected concise contributions from many authors of different viewpoints in a single volume. Chances are that the relevant anthologies on your topic will be near the call numbers you have already identified, but they may be among books devoted to the larger field of study. For example, if you were debating euthanasia, you might find relevant anthologies with the other books on euthanasia, but you might also find them with more general books on medical ethics. In any case, when you find an anthology, examine its table of contents and skim its introduction, where the editor will often summarize each essay. If a particular anthology looks helpful for your resolution, record its title, editor, and call number in your research notebook.

At this point you may also want to write down the names of any authors who appear indispensable based on your preliminary research. For example, if you completed the first three steps on a resolution about health care rights, you would find the names Allen Buchanan, Norman Daniels, and Tristram Engelhardt turning up repeatedly. If someone's name shows up in the bibliography of a reference article and also as the author of important-looking books and anthology chapters, the person is probably a major scholar in the field whose views you will want to know about if you debate the topic.

The fourth and fifth steps described below both involve periodicals, including academic journals. Like scholarly literature in general, academic journal articles tend to be written for specialists and may be tough going for high school students. At a minimum, they require serious attention and multiple readings to fully digest. Note that more accessible magazines such as *Commentary* and the *New Republic* also contain substantive articles by credible authors on debate topics. You can keep adding to your list of major authors as you complete the last two steps.

The fourth step is to use the library catalog to identify any specialized journals that focus on your topic area. Examples of such journals are the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, the *Hastings Center Report* (on medical ethics), and the *Journal of Business Ethics*. Whereas most periodical research is best done with general indices and databases that cover many journals, specialized journals like these may have enough articles on your subject to warrant skimming the tables of content of each issue. When you find a promising-sounding journal title, find the bound volumes in the library and flip through a few issues to better acquaint yourself with the journal's style and focus. If it looks like a good resource, write down the journal title and call number in your research notebook.

The fifth and final step is to use the library's periodical indices and databases to locate and download articles on your resolution. Each library subscribes to different periodical resources; some of the most common and useful at academic libraries are Academic Search Premier (from EBSCO), Expanded Academic ASAP (from Thomson-Gale), JSTOR, and LexisNexis Academic. Libraries may also have more specialized indices on the field of your research, such as education, law, medicine, or philosophy. LD research should *always* include the *Philosopher's Index* if it is available. Because each index functions differently, you want to spend some time with each one to learn to use it efficiently; reference librarians are often helpful for this purpose. You might seek to add a new index to your repertoire each library trip. Like a library's book catalog, a periodical index

will require many different combinations of search terms to yield the best results. But unlike book catalog searching, periodical searching is focused on finding specific items, not call number patterns. When you find a juicy-looking title, read the online abstract if possible. If the article still looks promising, find out if it is available electronically. (Every article you find through JSTOR can be downloaded in .pdf form.) Some libraries set up their indices to link directly to their electronic subscriptions, whereas others require a separate search for e-journals; again, a librarian can help you. If you find the electronic version of the article, download it to the appropriate folder on your flash drive. If you cannot find the electronic version, write down complete citation information in your research notebook for later use.

This discussion has focused only on *finding* good research, not on processing and applying it to debate resolutions. For more on these latter skills, see my articles on “How to Research LD Topics” (with Scott Robinson) and “Logic in LD: Casing Applications,” both available in the NFL’s online *Rostrum* archive.

5. Improve Your Writing. Better writing will improve your casing, but it will also improve your general language use, including your speaking. Many debaters assume that prose quality is simply a matter of superficial style, and that all that really matters is the underlying substance of their arguments. This belief rests on a false distinction. In debate, as in most other academic contexts, the only argument you make is composed exclusively of the words you actually write or speak. *If you think you understand an argument that you cannot explain clearly, you are fooling yourself.* Moreover, when fundamental normative or empirical claims are in dispute, it is normal and reasonable for listeners to side with clear, precise, persuasive advocates over their unclear, imprecise, unpersuasive opponents.

You can improve your writing either by rewriting cases on old resolutions or by drafting arguments on new resolutions. Either way, you want to identify some characteristic weaknesses of your writing and

work to remedy them. A real, live human tutor is best for this purpose. An English teacher or other adult whose writing you respect is ideal, but you can gain a lot from any intelligent person who is willing to say, “I don’t understand what you mean here,” or, “this sounds awkward.” Ask the person if he or she would be willing to read several drafts of your work over the summer and critique them in person or in writing (perhaps via the comment feature of MS Word). Emphasize that you want lots of criticism and ask your reader to hold nothing back. If you can’t find a tutor, you might instead consult a book. Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style* is a short classic, but Joseph Williams’s *Style* is meatier; there are also many rhetoric and composition textbooks with exercises that can be purchased inexpensively used.

You need to work through multiple—at least three—drafts of everything you write. Here as elsewhere, less is more: it is better to spend more time revising and polishing a small amount of text than to generate lots of new text with only superficial revisions. Revising is a slow, gradual process that should be spread out over several days. Pay attention both to large-scale issues of organization and logical exposition and to small-scale issues of grammar and phrasing. Although you might want to include some outside sources in your practice writing, keep quotations to a minimum: the point of the exercise is to improve your ability to explain arguments clearly in your *own* words. For some reason, many students write (and speak) better outside debate than they do inside it. Whether you are revising an old case or drafting material on a new resolution, try to write a clear persuasive essay for a general educated audience that makes a single argument (perhaps the equivalent of one contention) rather than a stereotypical debate case with lots of structural conventions and jargon.

6. Practice Rebuttals. No debater needs to be persuaded of the importance of strong rebuttals. To make progress here, you need to find a way to listen to yourself, and you need to identify specific weaknesses to tackle one at a time. If you don’t

already own some sort of voice recorder, I recommend purchasing either a small cassette recorder or a digital voice recorder (the Olympus WS series has worked well for me). You also need something to rebut. I recommend using old flows from tournament rounds or unfamiliar cases you borrow from friends or find online. You could even practice rebutting your own cases, which might also give you insights for your case revision practice.

First, give a rebuttal speech as you normally would and record it. Then listen to the recording several times and pick out one goal for improvement. Some common weaknesses include: poor issue selection (usually involving too many responses), unclear signposting and transitions, underexplanation, unclear resolutive impact (often due to lack of resolutive language), unclear personal and demonstrative pronouns, poor word economy, excessive speed, verbalized pauses and catch phrases (e.g., “you know,” “I mean,” “what you must realize is that”), unnecessary jargon (e.g., “turn,” “voter,” “discursive impact,” “a priori,” “social contract”), and lack of concrete details, examples, or analogies.

Once you’ve identified an area for improvement, practice redoing the rebuttal with a single-minded focus on that area. Record yourself each time and review your progress carefully and honestly. For example, if you need to work on issue selection, you might limit yourself to two responses to an entire contention; think about which two are most important and then develop those two in as much persuasive detail as time permits, being sure to explain how they take out the contention as a whole. Or you might seek to make resolutive impacts clearer by forcing yourself to use the language of the resolution as part of each individual response; you could check your recordings to see how many times you use major words from the resolution in each speech. You could spend a week either addressing the same specific skill in response to a different case each day or working toward a perfect rebuttal on the same case by focusing on a different skill each day.

If you have intelligible flows from past rounds (your own or others’), you might

also practice “writing the ballot” by planning and delivering new versions of the last speech(es). Study the progress of arguments in the round, and then decide carefully what kind of coherent, concise story you can tell about the crux of the debate. You are *not* mechanically “going down the flow” or listing unrelated “voters” here, but rather thinking about the *single line of thought* you want the judge to use in making his or her decision. Try writing out this final speech (or conclusion) verbatim as clearly and persuasively as possible. Then try to deliver substantively the same speech without reading it. Keep refining your written version and your delivery until you nail it.

7. Scrimmage. Of course, there is no way to work all your debate muscles at once other than to actually debate. So arrange some practice rounds with teammates or friends from your local circuit. If you’re not all working on the same new resolution, debate a past resolution instead. If at all possible, have a coach, teacher, parent,

or other adult observer critique you. In fact, a critic with little debate experience who is willing to be assertive about interrupting and demanding clarification can be a great asset: he or she will force you to communicate more clearly and explain yourself more thoroughly than you otherwise would. If you can hold several practices over the summer, try to find a different critic for each one, since different listeners will have different insights and blind spots. If you don’t have an outside critic, you and your opponent can serve as each other’s critics.

Formulate a goal for each speech similar to those you isolated for rebuttal practice. Tell the critic in advance what the goal is and ask him or her to stop you anytime (including mid-speech) there is an opportunity for you to make more progress toward the goal. Ideally, the critic will be giving you specific, ongoing feedback and forcing you to redo various bits of the debate until you get them right. A practice round with an appropriate amount of critical feedback and redo practice will take at

least twice as long as a tournament round. Remember, there are no ballots or trophies at stake, so leave your pride at home. Record practice rounds so that you can review your performance afterward.

Each of the seven activities described above can yield significant improvement if pursued seriously over time. And there are many other valuable exercises you could try; ask your coach or others whom you respect for suggestions. Let me underscore that you should not try to do everything in one summer. Rather, choose one or a few exercises to which you can realistically devote regular practice. You *can* become a better debater over the summer, even without attending a workshop.

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