



◆ Policy Debate

Winning Debates and Other Thoughts

A Judge's View

By Robert Wexler

My interest in debate started at our kitchen table in Belmont, Massachusetts, when I was 7 years old. At supper, my family discussed current events. I enjoyed sharing my comments, and I loved using vivid examples. It was lively and fun.

And then, when I was a junior in high school, I discovered The Elements of Style by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White. This friendly classic is a superb guide for writers and debaters. Their advice is simple: “Be clear.” In my experience as a debater and debate judge, being clear is the key to winning debates. At the National Forensic League Tournament in Philadelphia in June, the winning teams showed the effectiveness of clarity.

Imagine the “anguish of a traveler expecting to be met at a railroad station and not being met because of a slipshod telegram. Think of the tragedies that are rooted in ambiguity and be clear!,” said Strunk and White.

This little book will improve your classroom writing, and it can be a big boost in the writing section of the SAT, too.

Writing and speaking are parallel. The Elements of Style is now in paperback, and I recommend it.

The most important influence in my debating was Val Foubert, my debate coach at Sammamish High School in Bellevue, Washington. He stressed excellence in the fundamentals—a clear delivery, sharp analysis, an effective organization, and thorough research. He had high expectations, and his debaters learned a lot and were successful. His class brimmed with energy, and Mr. Foubert made debate a gateway to clear thinking and confidence.

Every year I’ve judged debate, starting with the first tournament in September, I’ve been impressed with the quality of analysis and knowledge about the resolution. But there are also areas for improvement.

These suggestions apply to Policy,

Public Forum, and Lincoln-Douglas debates and to the affirmative and the negative:

Show energy in your presentation. Since debate involves speaking, the quality of delivery is paramount. On the affirmative, pick a case that you truly care about and, on the negative, pick a strategy that is compelling to you.

The best way to communicate energy is by having an expressive voice with lots of vocal variety including changes in pace and emphasis.

Pauses are essential to an effective delivery. Listen to Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, and you’ll know about the power of effective pauses. And you’ll also learn about all of the elements of a powerful presentation.

Be an active listener. Judges listen for good listeners. I’ve heard debaters ask: Please repeat your second argument or please repeat your plan. The please part shows courtesy, but the repeat part shows a need for improvement in critical listening skills.

Avoid the hodgepodge effect. Debaters need to clearly distinguish among issues, arguments, and evidence in both constructive and rebuttal speeches. The format you use and the options of presentation are open to your skills and creativity.

The brief cross-examination period is precious. So sharpen your approach. You can win the debate with a few good questions. Focus on flaws in your opponents’ case and then, in your rebuttal, clearly highlight these critical admissions. In policy debate, for example, specific factual questions about the plan are effective. Plans can be vague and incomplete, and a negative team can easily win the debate simply by showing flaws in the plan.

It’s important to ask about the qualifications of persons quoted. Are they experts? Your opponents may not know. Currency of evidence can be crucial in many debates. Is the information from 2005 or

1995? Judges don’t like stale information, nor should you.

Avoid the over-use of debate jargon which is often confusing, especially to novice judges. Debate is not about pulling a 2AC through a 1NR and a 2NR and pulling through a negative analytic. (That’s a lot of extra pulling.) Instead, debate relies on compelling arguments and persuasion.

My debate experience is always with me—while I’m writing this article, when I’m preparing an outline for a debate workshop, and even when I’m jotting notes on a postcard on Main Street at Disneyland. Clear organization and the use of good examples are always important.

Debate has a lifetime of benefits including successful college admission interviews, convincing job interviews, and presentations at school board and city council meetings.

Recently, along with others, I spoke at a Reno City Council meeting where the Council considered the issue of building hotel rooms on property near the Reno-Sparks Convention Center. My presentation was, in effect, a first affirmative constructive speech. It had a thesis statement: The key to thriving tourism in Reno is hotel rooms. And the organization, analysis, arguments, and evidence followed from that opening statement as I highlighted the benefits of hotel rooms to Reno and its visitors. I used vivid examples about the friendliness of Reno, the bright blue of Lake Tahoe, and the historic riches of Virginia City. My speech had a beginning, a middle, and an end, and it was persuasive. I helped my community, and I credit debate.

I still feel like I’m at our kitchen table when I was 7. I’m just older now.

(Robert Wexler has been a debater and a debate judge since 1958. He debated at Highland Junior High School and at Sammamish High School in Bellevue, Washington, and at the University of Washington in Seattle.)