

Preparation for the Oxford Competition

It can be intimidating for schools and pupils who have never debated before to be thrown into a high quality competition where there will be pupils much more experienced than them. Obviously our workshops are designed to prepare people for the competition, but you can only do so much in one afternoon. This worksheet suggests further ways that you can help prepare your team.

The Motion

Possibly the most scary thing about the Oxford Competition is that the debates are all short preparation. This means we only announce the topic for debate fifteen minutes before the debate starts. We do this because we believe it encourages pupils to think on their feet. Reading a speech inhibits eye contact, rebuttal of other people's arguments and responding to what is going on in the debate. We also do not want to unfairly advantage teams who have the time to research more thoroughly, or have people to help them write wonderful speeches.

- The motion will be announced fifteen minutes before the debate.
- During that time coaches must not help their pupils
- No electronic research materials may be used. Pupils may use other research materials - many teams find it useful to bring a couple of copies of the economist with them, or a dictionary of politics for example.
- While not technically against our rules, teams bringing suitcases full of prepared cases will be frowned upon! We have not yet seen this happen in the Oxford Schools Competition.

Some examples of motions we have debated in previous schools competitions are:

- This House Would Invade Iraq tomorrow
- This House Believes Girls and Boys should not be educated together
- This House Believes The Catholic Priest should ordain a female bishop
- This House Believes That the developed world should should forgive the debts of the developing world.
- This House Believes that we should legalise drugs in sports
- This House Believes that Dianne Pretty has the right to die.
- This House Would eat meat.

We set motions working from the basic principle that **someone who reads a quality broadsheet newspaper should know of the subject.**

How to Prepare to Debate the Unknown?

⇒ **READ A NEWSPAPER!**

The topics for debate will frequently be current affairs. For example, during the Dianne Pretty trial there were a lot of debates on whether we should legalise euthanasia. Before the war on Iraq there were a lot of debates about that. Reading a newspaper will mean you are familiar with the issues that may be debated. Many articles also go through the arguments for one or both sides of a controversial issue, which is obviously very helpful for a debater!

- Get a quality broadsheet newspaper (the Times, or the Guardian, not the Sun...) and look through it for topics that would make a good debate.
- Some teams cut out any articles they see that may crop up in the Competition, and take them with them, just in case.
- Another way you could get to know your Debating Issues, is by visiting www.debateabase.org This website has a whole host of motions with various arguments for either side. However, remember that any random student can add to the site, so don't think of it as gospel!

⇒ PRACTISE SHORT PREP

Practise Makes Perfect. The more familiar you become with having to think up arguments in only fifteen minutes, the easier it will become. The first time you do it, it will almost certainly be horrible. Every time after that it will be easier and more fun. You will begin to realise that certain arguments apply to many different motions, and can just be recycled. (see Think Principles below).

- Practise coming up with arguments. Think of a motion, give yourself fifteen minutes to write down all the arguments you can think of for one side.
- Have a lunchtime or after school debate in BP format where you give yourselves fifteen minutes to come up with the arguments. For the first couple of times you do this, pick the topic before hand, and allow people to research in general, but do not tell them which side they are on until fifteen minutes before the debate, at which point they can start sorting their ideas out.
- Contact another school near you who debates (we can provide you with the names of schools in your region who have debating teams) and get together for a friendly. We have notes for Host Schools that may help you with this.
- **Never** write out your entire speech before a debate. Ideally you should have a few basic notes on what your arguments are, and what examples you have that are relevant, which you should expand on while you are talking. This will allow you to be more free to respond to the debate as it is happening, and discourages speeches that are beautiful in themselves, but not relevant to the debate.

⇒ RESEARCH MATERIALS

The Oxford Schools Competition allows paper research materials in the fifteen minutes prep time, but not electronic. Most schools do not bother too much with this, as in fifteen minutes having loads of stuff to plough through can be more of a hindrance than help. However, there are some classics.

- **Pros and Cons: A Debater's Handbook.** This book lists motions in various areas and gives you the basic arguments for each motion. It can be fantastically useful when you know absolutely nothing about a given subject, or your mind simply goes blank. However be warned: the Judges know this book like the back of their hand, and will not be impressed by teams simply reading out arguments. Use Pros and Cons as a starting point. Develop the arguments it has and think of examples.
- **A Dictionary.** We try not to use ridiculously complicated language, but have seen that some teams find a dictionary useful. More useful perhaps might be a dictionary of politics, or international relations, if your school has one.

⇒ THINK PRINCIPLES

Obviously there is no way people can know everything. However you will find that most debates boil down to one of several Principle Debates. For example, War on Iraq becomes ends versus means, Drugs in Sport becomes Freedom of the Individual vs Paternalism, and so on. If you always think about the principle underlying a debate you can often find some principled way of arguing it even though you know nothing about the subject.

- Compile a list of motions, and work through them writing down what you think the main clash of principles would be.
- Look at www.debateabase.org or Pros and Cons, and work out which arguments are the ones relating to the specific motion, and which ones are more principled.
- Have a Principles Only debate. These can be confused and difficult to follow, but when done well can be very interesting. Sometimes it is refreshing to get away from practicalities and think solely about what is right. Try

This House Believes that the Ends always Justify the Means

This House Would compromise Freedom of the Individual for Safety of the State

This House Believes that Human Rights should never be compromised

Remember when doing this that it is just a learning tool. If you get a motion like this in a debating competition, it is the job of First Proposition Team to tie the motion down to something more specific. So for example in the first above motion you could tie it down to War with Iraq, Assassination of Dictators, Violent Protests, etc. It is then the job of the other teams in the debate to follow that definition, using both principled arguments and specific practical ones.

Go to watch other people debate

You can learn a lot by watching other people debate. If they are good you can learn from them, and try to pick out specific skills to try to copy. If they are bad, you should try and work out what makes them unconvincing, and remember not to do those things yourself!

There are many debating competitions across the country, at many levels.

- **Schools Debates that you are not taking part in.** Whether it is a competition you are not in, or a round between other teams in a competition you are in, watching other teams will allow students to check out the competition. Hopefully they will find that the teams debating are no better than they are, and will be encouraged to participate next time round. There is also the chance that they see very experienced teams, but should see this as an opportunity to learn from them, and should not be discouraged. Schools with no debating history have come to the Grand Finals Day and done extremely well before – it can happen again.
- **After the debate,** the Judges will typically make some remarks about how they came to their decision. They will usually not go into too much detail so as not to embarrass or bore people. However it would be worth asking the Judges after their feedback whether your debaters could talk to them for a couple of minutes in some more detail about how they saw the debate and what they thought of the individual speakers. This will give your debaters some idea of the things Judges are looking for. However remember that often schools competitions have people who are less than qualified to Judge a debate. The Oxford Schools Competition is judged by students who have succeeded in National and International Competitions, and who have been trained by people who have Judged International Competitions, and our handbook and workshops are designed by similarly qualified people.
- **University Debates.** Most universities have debating societies, and hold debates regularly. Get in contact with your local universities to find out whether they would mind you bringing your pupils along to watch. I don't know of any university that would have a problem with this – in fact most have pro-schools debating policies, and it is likely that you would find someone willing to sit with them during the debate and talk to them about what they saw.
- **IV's – Inter-Varsity Competitions.** Most universities also hold IV's. These attract the best teams from all over the country, and the larger and more respected ones attract international teams from across the globe. You can find out when and where these will be taking place by looking at the Tournament Calendar on www.britishdebate.com