

JUDGING

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“I look to a day when people will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character.”

— MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

“They misunderestimated me.”

— GEORGE W. BUSH

WE PLAY THE ROLE of judge as often as we do the role of a debater. We are constantly evaluating the information we receive from other people. Our “inner judge” is constantly assessing the world around us, and helping us to decide what is right and wrong and come to a verdict on important issues.

Learning to judge a debate is an important skill, because you see the speeches through a critical lens. You learn to be fair and impartial, and judge the issue based on the merit of the arguments, not on your preconceived biases. In Martin Luther King, Jr.'s case, that would be his dream come true. In George W. Bush's case, he's happy if you don't "misunderestimate" him – whatever that means.

The role of the judge

A judge decides who wins and who loses the debate.

Debating is a competitive activity, with winners and losers. Most formats don't allow draws or ties – one team must win and another must lose. A debate judge, or adjudicator, is the person entrusted to make that decision on who wins and who loses. Judges are often experienced debaters themselves, and are thus familiar with the rules and expectations of the debate. Most tournaments run an adjudicator-training workshop prior to the start of the debates, to ensure that all judges are up to the mark. If you are interested in becoming a judge, contact the tournament organiser and ask them about adjudication training.

A judge's personal opinion on the topic is irrelevant.

It does not matter whether you as the judge personally agree or disagree with the topic. If you are personally against the death penalty and happen to be judging a debate on the same topic, your personal bias should not, in any way, affect your decision on who won or who lost the debate. This is very difficult to ensure, and judges who know they have a strong personal opinion on the topic must consciously try and let go of their "baggage" and listen to the arguments of both teams objectively. If you feel like your personal opinions on the topic are overwhelming to the point that you cannot be unbiased, excuse

yourself from the role of adjudicator for that debate and ask the tournament organisers to find a replacement.

The winner may be determined by a single judge, a panel of independent judges, or by concurrence from multiple judges.

The organisers will determine in advance whether a lone judge or a panel of judges will judge the debates. If you are judging a debate alone, your verdict will be the sole determinant of the outcome.

If there are other judges with you, then there are two ways in which the final outcome may be arrived at. In formats like the WSDC, the judges are treated as individual and independent, and each of their verdicts (or “ballots”) counts as a “vote” for that team. In a panel of three adjudicators, if two judges vote for the proposition team and the third judge decides in favour of the opposition team, then the proposition team wins because it had more votes. This obviously requires an odd number of judges so that there is never a tie.

Other formats — such as the British Parliamentary format — consider the judges as a single entity that must come up with a consolidated decision after discussion. That is, they are allowed to confer after the debate, and must agree on the winner *as a panel*.

A judge awards scores to the speakers and teams.

Depending on the format and rules of the competition, a judge must award a certain grade or score to each speaker and to the team as a whole. Obviously, the winning team must get the highest score or grade. Each format of debate has its own criteria for scoring, and often some amount of training and understudying is required in order to be able to assess how high or low to score a speaker.

A judge delivers the verdict to the teams.

Just like in the legal context, a debate judge is also responsible for

explaining the reasons for his or her verdict. The judge cannot simply say, “The Proposition won,” and leave it at that. Debaters are argumentative people, and the opposition team is certainly going to challenge you to explain why they lost.

Sometimes different judges see a debate differently.

Persuasion is a very subjective issue, and even though score-sheets attempt to break down persuasion into different subcategories (style, content, strategy, etc.), it is still highly personal. Each judge may have a slightly different perspective on what happened during the debate, what mattered most, and what was most persuasive. Even if all the judges are perfectly unbiased, their individual interpretations of the debates may differ because no two humans think exactly alike. Don't be worried if the adjudicators in the room give different verdicts or different scores — as long as they all have followed the rules and have given scores that are aligned with the instructions provided during the adjudicator training, it's ok. If you are a dissenting adjudicator (that is, you were one of the judges in the minority who voted for the losing team), don't worry. Judges do not need to be unanimous — that's why we have panels of multiple adjudicators.

Philosophies of judging

Different formats have different judging philosophies.

In a debate competition, the two sides and the debate speakers are not the only participants in the debate. In most formats of debate, the judge plays a very large role as well — and thus there is a need to discuss the “philosophies” that govern how an adjudicator should play his role in the debate. In this section, we discuss three of the more common philosophies.

Philosophy 1: The judge is a “blank slate” who does not do any analysis on his own.

In this philosophy, the judge believes everything that he hears from the debaters, and will not question the truth or logic of the argument unless the other team raises it. This judge is a “blank slate,” who is just waiting to absorb the speeches from the debaters. He comes with no prior knowledge of the topic and no ability to counter-check the facts or arguments, and relies purely on the other teams to disprove the points. If the other team fails to rebut any particular point, this type of judge will continue to believe that the particular point is true – even if any ordinary intelligent person would know that the point is false or illogical. Very few debate competitions encourage this style of adjudication, so if you encounter a judge like this, it may be possible that the judge is actually, in fact, vacuous.

Philosophy 2: The judge is the “next opponent speaker,” waiting to rebut every point with his expert knowledge.

Competitions that encourage a high level of research into a particular topic area (such as International Humanitarian Law debates), or that are based on a particular framework of argumentation (for example, moot or legal debates that use domestic laws as the framework) often ask judges to play the role of “subject specialist.” The judge is thus very well-read on the topic and able to distinguish between facts and fibs even before the opponent speaker points it out. The judge plays an interventionist role in the scoring, by analysing your argument for flaws and scoring you accordingly. The judge can be thought of as the “hidden opponent speaker,” who does not need to wait for the other team to point out your shortcomings and loopholes. Again, most debate competitions avoid this style of adjudication, because it means that the judge has “stepped in” to the debate and become a participant in the debate and is thus no longer a neutral assessor.

Philosophy 3: The judge is a rational, intelligent, reasonable, unbiased and generally well-read person.

This is the middle-ground between the two philosophies above, and also the most commonly used adjudication style in competitions. It requires a judge to just be himself: intelligent and rational enough to be able to distinguish good logic from bad arguments; well-read enough to know the key facts and issues but not a subject-matter-expert on the topic; and, most importantly, a reasonable and unbiased “man on the street.” The judge should not “step in” to the debate and pretend to be the opponent, but they should also not blindly accept everything that is being said by the speakers if they know that it is false. It is obviously a delicate balance – how “well-read” should the judge be before it borders on subject expertise? How rational and intelligent should they be in analysing the points before they become the “opponent in waiting”? These are tricky balances that must be learned through experience. Most debate competitions ask adjudicators to adopt this model of thinking.

Preparation before the debate

Judges must understand the rules of the debate format.

Studying and understanding the rules of the competition you are about to judge is critical. You should know what to expect from the debate (in terms of the speaking order, duration of speeches, number of teams, etc.) and also what is allowed and disallowed in the debate you are about to judge. In some formats of debate, the other teams are actually allowed to heckle the speaker – and you are expected as a judge to just ignore it. If you didn’t know that heckling was allowed, you might get quite startled when one of the debaters started shouting “Boo! Shame!” midway through another speaker’s speech!

Judges must be familiar with the scoring criteria.

Since you are required to grade the teams and the speakers, you should have some familiarity with the scoring standards and what a “good” speaker would look and sound like. You should preferably have watched a debate in this format, for example on video, and been briefed on how to score that speaker, so that you can make a good assessment of how the speakers you are about to judge would score, in relation to that video.

Judges should be at least as familiar with the topic as the average “man on the street.”

You shouldn’t try to become a subject-matter expert in every debate topic. However, if there are areas of common knowledge that you have always been weak in, now is the time for you to brush up on them. If you are a passionate literature student and the term “genetic engineering” means nothing to you because you slept through all your biology classes, you might want to go and browse the web for some intro articles. If you have trouble finding the Middle East on a map, you might want to educate yourself on the region a bit more, just in case you are required to judge a debate topic on the political or religious conflicts within that region.

“Success depends upon previous preparation, and without such preparation there is sure to be failure.”

— CONFUCIUS

Judging a debate

Listen and watch the debater closely and write down the important aspects of the speech.

To judge a speaker on content and style, you must have a system to write down your observations and analysis of his content and style. This will help you to score his speech at the end of the speech, and, if necessary, amend his scores at the end of the debate. Most judges develop their own system for “tracking” the debate – that is, writing down the speaker’s speech and adding comments. I use multiple pen colours to differentiate between the speaker’s key points, my quick analysis of the points, and my comments on his style.

Analyse the arguments – weak ones deserve little credit.

Arguments are weak if they do not meet the expectations of a “good” argument, as set out in earlier chapters, and are thus unconvincing. You should penalise debaters for making weak arguments.

If the other team rebuts the weak argument, reward the other team. If the other team does not rebut it, that does not mean that the weak point deserves higher credit; it is still a weak point. It just means that the other team dropped an opportunity to rebut a weak argument. Whether or not you penalise the other team for dropping this rebuttal depends on the adjudication philosophy of the competition, but generally speaking, it shows that the other team was not able to maximise the “attack” on their opponents. Any team that does not robustly attack the weaknesses in the other team’s case normally should be penalised.

Constantly question if you are bringing in personal biases.

As a judge, you must always be vigilant that you are judging the debate based on the debate itself, and not bringing in your personal biases. Don’t imagine how you could have or would have attacked or

presented an argument. Don't compare the student debaters against your own (probably excellent) skills as a debater. Judge the debate; don't "join" the debate.

Score the overall impact of the speaker, rather than adding or subtracting marks for each good or bad thing they do.

If a speech contains great arguments but no rebuttals, you should reward the speaker for the great examples and penalise him for the lack of rebuttals. The final score should be determined by how effective the speech was *as a whole* and not on piecemeal evaluation of each item. If the speaker started with a very engaging style but towards the end became nervous and lost the audience, consider if his overall speech was less engaging because the end was so bad? Or was his introduction so compelling that the bad ending was inconsequential? Judge the debater on the overall impact and effect of his speech.

There is no such thing as an "automatic loss."

Just like scoring a speaker, you should judge a team based on the overall effect of the team. Teams cannot win or lose for just one thing. You should evaluate the teams as a whole and judge all the relevant factors for the debate when making your decision.

Cross-check your scores across speakers and categories.

Your scores should reflect the relativity of the performance between each aspect of the debate. Comparing the team scores, the team with the higher score should be the team that won the debate (if not, there is something wrong with the way you scored the teams or judged the debate). Comparing the different speakers, the speakers who got the higher scores should be the speakers who were more persuasive and gave better speeches. Comparing the different elements *within* a speaker's speech (such as style, content, strategy), the

breakdown should reflect that speaker's strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, the breakdown of the different elements *across* different speakers should make sense as well — if you felt one speaker had a better style than another speaker, then that speaker's style score should be higher than the other speaker's.

Do not underestimate the difficulty of judging a debate.

Students put in a lot of effort to prepare themselves for a competitive debate, and thus you should expect the outcome to be very important (and sometimes emotional) for them. When the opposing teams are closely matched, your talent as a judge will make all the difference. You need to put in effort to listen, analyse, and evaluate the debates so that you reach the correct decision. This is hard work, and you should only be an adjudicator if you are willing and able to put in the effort to do it right.

Delivering the verdict

Delivering the verdict serves three very important purposes.

The key purposes of the verdict are (1) to announce who won the debate; (2) to explain the rationale behind this decision; and (3) to highlight — and commend, if required — speakers for good and bad aspects in the debate. Judges sometimes offer suggestions on how the debate could have been improved, but this is an optional item.

As an adjudicator, you will usually have three opportunities to provide feedback and comments for a debate: (1) written feedback on your score-sheet, which is often sent to the teams after the competition; (2) oral feedback when you deliver the verdict; and (3) individual briefings to the teams and speakers after the debate — sometimes teams or speakers approach the judges after the debate and request for explanations or advice.

The chief adjudicator normally explains the decision.

If you are the chief adjudicator, how should you deliver a good oral adjudication summary? This section provides some pointers, but keep in mind that all debates are different and a model answer on oral summaries cannot be given.

Jot down key points as they occur to you during the debate.

Prepare your notes early. You can start jotting down key factors that should be raised in the oral summary even during the debate. This would mean that you are unlikely to forget key points that were raised earlier in the debate. In the same vein, this would make the deliberations with the panel quicker. When preparing your notes, you can also start to categorise your points so that they are already in your preferred order when you deliver the summary.

If you are representing a panel of judges, include their views.

You can seek their opinions during the post-debate discussion before the verdict is announced. On some contentious areas, it would be important to highlight both the majority *and* the dissenting views. If you already have the preferred order of points for adjudication, it is easy to slot the additional points into your delivery.

Keep the audience in mind when delivering your verdict.

The oral adjudication summary is your only opportunity to address the audience, whereas there is still another chance to engage the debaters later, when you debrief the teams individually. Stick to the key issues without getting into the intricate details that would be best brought up later when talking with the teams.

Keep it short and precise.

Stick to the key issues; don't ramble on. There should be the same time discipline that is expected of the speakers. Before delivering the

speech, estimate how long it would take to deliver the summary and try to stick to that time limit.

Depending on the format of the debate and the competition, the verdict may be given either before or after the oral adjudication summary. There is a tendency to keep the comments vague so that the verdict will come as a surprise. Try to avoid this – vague comments do not provide learning points for the audience and the teams. If a good oral adjudication is delivered, the audience would be able to see what the key considerations for the decision were and the verdict will not be a surprise.

Keep your comments positive; don't focus on the negative.

Debaters are young students – don't mock them or criticise them in front of the audience. The goal of your post-debate remarks is to help them improve and learn from their mistakes, not to rub salt in the losing team's wounds, or to demoralise the winning team by criticising their efforts. You may have been a great debater in your days, but this is not the chance for you to show off how clever you are; focus your brilliance on helping the young debaters learn and grow for their next debate.

Common mistakes

This section lists the common mistakes that some inexperienced adjudicators make, and that you should try to avoid.

Mistake: Failing to recognise your own deep-rooted biases.

When a topic is controversial and goes against your religious or societal perspective, you must be very cautious. Some judges are unable to recognise that they have a natural inclination towards one side, and end up over-crediting the team that sides with their beliefs.

This is wrong. You must be impartial and objective, even if it means going against your beliefs. If you feel so strongly about a topic that you think you may not be able to overcome your beliefs, excuse yourself from that debate.

Some judges make the opposite mistake. Knowing they have a personal bias, they over-compensate for this and over-credit the opposing team, to “prove” that they were unbiased.

Mistake: Having favourites.

As a judge, you must put aside any relationship or friendship that you have with any of the debaters, and any feelings you have towards any of the teams. After a few years of judging, you may find you have judged the same school team or the same debaters many times. You must not let your past interactions with the teams or debaters influence your assessment of the current debate. Just because they were amazing debaters last year does not mean that they will be amazing in this debate, and so you should not think that “they will definitely win” this debate. If you do not think you are able to put aside your personal preferences, or if your relationship with the teams is too close, you should excuse yourself as an adjudicator and get a replacement judge.

Mistake: Bringing in expert knowledge that most people would not know or understand.

No matter which adjudication philosophy is chosen, there is some knowledge that is so obscure that most people would never know or understand it. If you are asked to judge a debate, and you happen to be the leading academic authority on the topic, do not expect student debaters to have the same level of depth and understanding as you do on that topic. Judge them based on what you would expect from a reasonably intelligent person who has read the different theories on the topic. If you know the obscure and complex

counter-arguments to conventional wisdom, you should not penalise teams for not raising them – you may want to educate teams *after* the debate, but it should not impact your scoring.

Mistake: Speaking in “debaterese” only.

Be clear and specific in your feedback. Using debate jargon (or “debaterese”) is not useful because it masks the problem in technical terminology. If you think they could have defined the topic better, tell them directly what the problem with the definition was and why you think it could have been better. Using technical terms that are familiar among advanced debaters – for example, “tiered sub-contentions,” “signposting,” or “claris” – may confuse novice debaters.

Mistake: Placing unfair expectations on the debaters.

If you were an excellent debater (as most judges tend to be), it is likely that you will have your own way of winning a debate on any given topic. Do not expect teams to think exactly like you – they may have their own way of developing a case, and you should allow them to do so.

Mistake: Penalising speakers for their accents.

This is a big no-no, especially for international debate competitions involving many different countries. Even for domestic competitions, there is an increasing ethnic diversity in each country. Just because a debater from China or Australia pronounces a word differently from how you would – or because they have a slightly different way of constructing sentences – does not make it wrong. As long as they are able to get their message across and capture the attention of the audience, you should not penalise speakers for their accents.

Mistake: Being mean.

Don’t verbally abuse the debaters. Be constructive in your criticism,

and balance it with compliments on things that the speakers did well and should continue doing. Students have fragile egos, and you should be building up their self-confidence, not destroying it.

Mistake: Being unprofessional and disrespectful.

If you are affiliated in any way with one of the teams you are judging (perhaps you have a sibling in the team, or you are an alumni), you should highlight this to both teams and to the chief adjudicator. The right thing to do when conflicts of interest arise is to find another adjudicator. It is your responsibility to be professional and make sure that the students perceive you to be an unbiased and fair judge at all times.

Don't be disrespectful to the debaters. Avoid texting on your phone, sleeping, doodling, and any other activity that is not related to your job as a judge.

Mistake: Disrespecting the other judges.

If you are a dissenting judge, do not mock or scoff at the opinions of the other judges. If you are in the majority, do not put down or insult the dissenting judges. Each judge is entitled to his or her own opinion, and your rants against the other judges will reflect worse on your own character than their ability as judges. If you have a legitimate complaint against one of the other judges, go to the chief adjudicator or organiser. Don't whine to the debaters.

Mistake: Getting into an argument with the students.

As a judge, you should maintain a cool, calm, and mature composure when debriefing the students. Even if they get upset (as losing teams sometimes do) you should keep your cool. Explain your position, but don't feel cornered or pressured if they keep badgering you for answers. Debaters are argumentative, but don't fall into the trap

of arguing with them. If they have a complaint about your performance as a judge, they should take it to the organisers.

Mistake: Thinking that you never make mistakes.

You may be an experienced judge, but it does not make your judgment perfect all the time. Be prepared to defend your opinion and assessment of the debate (vigorously, if you must) but if the chief adjudicator or other judges have some feedback from you, listen to them. Handle complaints graciously when you do receive them. Learn from your mistakes.

Being an adjudicator is a great opportunity to infuse young debaters with passion for the activity. Relish the role and respect the responsibilities!

THINK
SPEAK
WIN