

PREFACE

Discovering debate changed my life.

I have been debating, coaching, lecturing, and judging for over 16 years now. When I started, debating didn't come naturally – I took a few years to find my footing, slowly gain confidence, understand how to analyse issues, and present them to an audience in an interesting and persuasive way. There were no books or videos to guide me back then, so I just kept practising. When I finally got the hang of it towards the end of my schooling life, things started to click. My new-found confidence and analytical skills helped me get into my dream university, helped me win one of the most prestigious scholarships, and gave me the skills I need to excel in the working world. Debate holds a very special place in my heart and my life, because it transformed me. I have spent many years trying to provide that same opportunity to young students all around me. It has been difficult to find time to write this book, but if debate can have the same life-transforming effect on other young students, I believe it is worth the effort.

Debating offers important skills for success: Critical analysis (think), Communication (speak), and Confidence (win).

These “Three Cs” are considered to be the key capabilities and skills

that companies look for in their new hires, and that top universities look for in their potential students. The reasons for this are plentiful and obvious: Someone who can think deeply and independently about a problem and come up with solutions, then communicate that solution persuasively to others, while being perceived as confident and sure-footed, is definitely a good candidate for a top job or a spot in a prestigious university. Debaters are also well-read, because they have to understand the background of many issues in current affairs in order to debate them effectively. It is little wonder then that many of the most successful people in the world – whether from the business, academic or political spheres – have had some debate training in their school days. In Singapore, debaters are well-represented on the list of past President’s Scholars.

Debaters tend to have more balanced opinions because they are trained to see both sides of every issue.

Every debater knows that they may be asked to argue for or against the death penalty or abortion in their next debate – they don’t get to pick their sides – and they must thus be able to understand the reasons and evidence for and against those controversial topics. This forced dual-perspective on contentious issues requires debaters to step outside their own viewpoints and consider the possible counter-arguments. They also learn that any view they hold should be substantiated with logic and evidence if possible – and this usually prevents debaters from holding illogical and biased opinions that are derived from stereotypes or other irrational considerations. This type of thinking stays with them for life. Debaters tend to always analyse both sides of an issue before making their decisions, and thus are able to come to more balanced and rational perspectives.

Debaters prefer healthy discussion to aggressive arguments.

Debate is part of the human impulse to communicate thoughts,

opinions, views, and beliefs. Debate can connect two people who are divided on a topic. Debaters prefer healthy arguments rather than bitter emotional battles. When people are unable to express their opinions in words well enough, they often resort to emotion or aggression. Go online now and read any forum in which people disagree about something — Are Macs better than PCs? Should schools teach safe-sex? Should homosexual marriage be legalised? — and see how long it takes before the forum degenerates into illogical assertions, name-calling, and mud-slinging. There are some countries famous for their having parliaments erupt into vicious yelling and even fist-fighting when two opposing politicians are unable to discuss their disagreements maturely. I think it is in society's best interests that we teach people how to debate complex issues in a civilised manner, so there is no need to resort to the uncivilised.

“Difference of opinion leads to inquiry, and inquiry to truth.”

— THOMAS JEFFERSON

Anybody can learn to debate if they want to. It is not a sport reserved for the academic elite. Don't be scared of debaters!

Debate is not a recent phenomenon. It did not begin with politicians or Ivy League students. It is impossible to give a definite history of debate. My suspicion is that debate even preceded formal language — that when cavemen gathered to evaluate how to hunt using the spear, they must have compared the different tactics and somehow “debated” the pros and cons. Somewhere along the way, debate was hijacked by the classrooms of the best schools, and burdened with elaborate rules, special terms, and a manner of speech that only other fellow debaters could understand. Debate became

so complex that it left behind the people who mattered — us. This is wrong. Debate should appeal to and be understandable by the average man on the street.

Debate should not be taught to students just to win competitions; it should be taught because it is important for the students' life-long development, for the same reasons we teach students maths and science. I have seen students from weaker schools do well in competitive debate given the right training, and I have seen how their self-confidence improved dramatically as a direct result. Debate can and should be taught across all schools, as part of the core curriculum. Singapore's Ministry of Education has recently made debate a "core skill" for all students in primary and secondary school.

There are very few books that teach you how to think faster and speak better. This book aims to fix that.

There are many books on "Persuasive Speaking," but those books fail to get to the root of persuasion because they only teach you how to *speak* persuasively, but they don't teach you how to also *think* persuasively. Those books assume that you have already written a compelling, analytical, intelligent, well-researched speech, but you have difficulty delivering that content to an audience. That is rarely the case. Most people have difficulty communicating because they have difficulty thinking of what to say as well as how to say it. Most people face difficulties with everyday speaking — whether they are being questioned at a business meeting, or being grilled by a scholarship interview panel. Public-speaking or persuasive-speaking books are not very useful in these situations, because "visualising your audience naked" is not going to help you analyse the tough question and come up with an intelligent response or counter-proposal!

There are indeed some books on debating, but these books often focus on extremely technical advice, specific to certain competitive debate formats (mainly American). They contain cryptic debaterese

jargon such as “deficit disads,” “attitudinal inherency,” “fiats,” “kritiks,” or “tiered sub-contentions” – terms that mean nothing to most intelligent people. There are no books that I know of that teach the key concepts and skills of debating from scratch, free of technical jargon.

This book aims to close both those gaps. It introduces readers to the basic skills of debating in an easy, non-technical way. These skills are as useful in a debate competition as they are in everyday life and conversation. The last chapter of this book will show you how to achieve success by using “debate-thinking” in your daily life.

Debate as an activity can advance issues, unveil false arguments and misperceptions, and clarify complex topics.

I think debate is the first step towards improving our world. Before we embark on any course of action, before we make a decision on any morally challenging policy, before we change laws, we must evaluate the pros and cons of the choice that we (as a society) are about to make. We *must* debate. We must pit the opposing arguments against each other and see which prevails in the contest of ideas and logic and evidence. In the process, we uncover those ideas that are false, and cast light on areas previously in the dark. Debate helps people separate fact from fiction, because the opposing team will quickly point out any lies that are told. And where we cannot ourselves participate in the debate, we must be able to analyse and dissect the arguments and evidence that the politicians make in the senate or parliament as our representatives, to satisfy ourselves that they are making the right decisions for the country. Democracies are founded upon the “marketplace of ideas” and depend upon the voting masses to listen closely to the political debate of their countries and vote according to which side they prefer. When people do not understand those debates, they may become disaffected, apathetic, and resign themselves to the hands of politicians (or worse

yet, vote on irrational grounds). Being able to understand, participate, and contribute to the political process in a meaningful way is a fundamental right of any person in a democracy. Too few people have been taught those critical debate skills.

This book is meant to give everyone a chance to open up, speak up, and make a difference. Good luck.

THINK
SPEAK
WIN