Rules for MSPDP Competitive Debating – Updated 2015

The Middle School Public Debate Program Rules for Competition covers the eight key areas of a debate.

- Debate topics
- Number of teams and debaters
- Speaking order and speaking time limits
- Preparation period
- Debate materials
- Points of information and heckling
- Judge training and decision making
- After the debate

Much of the material covered in the rules is also discussed elsewhere in this book, but it is important that you understand the rationale behind the rules if you are to get the most benefit from participating in the MSPDP.

Debate Topics

The Rules
MSPDP competitions use prepared motions. Each debate has a different topic. Topics are announced several weeks (generally four) in advance of a competition. This gives debaters time to think about the topic; research and analyze arguments for and against it; and carefully organize notes on the strongest arguments.

Understanding the Rules
During a semester or competition season, you will debate a variety of social and political issues. You are expected to research and learn about both sides of each topic because sides are assigned shortly before a debate begins. Consequently, over the course of a season, you will become familiar with the major arguments and issues on each side of many current controversies, building a knowledge base that will help you become an informed citizen.

The topics you will debate follow MSPDP guidelines for selection and phrasing. Although you will not have to formulate a topic, understanding the reasoning behind how topics are developed will help you debate. Those individuals developing topics are guided by the following rules:

- **Topics should be simple, declarative sentences** such as “Extra-terrestrial intelligence exists” or “Schools should not serve junk food.” Clarity helps you understand which issues support the topic and those arguments that might effectively clash with the proposition team’s case.
- **Topics should encourage the application of higher-level thinking skills.** They may use comparative language, e.g., “On balance, video games do more...”
good than harm”) or complex terms (e.g., “It is unethical to eat meat”) to help you develop critical thinking skills.

- **Topics should be challenging, serious issues of local, regional, national, or international concern.** While debating about whether Batman could defeat Superman (hint: Batman will probably lose) or whether a dog makes a better pet than cat may be fun, MSPDP debates focus on topics such as federal bailouts of banks, the application of economic sanctions as a tool of foreign policy, abolition of supermajority voting in legislatures, and military intervention to help you better understand what is going on in your world.
- **Topics should be age-appropriate.** MSPDP topics involve issues of interest to your age group.
- **Where possible, topics should intersect with the school curriculum.** Topics are often drawn from what you are studying in the classroom.
- **Topics should be chosen and approved by teachers.** Your teachers have the best idea of what you can do and what you are learning.
- **Topics should be fair to both teams.** They should not ask too much of one team while making it much easier for the other team to win. They avoid extreme language like “always,” “never” and “all,” which makes the topic nearly impossible for the proposition to prove in a relatively brief debate.
- **Topics should avoid false dichotomies.** A false dichotomy occurs when a topic poses a choice when, in fact, a choice need not be made. A topic such as “Citizens should give up freedom for safety” makes it proportionately much easier for the opposition to win as they must only prove that citizens need not make such a choice.

### Number of Teams and Debaters

**The Rules**

Each MSPDP debate has two teams: proposition and opposition. Each debate team has three students, the first and second speakers for the team and a third speaker, also known as the rebuttal speaker.

Each team debates together throughout a competition without substitutions. If, for some reason, only two students are able to make up a team (for example, if the third team member becomes ill), those two may participate as a team. In that case, the team member who speaks first also delivers the third speech, the rebuttal speech. The missing student on the team receives an individual score of zero.

**Understanding the Rules**

The Public Debate Program uses teams of three because of the educational and social benefits of working in larger groups. Teams of three also teach you to work in more complex team environments, thus helping you learn the valuable negotiation and compromise skills that are important to work in school and in professional contexts. Working in a three-person team forces you to persuade at least one other member of team to agree with you to settle any team-based decision—speaker position for each of the teammates, strategy and tactics for debates, etc. The three-person team creates an
opportunity for you and your colleagues to practice debating (argumentation and persuasion) during debate preparation as well as in formal debates. Finally, working in teams of three helps beginning debaters, who can learn from their more experienced teammates.

**Speaking Order and Speaking Time Limits**

**The Rules**
Speakers make their presentations in the following order. The time listed is the maximum for each speech.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Speaker, Proposition Team</th>
<th>5 minutes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Speaker, Opposition Team</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Speaker, Proposition Team</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Speaker, Opposition Team</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebuttal Speaker, Opposition Team</td>
<td>4 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebuttal Speaker, Proposition Team</td>
<td>4 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first four speeches are sometimes called “constructive speeches.” In these speeches, each team will construct, or build, its arguments. New arguments may be introduced in any of these speeches. The final two speeches of the debate are called “rebuttal speeches.” These are summary speeches. In these speeches, the debaters try to offer the best comparative conclusion for their side of the debate and, at the same time, try to eliminate the major points of the other team.

Judges are told to disregard new arguments offered in rebuttal speeches. New arguments are defined as arguments without a foundation in the constructive speeches. For example, if the debate were about health care policy and a concluding speaker offered new ideas about how U.S. health care policy would affect foreign aid to Africa, the judge would consider it a new argument because it had no relation to the arguments in the constructive speeches. She would ignore it in her evaluation of the debate.

**Understanding the Rules**
The proposition team opens and closes the debate because they have the burden of proof in a debate: they must prove the motion is more true than false. The proposition team’s job is harder than the opposition’s because it is always more difficult to build something than to tear it down. For balance, the MSPDP format gives the opposition two speeches in a row—the second opposition speech and the opposition rebuttal are back-to-back. As we have seen, these two speeches function as a unit, with each adding its own material, summation, and ideas to the debate. Consequently, the last speech—by the proposition
rebuttalist—is the most difficult in the debate because the speaker must respond to 10 minutes of opposition team material in addition to reinforcing her team’s ideas—all in just 4 minutes.

The debate becomes more complicated as it proceeds. It begins with a case for the motion. The next speaker refutes the case and brings in new ideas. Each subsequent speaker continues the process of refutation while keeping the team’s ideas afloat. The final speakers are responsible for making sense of the debate in a way that will encourage the judge to vote for their side—this requires cleverness and careful note taking.

**The Preparation Period**

**The Rules**
 Teams are assigned a side (proposition or opposition), an opponent, and a judge before each debate. Tournament officials then distribute colored paper for use during the preparation period. A different color is used for each debate. After the teams have received their paper, the topic is announced. Debaters have 20 minutes of preparation time to review their notes, speak with their coaches and teammates, and copy notes or other information onto the colored paper.

**Understanding the Rules**
 The preparation period is to be used to develop your team’s ideas in advance of the debate. Of course, you will have done much of this work before you reach the tournament.

The rules prohibit reading prepared speeches for several reasons. First, the prohibition forces you to digest the research you have done before the competition. If you know that you will not be able to read prepared speeches, you will focus on thoroughly understanding the material. Second, prohibiting prepared speeches helps to “level the playing field.” Debaters cannot read speeches that others have written for them, so they must express their own ideas. Finally, the prohibition also encourages you to develop the skills needed for professional communication. Very few people will ever be asked to deliver a speech that they can read from a manuscript. Also, for most over the age of 10, being read to is quite boring. Effective speakers are able to talk from a limited set of notes and express their own ideas—the preparation period helps debaters to practice this skill.

Colored paper simply helps to ensure fair play. If all notes used in the debate are written on the same color paper, there is no question about whether notes were written prior to the start of the preparation time.

**Debate Materials**

**The Rules**
 Before a debate tournament or competition or during preparation time, students may review any information they think would help them prepare for a debate. This includes
books, newspaper or magazine articles on current events, class notes, and written records of debate meetings and previous debates. They may speak to teachers, coaches, teammates, parents, friends—anyone they choose. Debaters may not use computers or other mechanical devices unless they have been granted permission in advance of the competition for reasons of equity related to a disability. Coaches and parents assisting debaters during preparation time also may not consult electronic resources.

Once the debate begins, debaters may not review or use any notes that were not prepared during the preparation period. Using pre-prepared materials in the debate is a serious violation of the rules and may result in a student forfeiting or losing the debate.

**Understanding the Rules:**
During preparation, you may consult any materials you have brought to the debate, although you may not use your computer. You may also receive coaching from teachers, volunteer coaches, and parents; this is best done, however, before attending the tournament. For the best results, you should work almost exclusively with your teammates during preparation time.

You should write your own notes. This ensures not only that you can read them but also that a well-meaning adult has not written them. Your parents or coach want to help you win, but you don’t learn debating and communication skills if they do the work.

Using or reviewing too many materials in the preparation period can be a disadvantage. The most successful debaters have already read and digested their research prior to the tournament and made outlines or other easily copied materials. Over time, you will learn what techniques work best for you.

**Points of Information and Heckling**

**The Rules**
A point of information (also known as a POI, pronounced “P-O-I”) is an interjection by a speaker’s opponents to make a comment or ask a question. POIs are directed only to a member of the opposing team; a debater may not request a POI during a teammate’s speech.

Debaters can offer POIs only during the middle minutes of the constructive speeches (the first two speeches of both teams). The first and last minute of these speeches is “protected time,” when the speaker is shielded from inquiries from the other side. The judge will signal the beginning and end of protected time by slapping the table once. Debaters cannot offer POIs in the rebuttal speeches (the last two speeches).

A debater applies for a POI by standing and saying “Information” or “Point of Information.” The speaker may accept it or reject it. If she rejects it, she indicates this by gently waving a hand downward, signaling that the opponent should sit, or by saying “No, thank you.” The speaker can use either method, although the the hand gesture is
preferred as it is less disruptive for the speaker. If she accepts the POI, the speaker simply says “Yes” or “I’ll take your point.”

More than one person on a team can request a point of information at any one time. A rejection by the speaker applies to all opponents attempting a point at that time.

If the speaker accepts a point, the opposing team’s point may not last longer than 15 seconds. The speaker accepts only a single point at a time. The person making a POI may not interrupt the speaker’s answer, ask a two-part question, ask a follow-up question, or make any other comment unless the speaker agrees to it by accepting another point of information.

A heckle is an interruption of a speaker during her presentation. Heckles are designed to communicate brief but meaningful information about an issue to the judge. The PDP format encourages responsible heckling. Debaters heckle to applaud teammates and opponents before and after their speeches as a sign of respect and support for participating in a difficult competition. Debaters may also cheer the good arguments of their teammates by pounding the table and shouting “Hear! Hear!” They may show their displeasure with an opponent’s speech by saying “Shame!”

Heckles may be only one or two words. Disruptive heckling, that is, four or more words or interruptions that are nonargumentative, are not permitted.

**Understanding the Rules:**
The PDP format has no rules about how many POIs you should accept (a guideline is to accept at least two). Similarly, no rules are in place about how many points you should offer (but participants should attempt to make points as appropriate). If you take so many points that your speech becomes unfocused and confusing, you have lost control of the floor and will be scored accordingly. Similarly, if you do not take and respond to at least a couple POIs, you have failed to demonstrate mastery of the format and will be scored accordingly.

Points of information and heckling are included in the PDP format to encourage impromptu argumentation and the development of advanced public speaking skills. They make the debate exciting, interactive, and fun. You can use these techniques to remain involved in the debate both before and after your speech. Because heckling is permitted in all speeches, it also provides the opposition team an opportunity to offer a brief but necessary rejoinder during the proposition rebuttal (the last speech in the debate). Using POIs and heckling ensure that both teams are included in all speeches in the debate.

POIs and heckling must be used carefully to communicate with the judge and may never be used to distract a speaker or continually interrupt a presentation. The judge may reward individual speakers and teams for the effective use of points of information and heckling or deduct points for rude behavior.
Judge Training and Decision Making

The Rules
Every Public Debate Program judge must be certified to judge at competitions. College students and other adults are eligible to become judges, but high school students cannot judge high school debates.

Judges are expected to decide the outcome of a debate carefully and impartially. If a judge believes she cannot decide a debate fairly, she must remove herself from judging. Judges are never assigned to hear debates by students from their own school. Judges must take notes using a flowsheet and are responsible for ensuring accurate timing of the debate.

The judge must decide the winning side of the debate—the team that argued successfully on the topic. There are no ties. If the proposition team proves its case for the motion, the judge should reward them, if not, the win goes to the opposition.

In addition to deciding the winning team, a judge must award individual points to each debater. Participants are rated on a scale of 0–100 points, with 100 awarded for a perfect performance. The judge considers public speaking, argumentation, and teamwork skills in assigning individual speaker points. Judges must use the official MSPDP rubric to assign points. A judge may give the same number of points to more than one participant.

After careful deliberation, the judge will complete a ballot, a record of the debate given to her by the tournament host. On the ballot, she provides a detailed description of the reasons for her decision and gives additional comments to help debaters improve. She will then announce the outcome of the debate to the participating teams. She also will explain the reasons why a particular side won and provide some constructive oral criticism.

Understanding the Rules
The Public Debate Program is the only debating program in the United States that requires training and certification of judges. It is also unique in requiring the judge to reveal and explain the decision to participants at the conclusion of every debate. At first, insisting on disclosure might seem odd—after all, in a soccer game, officials don’t hide who made goals. But in nearly all secondary school debate formats in the United States, judges do not have to reveal debate results to students or give feedback to assist students in future performances. Consequently, many do not.

The PDP strongly believes in the educational and social values of transparency. You learn best when judges fully reveal their rationales and offer feedback to help you hone your public speaking and argumentation skills for future debates. Also, you are more likely to fully absorb their comments immediately after the debate when your speech is still firmly in your mind.
Transparency encourages judges to be accountable for their decisions. A judge is more likely to consider the arguments from both sides when she must explain her decision to both teams. Finally, announcing the outcome of each debate helps correct errors in tournament results. Although errors are infrequent, they do happen. Disclosure of the debate results can help students and schools get the right awards for their performances.

**After the Debate**

**The Rules**
Once the debate is over, participants are encouraged to discuss the results with the judge and ask her advice on how to improve their debating skills. No debater is permitted to dispute the judge’s decision, however. If a participant has a complaint about a judge’s behavior during the debate, he should speak to his coach, who may then raise the matter with the appropriate tournament officials.

**Understanding the Rules**
A judge’s decision is final. To proceed otherwise is to undermine the system of mutual and professional respect that makes debating programs possible. Judges are human. Thus, each one may watch a debate and make a slightly different decision for slightly different reasons. At first, this may seem unfair. But judging debates is more art than science. All educated people do not listen to a politician’s speech and arrive at the same opinion. Why? Because communication is a complicated enterprise. Successful debaters are able to win no matter who is judging; blaming a poor performance on judging is a beginner’s mistake.