

NEW ZEALAND SCHOOLS' 
Debating Council



How to Judge Debates

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INTRODUCTION

This guide will help judges (adjudicators) of secondary school debates to reach fair and reasonable decisions, prepare and deliver reasons for their decisions (oral adjudications), and provide speakers with appropriate feedback.

It will be of use to judges, teachers, and coaches in local competitions, as well as judges preparing for regional and national championships.

The guide uses, as its starting point, material prepared for judges attending the World Schools Debating Championships. This material has then been tailored to reflect the New Zealand context.

If you have any questions about the content of this guide or any other matter, please email New Zealand Schools' Debating Council at council@debating.org.nz

GENERAL OVERVIEW

Overview of the World Schools Debating Style

Debating in New Zealand schools uses a style developed for the World Schools Debating Championships (WSDC). This may be familiar as “Russell McVeagh Style” due to that law firm’s longstanding support for debating in New Zealand.

Structure of the debate

In this style, there are two teams of three speakers – the proposition/affirmative team and the opposition/negative team. Each speaker speaks for eight minutes.¹ Speakers should not speak for more than 15-20 seconds beyond their allotted time.

Between the first and seventh minute of each speech, speakers are able to accept Points of Information (POIs) – short, structured interjections from the opposing team (15 seconds max).

At the end of the debate the first or second speaker of each team delivers a four minute summary speech. These speeches may not contain new arguments.

What each team needs to do to win

The burden on the affirmative team is to defend a topic, called a motion or a moot, taking the position suggested by the motion and providing arguments in support.

The negative team takes the position contrary to the affirmative team and provides arguments that explain why they are not correct (rebuttal), and against the motion more generally.

The affirmative team wins if they show that the position in the motion is generally good and correct, and loses if the negative team is able to raise to show otherwise.

¹ In some regional and junior competitions this speaking time is shortened to six minutes, with three minute reply speeches.

Role of each speaker

Within each team, each speaker has a defined role. The first speaker introduces the team's case, provide the most important substantive/constructive material and (if first negative) some rebuttal.

The second speaker will provide about four minutes of solid rebuttal (aiming to take down all the other side's substantive material) and then provide another four minutes of new substantive material that develops the material already presented.

The third speaker will then deliver eight minutes of rebuttal designed to conclusively win all of the "live" issues in the debate, usually by breaking the debate down into a few discrete chunks (themes/issues).

At the end the leader of the team (the first or second speaker) will deliver a four minute reply that attempts to spin or frame the whole debate in a compelling way that sways the judge, by emphasising strengths and minimising weaknesses.

Role of the judge

Debating is a competition, and the role of the adjudicator is to:

- **Act as the match official** – ensuring the rules of the competition are followed. Sometimes they will be assisted in this task by a chairperson and/or timekeeper, but it is ultimately the judge's duty to keep order.
- **Determine the winner of the debate and assign points** – as with other subjective/technical sports like boxing or gymnastics, debating relies on the determination of an independent judge to decide who wins a round.
- **Provide feedback** – unlike most other sports, adjudicators in debating are expected to provide detailed feedback to the teams after each round. This reflects debating's diverse perspectives, and the expertise of the judges.

The characteristics of a good judge are:

- **Impartial and unbiased** – not judging teams based on who they are or what side of a topic they have been allocated.
- **Observant and detached** – willing to listen carefully to what is said during the debate, and not inserting their own views and analysis into the debate.
- **Aware** – possesses a basic knowledge of current affairs, but not to the extent their own specialist knowledge interferes with their assessment debate.
- **Constructive** – recognises that debating should be fun, that teams always deserve respect, and that every result (win or loss) is an opportunity for the speakers to learn.

The judge should aspire to embody the average reasonable person – they don't have pre-formed views on the topic, and resist sophistry, deception or logical fallacies. They are open-minded and willing to be convinced by the debaters who provide the most compelling case for or against a certain policy.

THE PROCESS OF JUDGING

Refereeing the match

Judges are responsible for enforcing order, as per the rules of each debate format. For WSDC style this means:

- Ensuring that speakers keep to the allotted time – 8 minutes for main speeches and 4 minutes for replies. After a 15 second grace period, speakers should receive clear time signals (e.g., a bell or claps) to indicate they need to end their speech.
- Recognising the current speaker's control of the floor – reminding speakers to not offer POIs during the first and last minutes of main speeches, and intervening if a POI significantly exceeds the allowed 15 seconds or if the offerer begins to engage in a back-and-forth with the speaker.
- Maintaining decorum by intervening if someone in the debate (or in the audience) is disruptive (e.g., talking over the current speaker, bullying behaviour etc).

When judging schools debating, remember that the speakers are both inexperienced – and so occasionally test boundaries– but also particularly deserving of respect and proper behaviour from the others in the debate. Judges should feel comfortable intervening to ensure that decorum is maintained, and the debate is fun and fair. For example, letting a speaker who is panicking know that it's okay to sit down if they have nothing more they can say, or asking speakers on the bench to quieten down.

Debating should be an inclusive environment where people from diverse backgrounds can be comfortable. If a speaker says things that are discriminatory or derogatory judges should, at the appropriate time (between speeches or during feedback), explain to the speaker that what they said is not appropriate.

Note – being offensive or insensitive is not independent grounds for judging a debate. Saying offensive things is unpersuasive because the arguments are analytically unsound, or alienating to the audience, and the appropriate penalty should naturally 'fall-out' of the process of judging without additional penalty.

Deciding who won the debate

There are no draws in debating, and so a winner must be declared. When deciding who won, judges should think about the teams holistically – they shouldn't simply assess each speaker in a vacuum and tally-up the total speaker points of each team.

At the simplest level the question to ask is, *has the affirmative team shown that their case (as per their definition of the motion) is good in a significant majority of cases*. In turn, the negative team need to cast reasonable doubt on the case –that it is not good in either the most important cases, or a significant minority of cases.

If doing well, the affirmative team will define the motion clearly (either explicitly or implicitly) and in a way that aligns reasonably with what was intended, describe the status quo, and explain

their solution (including any particular changes they want to make) to solve the problem or issue underpinning the debate.

The negative team can either purely refute the affirmative team (by showing that what they're saying is wrong), or stand for something, perhaps the status quo, in the alternative (the latter approach being far more common).

Speakers on each side will contribute to this question by providing new constructive arguments (critical in first and second, and rarely effective at third), making rebuttal (critical in every speech except the first affirmative, but a bigger focus in later speakers), and by explaining how the various arguments and examples come together into a few overall issues that form the cruxes of the debate (a key role of the third speakers and the replies).

More information on how to assess the individual components of each speech (style, content and strategy), and give appropriate speaker scores, is covered later on.

Explaining the result and giving feedback

After deciding who won the debate, and completing their score sheet (ballot) judges need to explain the result and the reasons for the decision (through an oral adjudication), and give feedback to the teams.

When giving an oral adjudication, judges should briefly describe what happened in the debate (focusing on the key issues/cruxes of the debate important for the outcome) and how the judge(s) weighed them. Save commentary on what could be improved for feedback – debaters will become confused if, for example, judges begin to explain an alternative argument they could have made while still giving the oral adjudication.

Oral adjudications should be short (aim for 5 minutes), focussed on the key issues, the contributions of each team to each issue, and an explanation about why the judges saw each issue fall the way it did. While not mandatory, it is good practice to announce the result before explaining the reasons, as this will make the adjudication easier to explain (as you won't be trying to obscure the result to maintain tension).

After the oral adjudication is complete, judges should then enter 'coaching' mode, and offer both teams constructive feedback. Generally it is best to focus on 1 -2 key pieces of feedback for each speaker, backed with clear examples of what 'good' would look like. It is helpful to point out things the speakers did well, but attempts to sugar-coat areas for improvement is seldom helpful, and can prevent speakers from focusing on what they need to work on.

BREAKING DOWN THE JUDGING CRITERIA

The three main criteria, assigning scores, and completing the ballot

In the WSDC style there are three main criteria for the judge to assess and score – style, content and strategy.

- **Criteria one – style** – How the presentation of content by the speaker enhances or detracts from its persuasiveness. A speaker with good style is clear, interesting,

charismatic, and persuasive in a way that makes them seem more credible, compelling, and their analysis more important.

- **Criteria two – content** – Content marks are awarded for making effective and logical arguments, presenting relevant and compelling examples, and having strong rebuttal. Speakers should be aiming to make sophisticated arguments, explaining all of the links that lead from premise to conclusion, and doing so in a systematic and logical way.
- **Criteria three – strategy** – Strategy is a measure of the speaker's ability to structure their speech in a way that maximises the effectiveness of their material. Good strategy marks come from having good internal timing and structure, handling POIs in a way that minimises disruption to the speech, and by prioritising important material over unimportant material.

After assessing each criteria, the judge allocates speaker points. The winning team will always receive more (i.e., no 'low point wins'). The marking sheet (or "ballot") in this format gives each speaker a mark out of 100. This marking range is further constrained by rule to 60 to 80.

Within this range, speaker scores are broken down into the three criteria: 40 points for style, 40 points for content and 20 points for strategy. Applying the 60 to 80 range, this equates to 24-32 for style and content, and 12-16 points for strategy. Thus, an "average" speech receives a score of $28+28+14=70$.²

Allocating half marks (e.g., 13.5) is permitted. There is also an option to moderate the final score (by -2, -1, +1 or +2) for POIs offered – covered in a later section.

Style

How to assess style

Style deals with how content is presented. It includes assessing the effectiveness of body language, pace of speech, choice of vocabulary, eye contact, use of humour and empathy, and the overall confidence and presence of the speaker.

There are many good styles, and speakers can be engaging and persuasive in lots of different ways. Good style makes a speech clear, easy to follow, interesting, compelling, and persuasive.

Good style complements and enhances the effectiveness of content. It helps arguments and analysis get through to the audience, helps them understand what is said, and draws them into the speech.

Elements of good style include:

- **Eye contact** – the speaker is able to address and engage with the audience, reading *through* notes rather than *from* them.

² 'Average' here refers to all speeches in this format globally. This is why it is important to judge many debates, and calibrate scoring over time.

- **Gestures** – natural movements that enhance, rather than distract from what the speaker is saying.
- **Stance** – facing the audience, with a calm and confident posture, and limited movement (e.g., pacing) that could be distracting to the judge or audience.
- **Speed** – speaking at a pace that allows the judge and audience to listen and engage with what is being said, and using deliberate variation in speed to emphasise important parts of the speech and maintain interest.
- **Voice modulation** – varying volume and tone for emphasis, or to keep the speech interesting and engaging. Includes the use of pauses for effect.
- **Clarity of language** – using vocabulary, language, and phrasing that is clear, easily understood, and used to evoke emotions or compel the audience.

It is not appropriate to consider the speakers command of the English language, or their accent, unless this presents a genuine barrier to understanding what is said.

Style scoring rubric

24 (-4)	Very flawed presentation, very difficult to follow or listen to. Style makes it impossible to follow content. At times unintelligible.
25 (-3)	Many significant flaws make the speech difficult to follow or listen to. Style significantly impacts negatively on content and ability to convince.
26 (-2)	Flaws are significant and impact negatively on ability to explain content or to convince.
27 (-1)	Able to communicate adequately, but with noticeable flaws that diminish content or the ability to convince.
28 (0)	Competent, can communicate, albeit with some noticeable flaws. Largely fluent. Can follow internal structure. Style does not interfere with content.
29 (+1)	Communicates well. Fluent and pleasant. Evidence of internal structure. Some flaws still evident. Style at times enhances content.
30 (+2)	Communicates well. Pleasant, engaging and convincing. Easy to follow, well-structured and compelling. Fluent. Some very minor flaws. Style generally enhances content.
31 (+3)	Communicates very well. Very pleasant and engaging to listen to and very convincing. Very well structured. Fluent. Style enhances content, with very few minor flaws.
32 (+4)	Style is superlative. Convincing, fluent, and very pleasing communication. Very well structured, with real presence and an ability to connect with the audience. Style enhances content to a large degree.

Content

How to assess content

The content criteria covers the material presented – evaluating the arguments and analysis made, and examples presented, as if they were written down rather than presented as a speech.

Covers both constructive material, but also rebuttal of the other side’s arguments. Includes both the quality of the analysis (the sufficiency of the logical linkages, the quality of the explanations) and the examples presented in support (whether they were relevant and compelling).

It also includes the other material presented by the speaker – the analysis accompanying their definition of the motion, the context they present for the debate, and the conclusions they reach.

Good arguments are substantiated rather than asserted. Good conclusions are connected to the argument and the motion, and explained fully rather than simply stated. Good examples are relevant, drawn from credible contexts or sources, and general rather than personal or overly specific.

Good rebuttal attacks the specific arguments the opposition made, rather than misrepresenting the argument, or attacking the argument partially or tangentially. It logically explains the response, rather than simply asserting that the original argument is false.

In addition:

- The judge is a reasonably intelligent person, and shouldn't evaluate arguments on the basis of specific personal knowledge or expertise.
- The judge shouldn't judge the quality of arguments by referencing other possible arguments the team could have made, or rebuttal the judge could have made themselves.
- The judge takes arguments as they find them, and doesn't fill in gaps or complete missing logical links on the team's behalf.

Content scoring rubric

24 (-4)	Little to no content. Logically irrelevant and totally flawed. Largely incoherent and tangential to the motion.
25 (-3)	Little argumentation. Significantly flawed, largely descriptive with major irrelevancies. Some claims may be asserted, but not substantiated with analysis.
26 (-2)	Basic argumentation evident in support of relevant claims, but significantly flawed. Some attempt to prove assertions, but not consistently and effectively. Aspects irrelevant.
27 (-1)	Basic argumentation presented in support of claims about relevant issues, but flawed. Some examples, but not fully explained, relevant or logical. Difficulty in convincing.
28 (0)	Picks out and makes arguments in support of claims about relevant issues, but inconsistent. Some use of examples that are relevant and logical.
29 (+1)	Picks out and explains claims about relevant issues. Reasonable argumentation in support of claims. Examples are logical and explained competently.
30 (+2)	Good explanation of relevant issues. Argumentation evident and sound for a large portion of claims made. Relevant examples used well and analysed.
31 (+3)	Issues canvassed and explained very well. Argumentation sound for most of the claims made. Uses examples well to back up argumentation. Very convincing.
32 (+4)	Almost flawless argumentation. Substantial analysis. Excellent use of examples. Totally convincing. Sophisticated.

Strategy

How to assess strategy

Strategy captures the decision-making and techniques used to pick what content to spend time on, and how to fit it into the overarching structure/framework of the debate. A speaker with good strategy picks the critical issues then prioritises their time, structures their speech, and chooses their examples and arguments in a way that reflects this importance.

Speakers with poor strategy will focus on the wrong things and on irrelevant details, have poor time management, and contradict themselves or others in their team.

The strategy category is also used to reward (and/or penalise) the visible evidence of good strategic decision making by the speaker. This includes:

- The interpretation of the motion and how this has been translated into a case (e.g., the effectiveness of the model, the grounds chosen to emphasise or to reasonably exclude, the context presented etc.).
- The visible prioritisation of material in the speech – the ordering of the points made, the time allocated to each argument, and the things the speaker chooses to emphasise being aligned to what is important to the debate.
- Decision-making around when and how to accept POIs (although the actual quality of the response is marked under Content), the specific examples used, and the strategy employed in the introductions and conclusions of speeches.
- How well structured the speech is – is there a clear beginning, middle and end, with signposts along the way to help the audience follow-along.
- Consistency between arguments, and with the rest of the team.

Strategy is the appropriate category to use to reward speakers who demonstrate a sophisticated or insightful understanding of the 'meta debate' – i.e., the debate as a competition, rather than simply a contest of ideas.

Strategy scoring rubric

12 (-2)	Little to no understanding of issues. Timing and structure very problematic. Little to no fulfilment of role. Significant contradictions. Evidence of little understanding of the structure of the debate, or the need for a coherent strategy.
13 (-1)	Attempts to grasp issues, but inconsistent. Problems with timing and structure. Problems with role fulfilment. Limited strategic insight demonstrated.
14 (0)	Shows some understanding of issues. Knows role and fulfils some aspects. Some flaws. Very basic strategic understanding of the debate demonstrated.
15 (+1)	Understands and articulates issues. Good structure and timing with minor flaws. Fits into debate structure and role is fulfilled. Some strategic flourishes.
16 (+2)	Excellent understanding and articulation of issues. Timing perfect. Fits very well into debate structure, with role well fulfilled. A number of strategic flourishes or insights demonstrated.

Points of information

Members of the other team have the opportunity to offer the speaker brief questions addressing what the speaker is saying. These 15 second interjections are POIs.

POIs provide immediate engagement between the speaker and the opposing team, and can provide strategic advantage.

For the speaker, responses to POIs should be assessed as part of the Content score. The speaker's decisions about when to accept a POI offered may contribute to assessment of their Strategy score (e.g., a speaker taking a POI in the middle of making a good argument might be demonstrating poor strategy, similarly refusing to take sufficient POIs is penalised in the strategy column).

Speakers should ideally accept two POIs per speech, assuming there is a sufficient flow of Points being offered.

Each speaker's overall contribution to the debate through POIs may be acknowledged in the Point of Information Adjustment Column. This allows for a modification of their total speaker score by -2, -1, +1 or +2, if the quality of the Points offered is significantly different from the quality of the speaker's speech.

For example, if a speaker gave an average speech (receiving a 70), but offered a large number of very strong POIs, you may use the Adjustment Column to increase their overall score to 71 or 72. Similarly, a speaker who delivered a very strong speech (e.g., a 77) but who offered counterproductive POIs that undermined their case may receive a -1 or a -2 adjustment (resulting in a final score of 75 or 76).

This Adjustment cannot be used to exceed the 60 to 80 points marking range.

JUDGING TIPS

Key things to keep in mind

The exact wording of the topic is not important. As long as the definition is reasonable, the debate is about what the affirmative set it up to be about.

Sometimes a definition is unreasonable – it does 'violence to the wording of the motion'. For example, by being unfairly limited to extreme or self-serving examples, or a complete non sequitur. This is sometimes referred to as 'squirrel'.

If there is a squirrel, the debate continues. The negative team should, early on in their first speech, point out the unfairness of the definition. From that point on, however, they need to change their case to address it. In nearly all cases the negative team will enjoy a significant advantage, because the squirreled definition usually leads to a trivial or unpersuasive affirmative case. There is no need to further penalise the affirmative team.

There is no right style for a speaker to use. Speaking with an accent is not bad style – everyone has an accent. Part of debating is getting good at listening to people from a range of backgrounds and nationalities.

This is not to say that style is unimportant. Far from it – clear, compelling and confident style can tremendously enhance the quality of the arguments presented. Style and content are given equal weighting on the ballot, and your assessment of each speaker should reflect this.

One of the most difficult parts of judging debates is correctly recognising the different weights of arguments, and how competing arguments interact within issues. Don't think of debates or points like they're on a set of scales. Winning two points of clash, but losing a third, doesn't necessarily win a team a debate. Think of it more like a tug of war. Did this point take the affirmative team over the line, or did the negative team pull it back?

Some points don't need to be simply won or lost. Imagine that the affirmative needs to prove that there is a moral duty to do something. The negative might raise reasonable doubt and 'parry' that point, but at the end of the debate we're not sure overall, or the point is drawn. However, if establishing the moral duty was critical to the affirmative team's case (for example, because they argued that practical outcomes should be ignored in favour of the moral duty), this draw could be enough for them to lose the debate overall.

Equally, losing some points can mean that other contingent arguments can't come into play. For example, they may have proven that a given change would result in three benefits, but they also need to have proven that that change would actually occur as a consequence of implementing the motion.

Tips and tricks

Feel comfortable rewarding a first affirmative speaker for saying things that the negative are never going to disagree with, but which are important to setting up a good debate. For example, even if both teams ultimately agree that a given right or duty is important, the first affirmative may have done good work establishing this in a way that makes the negative team's concession or agreement more costly.

In some debates there might truly be just one point upon which the debate turns. If so, there is no need to generate two more to reach an imagined target.

Feel free to do it your own way. New Zealand judges have many different approaches. Some write very few notes, some take a very long time to decide, some use different coloured pens, and some use just one sheet of paper.

Go with your gut. A good judge will know who has won a debate just from having watched it carefully, and thought about it as it goes. That's not to say that some judges don't benefit from taking a long time after the debate to review their notes, but many find it more straightforward to come to a conclusion and complete the ballot while the debate is fresh in their mind.

Don't insert yourself in the debate (for example, by rejecting an argument because of personal taste or specialist knowledge). However, if an argument plainly wouldn't make sense to the average reasonable person, it isn't persuasive. Similarly, the average reasonable person will notice if an argument addresses the opposition's case whether or not teams point out that it has that effect. Genuine contradictions should similarly be penalised, even if not pointed out by the other team (although the other team may be rewarded for doing a good job of explaining the contradiction).

Giving an oral adjudication

An oral adjudication is difficult to give. Judges are assessed just like debaters and, like a debater, your oral adjudication has to have authority, clear and compelling language, good pace, and all of the persuasiveness we expect from a speaker.

Don't be arrogant and disrespectful to teams.

Don't be overly lengthy in adjudication. The debaters know what their points were, and they don't really need to be reminded about the minor or obvious ones. The bulk of what you say needs to be assessment of the debate, not a rehash.

On the other hand, don't be too quick to dismiss things either if it was clearly important to one or both teams. An irrelevant point, if one team thought it critical, will need to be briefly addressed to convince that team of its irrelevance.

The debate will have evolved and likely moved away from the specific clash the debaters expected or wanted. You don't have to assess the debate using the framework or structure of the points the first speakers set out, and probably won't do that very often.