



A Guide to Public Forum Debate

Introduction

Association for Global Debate Public Forum debate is based on American Public Forum debate. Public Forum debates contain elements of preparing and delivering researched speeches; critiquing and responding to another teams arguments in the moment; and the comparison and synthesis of complex arguments. Our debates are designed to give an exciting and intellectually demanding experience while being accessible to an intelligent high school student or an informed citizen.

Public Forum (or PF) style debates were first introduced in 2002, and was originally known as “Ted Turner” style debate, after the famous American journalist. Public Forum was created in response to the perceived inaccessibility and insularity of the other formats in American debating, which had seen a significant rise in the use of jargon, rules technicality, rapid rate of delivery, and increasingly obscure arguments. Making them increasingly removed from the sorts of compelling discussion they were supposed to model.

Public Forum Debate pits two teams comprised of two people against each other. Teams are given a topic well in advance, which they normally debate several times over the course of a competition and season. Teams advocate that the resolution or topic, is either true or false with the sides being determined randomly. The sides are called “pro” and “con”, also known as “affirmative” and “negative”. Teams prepare cases for both sides of the topic in advance with an emphasis on research and in-depth argumentation.

Note that our Public Forum has two minor differences from the standard American usage. We allow one additional minute for constructive speeches, making them 5 minutes in length, in order to allow teams to offer more developed reasons and arguments. We also give teams 4 minutes of preparation time to use during the debate rather than 2.



1. Public Forum Topics

Topics often focus on controversial issues that have appeared in recent headlines or in public discourse.

They may be propositions of policy, value, or fact, and usually track current events.

For instance, the US September 2011 resolution was “Resolved: Allowing deep water offshore drilling is in the best interest of the United States,” which came shortly after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

Public Forum topics often give one side the burden of defending the status quo to some extent (meaning the current state of affairs in terms of a particular issue or policy).

2. Coin flips

Prior to the start of every round, teams will flip a coin. The winner of the coin flip will decide EITHER what side to advocate (Pro or Con on the resolution) or speaking order (whether their team speaks first or second). The loser of the coin flip will make the remaining choice. For instance, if Team X chooses to the Pro side, their opponents, Team Y, may choose whether they wish to speak first or second.

These choices are an important strategic consideration in the debate. For example: Teams may choose a side because they have stronger cases or more robust strategies for that side of the topic. On the other hand, there are distinct advantages of speaking first or last. If your team speaks first, you may find it easier to “frame” the debate in a way that benefits your side, since your case is heard first and the presumption will be that any definitions or observations you offer about the resolution are true unless explicitly refuted by your opponents. On the other hand, speaking second can be helpful, because your team gets the “last word” in the round and a chance to respond to the other side’s case.

After the coin toss, the teams should sit down in their allocated positions in front of the judge, with the first Team on the judge's left side.

3 .Constructive Speeches – The First Two Speeches

In Public Forum, each team has five minutes to present their initial arguments at the start of the debate. These two speeches, often called “cases,” are generally prepared in advance and lay out the main arguments that will be debated for the rest of the round.

Cases are made up of five main parts:

- ✧ A very short introduction.
- ✧ A definition of important terms in the topic.
- ✧ A framework that explains how the judge should decide the winner of the round.
- ✧ Contentions that explain why your side of the topic is true.
- ✧ A short concluding statement.

Introductions are simple: just state what the topic is, what your side is and your main points. Judges won't vote for you based on your introduction, so there's not much to be gained from a long-winded introduction.

Definitions are also fairly simple. Identify difficult or unclear words in the topic and define them. You can use a dictionary, encyclopedia, expert quotation, or make up your own definition. Definitions should be clear and fair to both sides, but it may be strategically beneficial to use a particular definition, depending what side you are on, to shape the debate in the direction you that benefits you. As definitions can be controversial be ready to defend your definitions.

Frameworks are a bit more challenging. A framework, or criteria, tells the judge how to decide if the topic is true or not, or how to decide which arguments are the most important.

For example, if the topic was “Arsenal is a better soccer team than Chelsea,” then we would need a framework that would tell us what makes a soccer team good. Is it good management? Fast strikers? A nimble keeper? Having an amazing star player? Similarly, if the topic was “On balance, the rise of China is beneficial to the interests of the United States,” we would have to figure out what the interests of the United States are. Our framework would tell us how to determine what those interests are. Are economic interests the most important? Or are security interests more important? Do long-term interests matter more than short-term interests?

Frameworks can also address moral considerations, for example in some circumstances you might want to say that the debate should be decided based on the greatest benefit to the greatest number of people, or based on justice, or some other principle.

Finally, there are **contentions**. These are the main arguments that you are presenting for your side of the debate, reasons to believe a particular proposal is good, or a statement is true. Generally a constructive case should contain 2 or 3 main contentions, as having too many means you will not have time to explain them in enough detail to prove them. However contentions that make broad arguments may be subdivided into sub-points.

Cases should focus on developing high-quality arguments, backed up with properly cited evidence and facts from reputable sources. A complete argument has three basic components: a claim, a warrant, and an impact.



Claims

A **claim** or “tagline” of an argument is a statement, usually limited to one or two sentences, that, if true, would affirm or negate the resolution. This is what you are trying to prove is true in that contention.

Warrants

A warrant is the proof offered for the claim. Warrants are reasons to believe that the claim is true. Several things can improve a warrant:

A. Depth

Arguments with “deep” warrants generally prevail over ones with superficial warrants. A warrant is “deep” if it can answer the question “why?” multiple times. For instance, let's look at the claim that deep-water oil drilling is not in the best interests of the U.S. because it is bad for the environment. One potential warrant would point to the possibility of catastrophic oil leaks and spills. A very shallow and unpersuasive way to warrant our claim would be:

“Deep-water drilling increases the risks of a catastrophic oil spill, such as the Deepwater Horizon spill, which was bad for the environment.”

This warrant only answers the question “why?” once. We need to go deeper by explaining why deep-water drilling increases the risk of spillage and how specifically spills harm the environment. A deeper version of our warrant would be:

“Deep-water drilling increases the risks of a catastrophic oil spill because the conditions in deep water are very harsh. Extremely cold temperatures cause malfunction in important safety components, because ice forms in containment domes that collect spilled oil and clog the domes' passageways that siphon away spilled oil.”

This warrant answers the question “why?” three times: it explains why deep drilling is bad for the environment (spills), why deep drilling causes spills (harsh conditions interfere with safety equipment), and why harsh conditions interfere with safety equipment (ice formations clog them).

B. Use of Reliable Evidence

Reliable evidence, from well respected sources or qualified experts, bolsters warrants significantly, particularly when the warrant is empirical, rather than analytical. An empirical warrant relies on a fact or particular worldly phenomenon that is not common knowledge.

Our warrant about ice formations and deep-water drilling is deep, but our warrant is very specific and empirical in nature. Since we are not experts on hydrocarbon extraction, our warrant would be much stronger with a quotation from an expert. A strong version of our warrant would be:

“Deep-water drilling increases the risks of a catastrophic oil spill because the conditions in deep water are very harsh. Extremely cold temperatures cause malfunction in important safety components. Remy Melina of Nova Science Publishers writes that, “Another reason for the danger is the harsh offshore environments that pose engineering challenges to offshore drilling equipment. Severe weather, ice and storms pose risks to the functionality of the rigs, and their distance from land make it harder for additional rescue personnel to promptly reach the areas in emergency



situations. The inexperience of oil companies at operating at these depths is a third issue. BP Chief Operating Officer Doug Suttles acknowledged that many of his company's efforts to stop the oil leak failed because they had never had to plug a well at such depths and were therefore unprepared for the conditions that foiled their attempts – including ice formation inside of the original containment dome due to freezing deep water temperatures.”⁷ In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, David Valentine, a UC Santa Barbara geochemist, said that ice-like hydrate formations “form quickly below 1,500 feet as the water temperature decreases and pressure increases. Oil and gas spurting near the seafloor and mixing with seawater could be particularly conducive to [icy] hydrate formation.”⁸

8 - Bettina Boxall and Julie Cart, 5-9-2010, “Oil Containment Dome Hits a Snag,” The Los Angeles Times, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/may/09/nation/la-na-oil-spill-20100509>

9 - Oxford Economics, “Potential Impact of the Gulf Oil Spill on Tourism,” Special Report Prepared for the U.S. Travel Association, 2010. 10 Neil McMahon, as quoted by Tom Bergin in “Cost of Oil Spill Could Exceed \$14 Billion,” Reuters, May 2, 2010. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/05/02/us-bp-oilspill-costs-idUSTRE6412H820100502>

Now we have a truly solid warrant that is deep and buttressed with a qualified expert assessment.

C. Clarity

Be careful that your warrants are clear. When you are giving a three-layered reason for a claim, things can easily get confusing. Be sure that it is clear why exactly your warrants prove your claim true.

It can help to think about your arguments as a can of small steps leading step by step to a conclusion. Each step should be very small and clearly lead on to the next one. E.g. “A is true because B. B is true because C. C is important because D.”

D. Uniqueness

There are a few advantages to having creative or unique reasons for why your claims are true. Your judge may have heard the same argument several times in previous debates, but your warrants offer a refreshing take on the argument. Your opponent may be prepared to answer the more common warrants for your arguments but will have more trouble with unfamiliar, more creative warrants. Though, obviously, you should not sacrifice the actual quality of your arguments for the sake of mere novelty.

Impacts

Now that we have proven our claim true, we need an impact. Impacts answer the claim “so what?” If your argument is true, why should the judge care? Using the above example, we would need to explain why the increased risk of oil spills mean that allowing deep-water drilling is not in U.S. interests.

Debaters often forget to explain the impact of their arguments fully, and this often frustrates judges. While a judge might intuitively understand why something is important they require you to explain it in the context of the debate for it to count, as in debates very often the importance of different things is heavily contested. So you need to be very clear in explaining the implications of the arguments you make, why they are important to people in the real world and why they mean you should win the debate.

Sometimes, impacts, as well as warrants, will invoke some empirical assumption or require some facts. For instance, we might imagine that oil spills are bad for the environment, but we need scientific proof for the scientific assertion that oil spills wreak environmental havoc. Having a piece of evidence or a fact in your impact analysis also generally makes your impacts “bigger”. For instance, good impact analysis for the oil spill argument above might look like this:

Oil spills destroy important coastal ecosystems that host key species, support vulnerable economies, and protect cities from flooding. Larry West, a Congressional Deputy Chief of Staff, writes that, “Oil spills often result in both immediate and long term environmental damage. Some of the environmental damage caused by an oil spill can last for decades after the spill occurs. Here are some of the most notable environmental damages typically caused by oil spills: Oil Spills Damage Beaches, Marshlands and Fragile Marine Ecosystems Oil, spilled by damaged tankers, pipelines or offshore oil rigs coats everything it touches and becomes an unwelcome but long term part of every ecosystem it enters. When an oil slick from a large oil spill reaches the beach, the oil coats and clings to every rock and grain of sand. If the oil washes into coastal marshes, mangrove forests or other wetlands, fibrous plants and grasses absorb the oil, which can damage the plants and make the whole area unsuitable as wildlife habitat. When some of the oil eventually stops floating on the surface of the water and begins to sink into the marine environment, it can have the same kind of damaging effects on fragile underwater ecosystems, killing or contaminating many fish and smaller organisms that are essential links in the global food chain.”⁹ Besides destroying important habitats for key species and tainting the global food chain with toxic chemicals, these oil slicks decimate the tourism and fishing industries in affected areas. The BP spill caused more than \$30 billion in damage to fishing and tourism industries, according to Oxford Economics and Neil McMahon, analyst at investment firm Bernstein.¹⁰ Finally, by destroying swamps along the US coastline, oil spills make cities more vulnerable to lethal and expensive flooding, since swamps act as a buffer between storm surges and large cities, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.”¹¹

¹¹ - U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, “Economic Benefits of Wetlands,” 2006, <http://www.epa.gov/owow/wetlands/pdf/EconomicBenefits.pdf>

Now we have a complete argument! We have a 3-layered warrant and 3 diverse impacts that all sounds pretty important.

Now, you may be asking: how can I possibly fit multiple arguments into a case if I need to quote experts, particularly if their quotes are wordy? Well, you can actually shorten down your quotes. You can either underline the part of the quote you intend to read, alter font sizes, or use ellipses, so long as the full text of the quoted paragraphs is available to your opponent or judge. Let's look at a shortened version of the West evidence above:



Larry West, a Congressional Deputy Chief of Staff, writes that, “Oil spills often result in both immediate and long-term environmental damage. Some of the environmental damage caused by an oil spill can last for decades after the spill occurs. Here are some of the most notable environmental damages typically caused by oil spills: Oil Spills Damage Beaches, Marshlands and Fragile Marine Ecosystems. Oil spilled by damaged tankers, pipelines or offshore oil rigs coats everything it touches and becomes an unwelcome but long-term part of every ecosystem it enters. When an oil slick from a large oil spill reaches the beach, the oil coats and clings to every rock and grain of sand. If the oil washes into coastal marshes, mangrove forests or other wetlands, fibrous plants and grasses absorb the oil, which can damage the plants and make the whole area unsuitable as wildlife habitat. When some of the oil eventually stops floating on the surface of the water and begins to sink[s] into the marine environment, it can have the same kind of damaging effects on fragile underwater ecosystems, killing or contaminating many fish and smaller organisms that are essential links in the global food chain.”

We managed to avoid changing the content of the evidence or omitting any useful arguments, while reducing the word count of the piece of evidence from 187 to 112. Keep in mind that you only need one impact for your argument to matter, and some impacts are more self-explanatory than this one. If something results in hundreds of people dying, it is fairly obvious that is important, for more abstract harms you need to make a judgment about how much you need to explain.

However in general, if you are ever unsure if you are being detailed enough in your analysis, always err on the side of depth: judges always appreciate a few well-developed arguments to many poorly-developed ones. Also keep in mind that your arguments will always seem clearer to you and your partner than they will to someone else as you have been thinking about them and discussing them for a while, your judge is only hearing them right now, so can only get what you actually said, not what you meant.

5. Crossfire

Crossfire is based on the question and answer sessions found in televised debates or interviews, and is similar to the cross examination sessions in some other debate styles. However in Crossfire there is no designated questioner and answerer, instead both debaters can ask and answer questions. The only restriction being that the first question is asked by whoever spoke first.

When asking questions in crossfire, remember a few things:

- ✧ Stand up next to your opponent and face the judge when asking all questions. Pay close attention to any nonverbal reactions to the questions and answers, since these can offer clues about what the judge thinks. While your teammate is in crossfire, note any strong reaction the judge had during crossfire.
- ✧ Be clear and concise. Your opponent or judge will often not follow questions that are more than one or two sentences long. If you have a question with multiple parts or would like to walk your opponent through a logical progression leading to your question, break it up into separate questions. This makes your line of questioning more clear to everyone and also builds a level of agreement with your opponent that they cannot back out of.
- ✧ If your opponent asks you a particularly long or confusing question, ask them to rephrase the question. If you do not understand a particular part of the question, ask about that particular part of the question, rather than simply saying "I don't understand your question." Conversely, try to give brief but helpful answers; do not give extremely long answers to your opponent's questions.
- ✧ Do not make arguments in the form of a question. If you go on the offensive in crossfire, be sure that your questions seem like good-faith questions that either clarify the round or probe weaknesses in your opponent's case. Although it sounds obvious, many debaters do not ask real questions, but instead simply re-assert their arguments in the form of questions. Avoid questions that begin with "Wouldn't you agree that..." or "But what about my argument that..." Remember that you will never get your opponent to change their mind and agree with you by repeating your arguments, but instead you should use this time to get particular information and responses from them.
- ✧ Be polite but assertive. Avoid being condescending or sarcastic, and try to avoid outright interrupting your opponent. It is considered polite to take turns asking questions during crossfire, rather than asking many questions in a row. On the other hand, do not let them dominate crossfire if they are clearly trying to do so. If they ask you too many questions in a row, particularly unrelated ones, you might say "Now that I have answered your question..." and ask your question. If your opponent is being particularly rude, you want to highlight this by being as polite as possible, perhaps by asking "May I please ask you a question now?"
- ✧ Watch your volume and tone. It's easy to begin yelling or taking a tone that sounds angry or too aggressive. You seem more reasonable and credible if you sound calm and collected.
- ✧ Be honest. If you made a mistake in answering a question, correct yourself. Deliberately misleading your opponent in crossfire never works to your benefit.
- ✧ Make sure that you understand all of your opponent's arguments before the crossfire ends. Do not be embarrassed or afraid to ask clarification questions if you are uncertain about what an argument said.
- ✧ Respect time limits. Wrap up answers when time has elapsed, and avoid asking any new questions.
- ✧ Let your opponent ask a few more questions than you if you are clearly beating them, or they are much newer to the activity than you and do not understand your arguments. You do not want to seem mean, and no one benefits from a debate where one side doesn't understand the other.



6. Rebuttals - The Second Two Speeches

The rebuttal speeches each last for 4 minutes and are made by the other member of each team. This is where we move from pre-prepared remarks to responding to your opponent's case and defending your own case. This can be quite challenging, since you have to deal with at least ten minutes of speeches (and potentially any problems emerging from crossfire).

There is a huge variety of ways to attack an argument. But here are some general guidelines on what to do and what not to do:

Avoid personal attacks against your opponent, extremely generic responses that have no clear relevance to the argument, or very short, undeveloped answers that do not have warrants. For all of these you are wasting time because you are not disproving their arguments. If you tell me your opponent is stupid and smelly, that may be true, but that doesn't mean their arguments are wrong. Similarly if you just contradict what they are saying without giving a reason you are not giving the judges any reason to change their minds. They know that you will disagree, that's why it is a debate, for it to be worth saying you need to ass new information or arguments.

Before attacking any argument, it's important to say "where" you are making attacks by signposting, or very briefly summarizing which argument you are going to attack. Signposting should not take long (perhaps a half of a sentence or a few words or by the name of the author of a key piece of evidence in the argument).

There are two broad types of arguments you can make against your opponent's case: defensive and offensive. Defensive answers prove your opponent's argument untrue. Defensive arguments are not reasons to vote for you; they are reasons not to vote for a particular argument or group of arguments that your opponent made. Offensive answers, or turns, are reasons that the opponent's argument is not simply untrue, but that the opposite is true. Offensive arguments are reasons to vote for you, rather than simply reasons not to vote for your opponent.

You may choose to not respond to some of your opponents argument's (known as "dropping" them) if they are not sufficiently well developed to harm your case or if you are confident that your arguments will outweigh theirs. You may also save time by grouping together arguments that are similar or have something in common that you wish to attach. You can also cross-apply attacks that you have made against another part of your opponent's case.

Flowing

At this point, you might be asking, "how can I possibly keep track of all these arguments?" There is a specialized way of taking notes used in Public Forum and other forms of American debate known as "flowing." Flowing is a system where you arrange notes in the form of how the arguments interact rather than in chronological order of when things were said in the debate.

In order to flow, you will need two sheets of blank printer paper (as opposed to loose leaf paper with lines on it) and two pens with different colored ink. Pick one color for the pro side and one for the con side. Anytime that your opponents or your team makes an argument, you should write down a brief summary of it starting from the first constructive speech. Divide your sheet on paper into separate columns for each speech, and align attacks with the arguments that they were made against. Keep track of each case on separate sheets of paper to avoid confusion. You'll need to devise a set of symbols and abbreviations to speed up your flowing. For example, let's assume that Team A is affirming and speaks first against Team B, who is negating. Team B waits until their rebuttal to answer the affirmative case.



It may be a good idea to prepare answers to some common arguments on each side of the resolution, and have these responses, called blocks, either written down in note form or completely scripted (although if you do this, you must be careful that your blocks are responsive to the argument you are attacking).

7. The Summary Speeches

Summary speeches are similar to rebuttals, in that you must both respond to your opponent's attacks and extend your own offense. However, summary speeches are only two minutes long, so you cannot answer every single argument from your opponents and extend all of your case points. You must pick and choose the most important arguments in the round, and explain why they matter the most. Start thinking about the end-game of the round and how to condense the dozen or more arguments at play in the round into simple reasons to vote for you, which you will do more explicitly in the final focus.

If your opponents have attacked your case, you should defend your case and answer back their attacks during rebuttals. In order to defend your case, you must do two things: first, you must answer back their attacks, by either directly refuting them or by explaining why they do not truly respond to what your argument said. Second, you must extend and re-impact the argument that you are defending. In order to extend an argument, you must briefly summarize the claim and warrant (remember to mention any author names if you used quoted evidence), and impact the argument, by explaining why it is important, making sure to weigh your impact against the impacts in your opponent's case and their responses to your case.

You may choose to drop attacks against your case for strategic considerations, but be careful to answer any offensive answers that your opponent makes against your case, since you could lose the round by doing so! Whether you defend your case first or answer your opponents' is up to you. However, you should always make sure that you have enough time to extend one argument from your case (or, in very dire circumstances, if you must drop your entire case, make very sure to make lots of turns against your opponent's case).

The first summary speech has a slightly different set of responsibilities than the second summary speech. The team giving the first summary speech has to extend their case and uphold attacks against their opponents' case. This is the chief duty of the first summary speech. The second summary speech is different, because the other side has already extended their main arguments that they may "go for" in the last speech.

Remember that these speeches are summary speeches. Making new arguments in the summary speech is inappropriate because there is not sufficient time to fully develop these arguments, and opponents will not have a fair chance at refuting these arguments or to extend their refutations against your defense of your new argument.

Additionally, you will not have time to extend every one of your arguments in rebuttals or from your case. You will have to choose the arguments that you are most clearly winning and that have bigger impacts.

8. The Grand Crossfire

The Grand Crossfire is similar to the previous two crossfire periods, only all four debaters participate.

Remember to observe the same basic rules as before, with the team who spoke first being able to ask the first question etc. (See section 5). As it is later in the debate and involves more people the Grand Crossfire is more likely to get passionate and heated and out of control, but it is important to still follow the rules of politeness and decorum.

Both speakers from each team should participate in grand crossfire roughly equally to demonstrate their abilities. A good system is to alternate who asks the questions for each team, or to prepare a line of questions in advance. Obviously, each team should only ask one question at a time.

9. The Final Focus Speeches

The Final Focus speeches are your last chance to make an impression on a judge. These are slightly different from the other speeches in the debate as you are to engage with the details of individual arguments but discussing the whole debate and trying to convince the judge that based on what has happened so far your arguments are the most important, and you should win.

By now, you know what arguments your opponents will be attempting to win with since you'll have heard their summary speech, and possibly their final focus as well. So you should aim to defeat the arguments that they are extending into the summary speech by explaining why your answers in summary or rebuttal were superior or that your main arguments matter more.

Remember the Final Focus speech is only 2 minutes, so you won't have time to extend more than one or two arguments and need to think very carefully about what to prioritize. This is easier for the second final focus speaker, since they will have already heard the first team's final focus and exactly how they are trying to outweigh your arguments.

Remember that you need to paint the judge a clear picture of why they should vote for you. It can be useful to phrase this in terms of particular questions or issues that will determine the result of the debate.



10. Preparation Time

Teams are allotted 4 minutes of preparation time for each round to prepare responses, strategize, and confer. You may use this time at any point when a speech or crossfire is not in progress.

However you should think strategically about when your preparation time would be most useful. Generally, prep time should not be used before constructive speeches or crossfire. It tends to be most useful when you are preparing to respond to the other side, e.g. before your rebuttal speech. Make sure to keep track of how much you have left after every time you use any.

You can also use this time to look at your opponent's cases or references. Which can allow you to look at the details of their arguments and respond to them.

11. After the debate

Immediately after the debate is over you should take a moment to shake hands with your opponent's, then leave the room so the judge can begin working on their reason for decision.

It can be useful to chat with your partner about what went well in that round and what you can improve on next time. But remember to take some time to relax and unwind. Not only is this good for your mood and mental health, but extremely stressed debaters often make mistakes. Some people like to listen to music or read, others like to walk around outside the venue to clear their heads.

This is also a very good time to strike up conversations with other students who are also in between debates. Debating competitions are an excellent opportunity to meet new people who you might not otherwise meet before. Debaters are universally some of the most clever and engaging people you will meet, and you are guaranteed to have a common interest to talk about. You can always start a conversation by asking how their last round went.

Remember to keep track of when you have to be back for the next round. While our staff will try to contact missing teams it is your responsibility to be where you need to be on time. You really don't want to forfeit a round accidentally. If you are worried set reminder on your phones or timekeepers 10 minutes before the designated time so you know when you need to get going.