



Debate Fundamentals Guide

formats • motions • your first round, scripted out

a Daeva Collective guide

01 · Welcome & How to Use This Guide

Hi, and welcome! This guide from Daeva Collective is here to take you from “I’ve never debated in my life” to walking into your first round knowing what to expect. Debate looks intimidating from the outside, fast talking, confusing jargon, people slamming folders shut, but underneath all that, it’s really just structured disagreement.

What's inside

- ♥ **Part One:** the major debate formats and how each one works
- ♥ **Part Two:** how to read and break down a motion
- ♥ **Part Three:** how to build a simple, solid case
- ♥ **Part Four:** an annotated script for your actual first round

Pink star sections cover the big ideas, lavender boxes are quick-reference tips, and the gold italic lines are scripts you can practically read out loud.

02 · Part One: Debate Formats

Every debate format is really just a different set of rules for who speaks when, how long they speak for, and what they're allowed to argue. Here are the ones you're most likely to run into as a beginner.

- ♥ **British Parliamentary (BP)** — Four teams of two (Government and Opposition x2), each giving short, punchy speeches with no prep time once the motion drops.
- ♥ **World Schools Style** — Two teams of three, mixing prepared case-building with a surprise “impromptu” motion round. Known for substantive speeches plus tight rebuttal.
- ♥ **Public Forum** — Two teams of two, debating current-events topics in plain, accessible language, built for a general audience, not just debate insiders.
- ♥ **Lincoln-Douglas** — One-on-one, values-focused debate that digs into philosophical and ethical questions rather than just policy specifics.
- ♥ **Parliamentary (American Parli)** — Two teams of two with very short prep time, styled after legislative debate, often with witty, conversational delivery.

Don't worry about memorizing every rule on day one, just know which format your first round is using, and read that section closely.

03 · Comparing the Formats

Format	Teams	Prep time	Best for
BP	4 x 2	~15 min	Quick thinking, wit
World Schools	2 x 3	Prepared + 1hr impromptu	Balanced, well-rounded debaters
Public Forum	2 x 2	Days (prepared)	Current events, persuasion
Lincoln-Douglas	1 x 1	Days (prepared)	Philosophy, values
Parli	2 x 2	~20 min	Improvisation, humor

If you're not sure which format your club or tournament uses, just ask, there's no such thing as a silly question when it's your first time.

04 · Part Two: Understanding Motions

A motion (sometimes called a resolution or topic) is the statement you'll be arguing for or against. It's usually phrased starting with "This House..."

Three Common Motion Types

- ♥ **Fact** — Is something true or not? e.g. "This House believes social media use is harmful to teenagers."
- ♥ **Value** — Is something good, right, or justified? e.g. "This House believes that homework does more harm than good."
- ♥ **Policy** — Should we do something specific? e.g. "This House would ban smartphones in schools."

Key vocabulary

- ♥ **Proposition / Government** — the side arguing FOR the motion
- ♥ **Opposition** — the side arguing AGAINST the motion
- ♥ **Burden of proof** — what each side actually needs to show to win

05 · Breaking Down a Motion

Before you write a single argument, slow down and actually unpack the motion. Try this four-step process:

- 1 **1. Define the key terms** — What does each important word actually mean? Don't assume, write it out.
- 1 **2. Find the actor** — Who is being asked to do something? (a government, a school, society in general?)
- 1 **3. Spot the comparison** — What's the alternative to the motion? Debate is always a comparison between two worlds.
- 1 **4. Predict the clash** — What will both sides obviously disagree about? That's where your best arguments will live.

◆ Example

"This House would ban smartphones in schools", the actor is schools, the comparison is banning vs. not banning, and the clash is probably learning focus vs. safety/access.

06 · Part Three: Building Your First Case

A case is just an argument built carefully enough to survive being attacked. The easiest beginner structure to remember is C.E.R.I.

C	Claim	The point you're making, in one clear sentence.
E	Evidence	A fact, statistic, or example that backs up the claim.
R	Reasoning	The logic that connects your evidence to your claim — why does this evidence actually prove the point?
I	Impact	Why does this matter? Who is affected, and how much?

◆ Example

“Schools should ban phones (claim), because a 2023 study found phone bans raised test scores by 6% (evidence), since students without phones spent more focused time on classwork (reasoning), which matters most for students already struggling academically (impact).”

One solid C.E.R.I. argument beats five vague, underdeveloped ones, depth wins over quantity.

07 · Rebuttal Basics

Rebuttal is where most beginners panic, but it's just responding to the other side's C.E.R.I. with your own. Try the "This, But, Because" structure:

- ♥ **This** — name exactly which argument you're responding to
- ♥ **But** — state clearly what's wrong with it (the evidence is outdated, the reasoning doesn't follow, the impact is overstated, etc.)
- ♥ **Because** — back up your objection with your own reasoning or evidence

Four Ways to Attack an Argument

- ♥ **Attack the claim** — Show it's just not true, or not always true.
- ♥ **Attack the evidence** — Question the source, the sample size, or whether it's outdated.
- ♥ **Attack the reasoning** — Show the logic doesn't actually connect the evidence to the claim.
- ♥ **Attack the impact** — Argue it matters less than they're claiming, or that your side's impact is bigger.

08 · Part Four: Your First Round, Scripted

Here's the part that actually gets you through the door: a simple, annotated script you can adapt for your very first speech. Don't worry about sounding fancy, sounding clear and organized matters way more.

A Beginner Speech Skeleton

- 1. Greeting + state your side
- 2. Roadmap ("I'll cover two points: ... and ...")
- 3. Argument 1 (full C.E.R.I.)
- 4. Argument 2 (full C.E.R.I.)
- 5. Brief summary + thank you

09 · Sample Opening Speech

Motion: "This House would ban smartphones in schools." — arguing FOR.

◆ Script

Good [morning/afternoon], judges and fellow debaters. My name is [name], and I stand in proposition of this motion.

Today I'll be covering two main points: first, that phones damage focus and learning, and second, that banning them protects students who can't self-regulate on their own.

My first point: phones damage focus and learning. A 2023 study from the London School of Economics found that banning phones raised test scores by 6%, with the largest gains among struggling students. This makes sense, when the temptation to check a notification disappears, students naturally spend more of class actually engaged with the material. That matters because the students losing the most focus today are often the ones who can least afford to fall further behind.

My second point: a ban protects students who can't self-regulate on their own. Asking a 13-year-old to simply "use willpower" ignores how phones are deliberately designed to be addictive. A school-wide rule removes that daily battle entirely, instead of leaving it to chance.

To summarize: phones cost focus, and a ban removes a fight students shouldn't have to win alone every day. For these reasons, I urge you to vote in proposition. Thank you.

Swap in your own evidence and motion, but notice the shape: greeting, roadmap, two full arguments, summary. That shape alone will carry you through most beginner rounds.

10 · Sample Rebuttal Speech

Responding to the proposition's case above, arguing AGAINST the ban.

◆ Script

Thank you. I want to respond directly to both of proposition's points before building my own case.

This focus argument relies on one study claiming a 6% test score increase. But that study only looked at one country's schools over a single semester, we have no idea if that result holds up over time, or in schools that look like ours. Because the evidence is so narrow, it can't support the sweeping claim that banning phones is the right call everywhere.

This self-regulation argument assumes a full ban is the only protection available. But schools already have lighter tools, phone pouches during class, designated check times, that solve the same distraction problem without cutting students off from a device they may need for safety or accessibility reasons. Because a full ban isn't actually necessary to fix the problem, it ends up costing more than it gives back.

For these reasons, I urge you to vote in opposition. Thank you.

Notice the "This, But, Because" pattern repeating in both rebuttal paragraphs, once you have that rhythm, rebuttal stops feeling so improvised.

11 · Speech Timing Cheat Sheet

Section	Suggested time
Greeting + roadmap	15–20 sec
Argument 1	60–90 sec
Argument 2	60–90 sec
Summary + thanks	15–20 sec
Total (typical first speech)	3–4 min

Practice out loud with a timer at least twice before your first round, speeches almost always run longer than they feel in your head.

12 · Common Beginner Mistakes

- Arguing too many points instead of two or three strong ones
- Forgetting to actually respond to the other side's arguments by name
- Reading straight from notes instead of speaking naturally
- Skipping the impact, explaining facts without saying why they matter
- Speaking too fast out of nerves, which judges actually penalize for clarity

Every single one of these is completely normal in a first round, the goal isn't perfection, it's improvement round over round.

13 · Glossary of Debate Terms

Term	Definition
Motion	The statement being debated, also called a resolution or topic.
Proposition / Government	The side arguing in favor of the motion.
Opposition	The side arguing against the motion.
Case	The full set of arguments a team presents.
Rebuttal	A response that directly attacks the other side's arguments.
Point of Information (POI)	A brief question or comment offered to the speaking side, used in some formats.
Burden of proof	What a side needs to demonstrate in order to win the debate.
Clash	The points where both sides directly disagree, usually the heart of the round.
Floor / whip speech	Closing speeches that summarize the round rather than introduce new arguments.
Adjudicator	The judge who decides the winner of the round.

14 · Cheat Sheet & Closing

Quick Recap

- ♥ Know your format before the round starts, rules differ on timing and prep
- ♥ Break down the motion: define terms, find the actor, spot the comparison and clash
- ♥ Build arguments with C.E.R.I.: Claim, Evidence, Reasoning, Impact
- ♥ Rebut with This, But, Because, name it, fault it, back it up
- ♥ Two strong arguments beat five weak ones
- ♥ Practice your speech out loud with a timer before round one

That's everything you need to walk into your first round prepared. You will stumble over a word, forget a point, or run out of time, every debater does. What matters is that you showed up and tried. The rest comes with practice.

Made with love by Daeva Collective — a free, student-led community for research, debate, and leadership.

Questions? Reach us at daevacollective@gmail.com