A debate is a two-sided presentation of an issue with one side advocating a position and the other side negating the position. Debates may end with a “winner” who does a better job of advocating his or her side. Debates differ from forums, which usually involve more than two viewpoints and may seek a compromise as the result instead of a “winner.”

Tips When Advocating or Proposing
When advocating a topic, proposal, or resolution, you are suggesting that something is true or good, or that something should happen. When advocating a topic, it is your burden to provide proof, evidence and logic to defend your side.

1) Know what you are advocating
What type of issue are you going to be discussing? State your topic and position clearly in the opening of the debate.
- Fact – This type of issue asks a “Yes/No” or “True/False”
- Value – This type of issue asks about attitudes or beliefs.
- Policy – This issue concerns a plan or proposition and involves a course of action.

2) Know the basic argument model
If you make a statement (claim), you must have reasons (proof) to back it up. Proof can be data, statistics, logical explanation or testimony. Always give the source of your information.

3) Know how to impact arguments
After you make a claim and give proof, explain why it is important to the topic. Don’t merely repeat your claim; give reasons why the claim is important. Relate the claim back to the topic and to your position.

4) Structure your debate like a speech
Use the Introduction—Body—Conclusion model for your presentation. See our other guide sheets for more information on how to construct these parts of a speech.

5) Learn the specifics of the debate
You should know how many people will speak, the approximate length of each speech, how many times will each person speak, and if questions will be allowed. The more you know about the requirements, the better you will be able to prepare for the debate.

6) Listen carefully and take notes
Use these notes during subsequent speeches to directly answer any points and refute the ideas presented by the other side.

7) Keep your cool!
Remember it is the other person’s job to attack your ideas. Don’t take it personally.
Tips for Opposing or Defending
It is important to remember that opposing a topic does not mean that you have to take the opposite perspective. Often times you can oppose the topic by offering an alternative solution, idea, or plan.

1) Know what you are opposing
The opposition opposes the topic, the plan, or the points brought up by the other speaker. You can still prepare your speech in advance by researching the topic and deciding which stance the speaker will most likely take. Some questions to consider:
- If you oppose the topic, what is your exact stance?
- If you oppose the plan, do you have to suggest a new plan?
- If you oppose the other speaker, will you point out flaws in logic or offer other ideas?

2) Be able to identify what is wrong with the proposition
It is not enough to say something is wrong; clearly identify what the problem or error is. Consider the following common counterarguments against the speakers:
- Harm: Does the proposed idea cause a harm not mentioned?
- Solvency: Does the proposed idea actually fix the problem?
- Cost/Benefit: Does the cost of the idea outweigh the benefits?
- Barriers: Are the barriers in the system (such as laws) that will prevent the idea from working?
- Fallacies: Is the idea free from fallacious logic or errors in reasoning?

3) Be mutually exclusive
As a member of the negative side, if you suggest a different plan or idea, your plan or idea can not occur in addition to or at the same time as the affirmative side’s plan.

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5) Structure your debate like a speech
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