

HOW TO CUT PREP TIME USE

by David M. Cheshier

The amount of preparation time given to debaters varies considerably from region to region. In some areas teams receive as much as ten minutes for preparation, to be used as they wish; in others students are expected to speak without any prep time at all. At some college tournaments prep time is being merged with cross-examination periods, and teams are provided with so-called “alternative use time” which they can use for prep or questioning.

This essay is intended to advise debaters who receive some amount of time to be used at their discretion as the debate continues — is there ever enough? — and to provide some tips for using prep time more effectively.

The basic rules of prep time management are well known, and obvious to anyone who thinks about the topic for even a few minutes. Save prep time for the last speeches, to the extent possible. Devise a system to collaborate efficiently with your partner. Do as much preparing before the round as possible. Work to stay organized during the debate, both with respect to your flowsheet and your evidence. But the obvious advice can be hard to implement — sometimes one partner steals the lion’s share of prep time on account of inexperience, and teams simply settle into a routine where they always lack time late in the debate for strategic planning. And it can be difficult to solve these problems — so often I see partners in a perpetual state of war with colleagues who eat up more prep time than their “share.”

The dynamics of prep time use vary as the year continues. Every one experiences prep time allocation issues early in the season, if only because of the near-universal state of under-preparation and disorganization characteristic of the early tournaments. And I think it also easy to say that prep time problems typically tend to subside as the year goes on, as students gain greater familiarity with their major positions, and the possibility for genuine tactical or argumentative surprise is lessened through experience.

What can be done to fix chronic prep time issues? In what follows I offer twenty tips for improving your use of preparation time. Think about using a handful — no one I know effectively does all these things— and you will cut down your own

drain on time, much to your competitive benefit.

1. If your own time isn’t enough, use theirs. Often I see debaters sitting quietly as their opponents prepare, or I’ll see behaviors that clearly show a lack of concentrated attention to prep. The reluctance to do serious preparation work as your opponents work is, I suppose, understandable — “I’m not a mind reader, so how can I prep against a speech I haven’t even heard yet?” But consider the possibilities for 2NR prep work while the 1AR readies her or his speech. In fact a lot of work can be done well in advance of the actual 2NR, even without knowing exactly what the 1AR will specifically extend. There are some positions the 1AR must extend, and to a very large extent you can certainly know in advance what major responses are likely to come — after all, rebuttal speeches are not supposed to contain new arguments. You can at least think about how you will script issue overviews — your basic overview to a topicality argument, to the “critical race” critique, or business confidence will not likely be changed regardless of what the 1AR argues. Yes, some major concessions in a good 1AR will nullify large portions of the 2NR, and in those cases your work will be wasted. But for the most part advance scripting of issue overviews and argument explanations to be given on the most tricky responses (such as intricate turn stories or impact assessments) can be written in advance, saving a lot of detailed work in your own prep time block.

2. Pre-brief as much as you can. We all know that to the extent you can script yourself prior to the round you will save prep time as the debate occurs. But too often our briefs are not written for delivery; instead, they tend to consist simply of card runs. Thus my advice is to consider writing rebuttal or at least specific extension briefs for particular use in your major speeches. As a second negative fond of extending a presidential transition disadvantage, you know you will face some version of the response that the position is not unique since President Bush just this morning had his agenda captured by some event on the other side of the world. So you may as well write carefully scripted response briefs, including your most important asserted answers, eloquently and efficiently drafted.

The more you prepare before the debate, the less time you’ll need to prep during the round.

3. Convert tournament down time into preparation opportunities. At the end of most rounds I see, students rather leisurely re-file their evidence, post-mortem their just finished performance and the judges’ reaction to it, wander around to find their coach or friends, and kill time until the next pairings are released. Time between rounds should be an occasion for some relaxation, and making friends is a benefit of debate participation. But if you and your colleague step up the pace and work a little harder you’ll be surprised at how much productive work you can get done, and still have time for fun between debates. Consider this: If you worked hard and fast to re-file your evidence, you could probably free up as many as ten minutes per debate. If you did nothing more than make those new ten minutes productive, you will have added at least an hour’s work time to your weekend. Try this: Immediately after the judge concludes his or her comments, look at your flow of the major positions and at that moment script or re-script extensions for use the next time. Briefs made right at the end of the debate are typically of higher than normal value, since the issues are readily in mind. Or script extension briefs (on, say, your major disadvantage) for the three new answers you heard in the round you just debated, even if they were asserted answers. Doing this can make you completely prepped on a disadvantage by tournament’s end.

I think this idea is so important and under-utilized, that I invite you to think seriously about your current use of post-round time. Even if you feel your time is productively spent, I suspect you can squeeze ten minutes out of time you presently use to unwind at debate’s end. And here is another benefit of this idea: It will help you remember with clarity the actual arguments your opponent made. When I ask my debaters at rounds end how the team they debated answered our counterplan, they often reply with some version of “oh, they just pressed it.” I interpret that as a judgment on their part that the other team made predictable and usually asserted answers (standard permutation answers and so on). You probably say the same thing to your

(Cheslier from page 33)

own coach after the normal debate. But if you had taken the ten minutes or so necessary to pull out a piece of paper and precisely script out what you should have or did say against the particular permutation you hadn't heard before, you will save yourself the prep time later of having to rethink your responses.

4. Consider pre-flowing. I offer this tip with some trepidation, since it can be risky to flow yourself in advance, if only because the actual circumstances of debates rarely matches the pre-flow. But there are students who eat up prep time because it takes them so long to back-flow themselves after their speech, or so long to prep their speech in advance in a legible hand. Some students successfully use Post-It tape, which comes in a roughly one-inch width — perfect for pre-flowing a column's worth of talk on your flow. The beauty of Post-It tape is that after use in the round, you can peel it right off and re-attach it to the original brief for later use, although that makes your actual flow harder to understand later.

5. Take no prep for the 1NR. Some would add that the 1AR should take no prep, delivering the speech stand-up, a position I disagree with (I outlined my arguments against the stand-up 1AR in an earlier Rostrom column). But no one believes the 1NR should ever take prep time. The first negative rebuttal can be completely prepped while the 2AC and 2NC speak, and during the cross-ex of the second negative. Think about it: there is no reason at all for the 1NR to listen to or flow the 2NC, since s/he will not be extending the 2NC positions. Never, ever take 1NR prep! Sometimes students who understand this advice and intend to follow it are thrown, robbed of prep time, when the 2AC waives her cross-ex of the 2NC. So, fine, plan to be fully prepped at the closing second of the second negative constructive.

6. Allocate arguments within the negative block with an eye to saving prep time. I often see second negatives take upon themselves the most intellectually demanding arguments for their own constructive, leaving the weaker or easier arguments for their partner. We all get the reasoning — usually the 2NC is the more advanced debater, though of course not always, and many 2NC's simply don't want to trust the particulars of their argument to a colleague. But that position, which borders on or becomes arrogance, can come with a steep prep time price, as 2NC's have to eat up

minutes on the clock scripting out answers to new, tricky, or simply sophisticated 2AC answers. In response to this problem, the tip is to have a very quick conversation with your partner at the end of the 2AC, and to allocate positions in the block with consideration of prep time concerns. Let the 1NR take a major position that will require a lot of careful in-round prep. Or, if you don't trust the 1NR enough to extend the entire critique, explicitly skip over some of the demanding responses in the 2NC, leaving them for 1NR coverage.

7. Get well organized. File carefully. Know where your evidence is. Highlight your major positions, so the best evidence is pre-selected. Keep expanding files in a consistent order, so you'll always know where to find them. Double check to make sure you really have everything at round's end, and are not missing critical briefs. Copy everything before the tournament, so you don't have to run back and forth borrowing evidence from your other teams. Keep notes about your strategies, judges, and the other teams' arguments in a well-organized notebook or file folders. Every second you have to spend in a debate hunting for the new uniqueness evidence is a wasted second.

8. Write useable debate briefs. I mentioned a moment ago the problem many even talented debaters have in writing briefs that are nothing more than card runs. But another problem is that even when analytical arguments are scripted on the page, they are not well written with an eye for actual in-round use. The arguments are not sequenced from strongest to weakest, which means a student just picking up the brief in the frenzy of a constructive may stop (under time pressure) after the third answer, when the fourth is really the key. Or briefs may be written in such a way as to make it hard to keep track of what evidence is to be read as a frontline (or first speech) response, and which ought to be saved for use in the rebuttals. Consider writing second versions of important briefs on the arguments you most prefer that can be used in the 2NC or 1NR, so that as soon as you hear the "wrong forum" critique answer you'll have a perfectly scripted brief requiring no in-round prep use.

9. Script out your major theory arguments. At some point, given the practices in most of the nation's debate circuits, you will need to defend why topicality is a voting issue, why counterplan conditionality or dispositionality is justified, why critiques are reasons to reject flawed advocacy, or

the contrary views to all these claims. Script yourself out comprehensively. A danger to avoid is writing theory briefs that are too truncated, where claims are made without reasons. While no one has time to deliver a treatise on why performative contradictions are reasons to reject a particular critique, no one wants to hear an asserted blip offered without any explanation either. Why have to take prep time to rewrite your arguments about why private actor fiat is illegitimate?

10. Concentrate in-round prep time on tricky and round-deciding issues. A tip I often suggest advises the 2NC and 1AR to circle the best 2AC answers as they are delivered. That is, as the 1AC flows her or his partner giving the 2AC answers to a disadvantage, s/he should circle the best ones (and by best I simply mean the truest, most clever, or the ones the 2AC is most likely to want to extend in the last speech). Then, as the 1AR prepares to extend the disadvantage, s/he should concentrate attention on those circled arguments. Start by prepping those first, to make sure the most important arguments receive the fullest attention. Often you'll find that you can effectively extend some of the other answers without pre-scripting anything at all.

11. At home, practice giving constructives without any prep time used at all. I especially recommend this no-prep drill for practicing theory arguments. The drill does not require full practice debates. For example, you can read a critique shell, your partner can read responses (as the 2AC would), and then you should stand up immediately to give a 2NC on the position. Do this drill repeatedly. You'll be surprised at how readily you can speak persuasively in response to most arguments without elaborate prep time use. And the experience of this drill will strengthen your performance in rounds where you simply run out of time. I like the no-prep drill because it most readily reveals what my students truly understand and do not understand about the positions they're extending — there is no cover for ignorance when the prep time to figure it all out is taken away.

12. Get help from your partner during prep, but be smart about it. This is tricky, since the most tempt colleague — as in, urgently whispered, "prep me on the counterplan!" or "write out T answers for me!" That can be dangerous, since partner handwriting is notoriously bad, and since the limited time available converts even clearly written answers into cryptic taglines

(Cheslier continued to page 40)

(Chesler continued from page 37)
that cannot be easily deciphered by someone else. Some find it more productive to have their more eloquent colleagues script out the internal overview, which can work if the person speaking remembers they are reading eloquence, and not another two sentence card at light speed. Others have their colleagues script out answers but only for certain difficult responses. Still others use their colleagues to fetch evidence and responses from their opponents, or to find cards in the files. How best to use your partner depends on that person's strengths and weaknesses. Talk with your colleague about how to be most productive in working together.

13. When practicing, avoid simply rehearsing your own specialty arguments. Some of the greatest prep time disasters come when students are called upon, for whatever reason, to extend a position they do not know well. Debaters who only know one argument are obviously disadvantaged under these circumstances. The cure? Broaden your specialization during at-home practice. Don't know much about critiques, while your partner is the reincarnated Michel Foucault? Practice the argument at home anyway — it will give you a better grasp of an important position on many resolutions, and even if you rarely have to take it over or extend it, when you do you won't have to sit there for all eight or ten minutes figuring it out.

14. Make pre-round conversations prep time productive. I'm referring here to the five or ten minutes of time available immediately prior to the start of the round. Consider explicitly rehearsing the basic stories of the arguments you plan to extend in the last rebuttal. Ask yourself, "given this affirmative we're meeting, what is their strongest and likeliest answer to my self-regulation counterplan?" Or, "how are they most likely to say they are turning the link to this argument?" Then and there, right before the 1AC stands up, script out your answers. You may or may not end up using the brief you write, but certainly somewhere down the road it will save you valuable time.

15. Diagnose your own prep time catastrophes immediately. Even skilled and experienced students get into occasional debates where all the time is inexplicably eaten up for the 2NC. So, what went wrong? How will the problem be fixed the next time? What specific argument ate up all my prep time — and once identified, you and your colleague should immediately take out pa-

per to pre-prep for the next time the same issue arises. Talk with your coach about your prep time use — when in the debate is it tending to disappear? Who is using it up and for what purpose? What remedies are available? These conversations are not productive if they simply result in finger-pointing at a colleague less skilled at prep time use. Failures to allocate prep time well are team, and not individual, failures, and are not correctable by screaming at your colleague ("get up now! get up now!"), casting blame ("I hate you!"), or scripting them word for word ("OK, listen to me monkey boy! — they said this. Say these three things back!").

16. Think explicitly about ways to minimize 1AR prep time. Apart from the stand-up routine I've criticized elsewhere, it is important that the 1AR not eat up every available second. Talk with your partner about ways to solve prep time problems productively. If your partner takes forever to prep the 1AR because you are dictating every word of the speech, the fault lies equally with you. If the problem is flowing, or deciphering a flowsheet, talk about ways to fix that problem. If the problem is just that prepping takes a lot of time because the debater can't figure out what to say in response to major answers, that evidences a problem of understanding best remedied at home.

17. Think about ways to minimize the use of preparation time for the first negative constructive. The 1NC should never use more than a minute or two of prep, at most. One reason 1NCs take too much time is they sometimes feel they must carefully and completely script asserted presses against every card in the 1AC. But that is inefficient, both as a preparation strategy and as an overall strategic choice, since these so-called "pimps" rarely are round decisive. Instead of eating up prep to write assertions, have a series of well organized pre-selected arguments available. Don't think it necessary to make answers to every part of the first affirmative — concentrate your firepower on the areas of real weakness in the case (usually these weaknesses are in the solvency or impact area). Many fine debaters have gotten into the habit of converting their off-case critique arguments into on-case solvency attacks (and so, for example, evidence from the critical legal studies tradition claiming that the law is indeterminate will be read as an argument why the plan cannot solve). This can be a very productive strategy, but make sure you are not

wasting prep time figuring out what cards to read — rather, make specific solvency briefs at home including your best critique evidence.

18. In the round, work especially hard to stay focused on preparation. It is sometimes overpoweringly tempting to jump into cross-examination periods, when your partner is perfectly capable of doing their own questioning. Or, it can be easy to let the other team distract you. Concentrate, concentrate, concentrate! And if the noise levels in the room are interrupting your ability to focus clearly on the prep issues at hand, don't be shy about politely asking others in the room to quiet down.

19. Taking a little planned prep time early can sometimes save lots of unplanned prep time later. Simply planning to have a ten second conversation with your partner right after the 1AC ends where you coordinate your work, what major positions you plan to run, and who intended to go for what in the negative block, can save whole minutes of time later in trying to fix problems arising from a failure to communicate early on.

20. Have some filler ready for use in fleshing out a position late in a speech. It always helps to have some extra impact cards at hand, so that as you conclude your coverage of the disadvantage or advantage, you can quickly add one or two especially powerful cards. There is no reason in the world why the selection of these cards should take one second of your own prep time, or (as is more commonly the case) a single second of your partner's time ("quick, get me more impact cards!" or "I need more to read against the case — NOW!"). Prep these issues out before the round or even better, at home.

In-round preparation is something that can be improved by practice — after all, this is why prep time use usually gets under control as the year proceeds. So think about practicing at home to minimize your own prep time use. I mentioned and defended the idea of doing no-prep speech drills. But there are other possibilities as well. When you have practice rounds at home, force yourself to use less prep time than you routinely have available at your tournaments (so if you usually receive eight, limit prep in all your practice rounds to five). Use practice debates at home to see what happens if you make the 1AR stand up at the four minute mark — it may not be all that bad. And work, work, work! — the most important way to reduce prep time use

at tournaments is to spend more time preparing before they begin.

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