

# THE D E G E



## DEBATING FASTER TEAMS

by  
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The greatest shock experienced by novice debaters usually occurs when they meet considerably faster debaters. It's humiliating: getting run out of the room is no fun, and being on the losing end of hyperspeed is frustrating too, since one can't escape the sense that the loss happened on pure pyrotechnics, as opposed to pure intellect. When a judge says something like, "what can I say? – you dropped the third answer!" you're made to feel stupid even though it was simply a technical glitch.

The sick feeling that comes from being outrun doesn't always go away after the novice year, as any experienced debater will volunteer, though often only when put under truth serum. I still vividly remember a debate that happened during my junior year in college, against a superfast debater who last year wrote a best-selling business book based on his experiences as a vice president at *Yahoo!*. I had enough experience to expect that we could win the debate if we were smart, although I knew it would be very tough since our opponents were a top ten team. We lost because I didn't adequately cover in the 2AC. Ugh! I can still remember it to this day. For weeks afterward all of my practicing was centered on reliving that debate, although we never again had the chance for a rematch.

As you might expect, my coaching colleagues have mixed reactions to such occurrences. An old friend and former coach who came out of the Northwestern debate program famously sneered at debaters

who complained about the speed of their opponents. Her point was this: the skills it takes to become fast or efficient enough to win are not that difficult to master. So get over it, do the drills, and learn to get speedily efficient in making arguments. On the other hand, I've heard a great debate coach from Wake Forest often say he thinks such drills are a big waste of time – speak eloquently and efficiently, practice speaking with passion, and the rest will follow. Still others privately express their frustration – it's hard to defend debate as a game of smarts when you're talking to a student disillusioned by a loss suffered on pure technique. And the technique is, for many coaches, hard to defend in the first place. Whether your coach defends or deplores fast talking, there's no denying that high speed rates of delivery mark debate as an idiosyncratic speaking event. And there is something of a “tragedy of the commons” effect: it's often in the self-interest of any given individual debater to press the speed as much as possible, and not in the direct individual interest of individual judges to dial it back. So while this doesn't mean debate is faster today than it was twenty years ago (it isn't), it's not likely to significantly slow down without a major and unlikely intervention.

I want to give some practical advice about what to do when the other team is talking so fast you cannot keep up. As is usually the case when I attempt to give practical advice, I'll acknowledge up-front that some of what I say will be blindingly obvious – my purpose there is just to remind you of things you may already know, but might have forgotten.

If you are currently angry at debate because you lose to faster teams, I sympathize but also want to disabuse you of a potential misconception. You are not losing simply because they talk faster. Speedy opposition puts pressures on you and your partner, in the process revealing all your shortcomings. For instance, a fast talking opponent can quickly reveal the inadequacies of your preparation. When you have to prepare a 2AC to cover fifteen major arguments instead of the more normal five or six, if you are inadequately briefed ahead of time you will pay the price in the faster round. And responding by talking back just as fast is not the only cure. In fact, matching speed for speed is not even the most strategic way to respond – as I'll argue below, creating a contrast effect where you talk in a noticeably slower but more efficient way is a far better recourse than straining your own abilities to blindingly spread.

Some suggestions, then, in no particular order of importance...

*Practice speaking more efficiently*, by which I mean you should practice making the same number and quality of arguments by use of fewer words. There are some easy ways to rehearse this. Some give rebuttal reworks under the condition that the student must make all the same arguments but with thirty fewer seconds on the clock. Rewriting briefs so they more efficiently convey your ideas is a good way to build efficiency into your speeches.

I've argued in a previous essay that a common source of inefficiency is the lengthy rebuttal-opening oration or overview. My point before was that debaters should work to make the overview a source of increased and not decreased efficiency. That is, if the overview just introduces a point you'll be repeating later, then abbreviate or nix it. If it saves you the time of having to reinforce your ideas later, then go ahead and orate, but briefly. One of the cautions I offered in that earlier essay had to do with the temptation to orate at great length since the start of the rebuttal seems to

impose few time constraints (of course that's a myth – forty-five seconds robbed from actual extension-making at the start of a rebuttal are just as devastating as 45 seconds stolen from the end). My advice to students who find themselves wasting more time than they intended at the rebuttal start was to script the overview out word for word.

At some point debaters obviously need to acquire the confidence necessary to trust that their ideas are getting through. Too often students repeat points over and over because they believe they must to be understood. But their judges probably got it the first time around and their opponents gratefully use the duplication time to prep their own speeches. Trust yourself!

*Practice talking faster*. Again, this is a much lower priority, and since I've recently written a full essay on the mechanics of speaking more quickly, I won't reproduce my advice here. Remember, though, that speed drills (where you push yourself faster and faster) can achieve faster speed but too easily come at the consequence of incomprehensibility. The overall imperative is thus to improve your speed for circumstances where you need it but to do so in a way that keeps you always clear. A reading overemphasis on key words from your evidence and explanation is the best way to preserve clarity and convey a sense of passionate urgency in delivering arguments.

*Look harder for ways to simplify the debate*. “Disco” refers to strategies that drastically simplify the debate in rebuttals. A 1AR might, for example, concede a part of their plan isn't topical (by, say, granting an extra-topicality argument) and jettison it as a way of also avoiding a disadvantage link. Such approaches are controversial with many judges, who consider major concessions of this sort to constitute new arguments in the rebuttal (a position with which I strongly disagree – I don't see how it's ever new to concede your opponents' arguments), and on that account disco isn't very common.

In a debate where you find yourself under enormous time pressures, though, the downsides of disco recede. If making a major concession in one place can reduce the number of arguments you have to make, and advance your strategic position, then you might consider doing it more often under circumstances of speed-induced duress. You may also find judges are more willing to accept radically round-transforming approaches when your opponents are exceptionally fast. Of course one must be careful: you will still encounter a lot of skepticism about major concessions, and that has to be considered under any circumstance. Still, considering drastic strategic maneuvering able to simplify the debate can be of enormous help.

*Don't whine, but be willing to make it an issue if the situation becomes absurd*. Sometimes students are tempted to complain in their speeches about opponent speed, but the problem is such an approach inevitably sounds whiny. Many judges will think to themselves something like, “if this debater gave the twenty seconds rationalizing a failure to cover to other answers, they'd have twenty more seconds to answer everything.” In other words, simply complaining about your opponents' speed or clearness rarely accomplishes anything. If you say the 1AR made no sense, his or her partner will simply say, “What's the problem? I got every word!” And what are you to do? Ask for a 3NR?

The solution is to debate more assertively than normal, and to find ways to provide a specific impact to the speed issue if you really feel abusive arguing has occurred. Since the vast majority of judges will not vote against a team simply because they were fast,

I wouldn't waste time arguing for such a loss. Instead, be more precise in designating a decision rule. Argue for something like stricter judge scrutiny of potentially new arguments in the last rebuttal. Or defend the idea that you should be waived from punishment for missing an argument.

Here is a common problem: Let's say a 1NR blazing through a topicality position is utterly incomprehensible. You weren't able to get his second and third responses to your first 2AC answer. But making a big deal about that may get you nowhere, since the judge may have understood arguments two and three, but missed numbers four and five. What can you do? General complaints sound like whining; specific complaints may garner no sympathy since only you missed the answer.

One approach which I've recommended for years but have never seen a student gutsy enough to try is making a federal case out of speed in this way: Let's say you are the 2NR and you get to a 1AR disadvantage answer that makes no sense. Maybe the judge got it, maybe she didn't. Either way consider saying this: "On the 2AC three, the link turn, the 1AR was incomprehensible. Maybe you got it and missed the next one, but I couldn't understand him here, and *I refuse to answer this argument, whatever it was*. Not only should I not have to pay the penalty of wasting my prep time to have figured out the blur, but I don't think I should be held accountable for the response. *Vote against me on this argument if you must*, and I'll live with it – but just remember in doing so *you're rewarding incomprehensibility*."

Do you see how such a response calls your opponents' bluff? And I think it would be very hard for a judge to work up the courage to vote against you on an argument you plausibly claim made no sense. Of course, such a tactic cannot be overused, or you'll soon get a reputation for finding all the tough answers "impossible to understand." Still, if the abuse is real, take a gamble. I think it will pay off.

Make the issue comprehensibility, not speed – *fight especially hard to stay clear*. Students too often try to fight fire with fire. The 1NC goes blindingly fast, too fast, and so the 2AC goes even faster or tries to. The downsides of this approach are obvious. At round's end the judge is exasperated with both teams, and lowers everyone's points because the whole thing broke down in mindless speed.

In my view, it is far better to create a *contrast effect*. I want to emphasize that the contrast need not be absurd, and it is not necessary to slow down to kindergarten speed to illustrate the differences between you and your opposition. And the contrast need not be evident at every moment in the speech, since there can still be runs of relatively speedy delivery. But at all points you should struggle to be clearly understood. Don't give your judge the easy cop-out that "everyone was to blame." Beyond the efficiency necessary to cover a faster team, debate in a super-efficient manner that will enable you to be plainly slower than the other team if at all possible.

*Make your four best answers, instead of the fifteen ones you've briefed.* In response to a very quick team (or even a team possessing both the skills of speed and efficiency) consider cutting out weaker responses. This advice, by the way, is an important reminder of the need to create briefs that make the stronger arguments at the top. This tip can be difficult to embrace – after all, when the 1NC runs ten off case positions, and you know her strategy is to drop all but the most under-covered in the block, who wants to play into her hands by making just a couple arguments on

every argument? But reducing the number of answers will not hurt you. How much mileage did you ever get out of asserted "no threshold" disadvantage responses anyway? Consider giving them up so that your truest and best evidenced responses remain on the table even if you are slower.

*Avoid the temptation to group everything, but do group more than normal.* Grouping is especially a good idea on high risk positions. Thus 1AR's should consider grouping entire topicality violations or blown up case positions. Group when doing so increases your ability to comprehensively cover important arguments, and when it leaves you free to more specifically extend the positions you must to win.

Here are some final quick tips to keep in mind when you debate considerably faster teams. *Take advantage of available cross-examination time.* Obviously the cross-ex period can help you fill in gaps. But instead of letting the speaker invent intelligence out of babble ask more narrow questions: "Your third answer to Bush/Iraq was, and I quote, 'turn 1AC Smith.' What did you mean by those three words?" It is important to *coordinate with your partner*. Don't engage in lots of quiet chatter while the fast constructive is going on, since you'll both end up missing even more. But do *coordinate ways to communicate* so you're two partial flowsheets can fill in gaps. This can help you recover from the speed without losing all your prep time in the process.

Some recommend that you try to bring incomprehensibility to your judge's attention by engaging in *nonverbal behaviors*, like moving your chairs closer to the speaker, and so on. I'm unconvinced this makes much of a difference, but if you feel differently it can't hurt to try.

Apart from intelligently briefing at home, you should also *write a 1AC that will hold up well against exceedingly fast 1NC's*. Build preemptions into the 1AC, and if there are specific pieces of evidence you always read in the 2AC think about moving them into the 1AC if you can do it without incurring a strategic disadvantage.

After fast debates, you might consider *asking the judge for specific advice about the speed situation*. I don't mean that you should ask accusatory questions ("why do you insist on endorsing mindless spewing?!"), but it might yield useful advice to ask something precise, like: "You saw I had trouble covering in the 2AC. Would you mind looking over your flow of that speech and telling me what I might have done to better allocate time?" *Consider using fast debates where you were really stressed to cover as the basis for post-tournament practicing.* Practice that 2AC or 1NR over and over until you can competently respond to all the arguments in a clear and eloquent manner.

Even doing your best, you'll encounter opponents who end up gaining a very real tactical advantage by speaking unclearly. Still, a lot of this apparent edge can be undone by careful strategizing. And remember this: despite the "tragedy of the commons" effect which has gradually ratcheted up speed over the years, a lot of judges remain basically sympathetic to teams on the receiving end of unclear speeches.

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