

About the MSPDP Debate Format

The Middle School Public Debate Program *Rules for Competition* cover seven key areas of a debate. These are:

1. **Debate Topics**
2. **Number of Teams and Debaters**
3. **Speaking Order and Speaking Time Limits**
4. **Preparation Period**
5. **Debate Materials**
6. **Points of Information and Heckling**
7. **Judge Training and Decision-making**

There are other procedures that you will want to know about, including tournament debating, and they are available on this site. In a brief form, here are the rules for MSPDP competitions.

1. Debate Topics

Topics for debate competition are usually announced 2-4 weeks before debates are held. MSPDP debating supports the use of both extemporaneous topics and impromptu topics. An **extemporaneous debate topic** is one for which you will have limited preparation before debating. There will be several weeks of time for thinking about the topic, researching the main points of arguments for and against the topic, and carefully organizing some notes about the better arguments. An **impromptu topic** is one that is not known before the debate is ready to begin. Students may debate extemporaneous and/or impromptu topics in a competition.

Topics are selected to provide a range of debates on personal, educational, social, political, economic, and cultural issues.

2. Number of Teams and Debaters

Each MSPDP debate has 2 teams. One team is called the **proposition**. The other team is called the **opposition**. Each debate team has **3 students**. One student is known as the **first speaker** for the team; one is the **second speaker** for the team; and the third student is the team's **rebuttal speaker**.

3. Speaking Order and Speaking Time Limits

Speakers make their presentations in the following order. The time that is listed is the maximum amount for each speech.

- **First Speaker, Proposition Team** 5 minutes
- *First Speaker, Opposition Team* 5 minutes
- **Second Speaker, Proposition Team** 5 minutes
- *Second Speaker, Opposition Team* 5 minutes
- *Rebuttal Speaker, Opposition Team* 3 minutes
- **Rebuttal Speaker, Proposition Team** 3 minutes

The first four speeches (the 5-minute speeches) are called **constructive speeches**. In these speeches, each team will construct, or build, its arguments. New arguments may be introduced in any of these speeches. The final two speeches of the debate (the 3-minute speeches) are called **rebuttal speeches**. These are the final speeches of the debate for each side. They are summary speeches. In these speeches, the debaters try to make the best case for its side of the debate and, at the same time, try to eliminate the major points of the other team. **NO NEW ARGUMENTS ARE PERMITTED IN THE REBUTTAL SPEECHES.**

4. Preparation Period

Before each debate, a topic is announced. If the topic has been announced before the tournament or competition (an extemporaneous topic), debaters have 20 minutes of preparation time to review their notes, speak with their coaches and teammates, and copy notes or other information for use in the upcoming debate. If the topic has not been announced before the tournament or competition (an impromptu topic), debaters have 30 minutes of preparation time before the debate begins.

5. Debate Materials

Before a debate tournament or competition, or during preparation time, students may review any and all information that would help them prepare for a debate. They may review books from the library, current event articles in newspapers and magazines, websites and other information on the internet, class notes, and written records of debate meetings and previous debates. They may speak to teachers, coaches, teammates, parents, friends, and others.

Once the debate begins, however, students **MAY NOT REVIEW OR USE** any notes that were not prepared during the preparation time period. In preparation time, students may look at and copy materials from their notes. They may ask the advice of coaches and teachers. These new notes, written during preparation time, are allowed in the debate. Students may not use any materials, even hand written notes, which were prepared before the announced start of preparation time. In particular, students may not read prepared speeches in a debate. The use of pre-prepared materials is a serious violation of the rules and their use may mean a forfeit and loss of a debate.

6. Points of Information and Heckling

There are parts of parliamentary procedure that are used in the debates. These are **Points of Information** and **heckling**. **A Point of Information (also known as a POI, pronounced “P-O-I”) is a request by a member of one team to the person who is speaking to give some of her speaking time to the other team to make a comment or ask a question about her speech.** Points of Information may be accepted or rejected by the speaker. If a point is accepted by the speaker, the opposing team’s point may not last longer than 15 seconds. The speaker accepts only a single point at a time. The person making a Point of Information may not interrupt the speaker’s answer to the point, make a two-part question, ask a follow-up question, or make any other comment unless the speaker agrees to it by accepting another Point of Information.

A heckle is an interruption of a speaker during her presentation. Responsible heckling is not only permitted, but also encouraged, in the MSPDP style. Students heckle to applaud teammates and opponents before and after their speeches. This is done by pounding on a

desk or tabletop with an open palm, slapping one's hand 3-4 times. This is just like regular applause, except the debaters use a desk or table as the "second hand." This is a sign of respect for your friends and opponents. This is a way of showing support for all those people who are willing to participate in a difficult, challenging competition.

Debaters may also cheer the good arguments of their teammates and show their displeasure with some of the opinions of their opponents. During a partner's speech, it is appropriate to slap the table in support of a particularly clever or winning argument. The members of the team supporting the speaker may also add a shout of "Hear! Hear!" to the pounding. During an opponent's speech, it is appropriate to say, "Shame!" if you strongly disagree with the opinion of the speaker. Debaters should not pound on the table when they say, "Shame!" Remember—pounding on the table is applause. Debaters would not cheer and boo a speaker at the same time.

Points of Information and heckling are included in the MSPDP format to encourage impromptu argumentation and advanced public speaking skill development. They make the debate exciting, interactive, and fun. Debaters can use these techniques long after their speaking time in the debate is over. It lets debaters stay involved in the debate both before and after their speeches.

Points of Information and heckling should be used strategically to show the judge that your opponent cannot defend an argument or has made an error during a speech. Heckling can show support for particularly good arguments made by your teammates. These techniques should be used carefully, however, and may never be used to distract a speaker or continually interrupt a presentation. Debaters should not get carried away with using POIs and heckling. A judge may deduct individual speaker points for rude behavior during an opposing team's speeches. A judge may also reward individual speakers and teams for the effective use of Points of Information and heckling.

7. Judge Training and Decision-Making

Each MSPDP judge must be certified to participate. Once a judge is certified, she may judge at competitions. To be eligible for certification, a person must be at least a high school sophomore or adult.

Judges are expected to carefully and fairly decide the outcomes of a debate. Any judge who cannot fairly decide a particular debate should notify a tournament director, competition coordinator, or other responsible person and remove herself from judging. Judges are never assigned to judge students from their own school. Judges are ultimately responsible, however, for making sure that they will judge debates in a fair manner. There are two outcomes for a debate. The judge must decide the winning side of the debate. That is the team that argued successfully on the topic. If the proposition team proves its case, the judge should reward the proposition team. If the proposition team did not prove its case, the judge should declare the opposition team as the winner. There are no ties in debates. Neither can two teams win a debate or both teams lose a debate.

In addition to deciding the winning team in the debate, a judge must award individual points to each of the six debaters. Student are rated on a scale of 0-30 points, with "30" points awarded for a perfect performance. The judge should consider public speaking,

argumentation, and teamwork skills in assigning individual speaker points. It is possible to give the same speaker points to more than one student.

After careful deliberation of the outcome of the debate, the judge will complete a ballot, a record of the debate, given to her by the tournament host. The judge will then announce the outcome of the debate to the participating teams. The judge will explain the reasons that a particular side has won the debate. The judge will provide some constructive criticism to help debaters improve in future debates. The judge will then complete the written ballot, providing a detailed description of the reason(s) for the outcome, as well as listing any additional comments to help debaters improve their public speaking and debate skills.