United States Universities Debating Championships

Adjudicator’s Briefing

Introduction

Welcome to Purdue University for the United States Universities Debating Championships.

This document sets out the how to adjudicate a British Parliamentary debate at this tournament. It is intended to supplement the adjudicator’s briefing which will occur on Friday 11th April.

The Chief Adjudicators (Jan Hovden, Melissa Franke, Gina Iberri-Shea, James Hardy and Brett Frazer) would like to thank the adjudication teams of Manila Worlds (in particular Sam Block), Berlin Worlds, Galway Euros and Chennai Worlds on whose shoulders these guidelines have been written.

General Adjudication Guidelines

In a Worlds format debate, judges assess who seemed to win the arguments in that specific debate. They do this as though they were the “ordinary intelligent voter”. There are only a small set of technical rules; they are intended to facilitate argument. They will be set out in this briefing.

We would like our adjudicators to judge debates holistically. Judging debates (and persuasiveness) holistically means that strategy, content and style are interdependent. One element cannot successfully persuade you without the others. By this we mean that deploying arguments persuasively is impossible if they are not explained clearly, if their importance is not emphasised, and if the interest of the audience is not maintained to listen to them. Without decent argumentation, style is empty rhetoric, a façade which the intelligent observer would easily see through. As for strategy, brilliantly analysed arguments are unpersuasive if they are irrelevant to the position that is meant to be advocated or if they ignore the central claims made by the other side.

Role Fulfilment

Roles are to be understood reasonably loosely; they should facilitate fair argumentation. It is rarely, if ever, correct to decide the result of a debate purely on the basis of role fulfilment.

The only specific roles that have specific rules attached to them are the first speaker in Opening Government (the Prime Minister), and the final two speeches (the Government Whip and the Opposition Whip); they are discussed below.

Definitions

The first speaker in Opening Government has a responsibility to define the debate. In policy debates, this means they need to make clear if there is a policy and, if so, what that policy is. In other debates, they need to make clear the position they are defending. They can do this in a variety of
ways. Just stating the motion may be adequate in some cases; for example, if a motion was “THW lower the legal drinking age to 18”, or “THBT Margaret Thatcher made a positive contribution to the United Kingdom”, stating the motion may be adequate to define the debate. Similarly, a team may have an extensive definition with a precisely detailed model (for example, “THW militarily intervene in Syria” may require definition as to who will take this action, how they will do it, etc.). In some motions, either approach may lead to a functioning and legitimate debate.

The judge should not attack the definition, and should not punish teams for defining the debate in a certain way, unless the other teams in the round do. If the teams do challenge the definition for being insufficiently explanatory, the Opening Government team should be punished only insofar as the lack of detail in the definition prevents other teams from making arguments. Judges should give other teams the benefit of the doubt relative to Opening Government in such situations.

Opening Government should define the debate in accordance with the words of the motion. This should be obvious from the motions. Teams should not stretch the meanings of the words to make the motion easier for them to defend; words should be given their ordinary meaning. If proposing “THBT China should make extracting a full apology for Japan’s War Crimes a top strategic priority”, the priority should be a top one, to which a significant amount of resources, time and political capital would obviously be committed. To debate the motion by arguing that China should devote at least some resources to it, because it matters, is to ignore the word “top” in the motion.

Opening Government should also define the debate in the context suggested by the motion. This may be the USA, or it may be about a specific country or group of countries. It may be defined from the point of view of a specific group. It is legitimate to exclude anomalies, but not legitimate to include only anomalous examples. For example, in debating the motion “THW Ban Cosmetic Surgery”, it is legitimate to exclude burn victims, but it would not be legitimate to say “We’re banning cosmetic surgery, but only for children.”

If Opening Government does define in a restrictive or otherwise problematic manner, judges should only act if the teams in the debate (typically Opening Opposition) challenge the definition, and if they present good reasons to do so. If a definition is challenged as unfair, the judge should assess whether or not you are persuaded that Opening Government’s definition gives the words of the motion their ordinary meaning. If the definition does not, Opening Opposition’s challenge can stand, and the alternative they provide becomes the debate being had. This does not mean that Opening Government lose. It just means that the debate is the one that Opening Opposition suggest in their challenge. Opening Government can still win this new debate.

Once Opening Opposition accept a definition, other teams cannot challenge it unless it is tautologically true or untrue, or impossible to argue in good conscience for or against.

If the motion does change, judges must weigh the contribution of teams to the debate as they found it at the time. So if Opening Opposition won very strongly the debate that Opening Government ran, but Closing Government manage to change the definition (owing perhaps to it being tautologically untrue) and make a significant contribution to the new debate, we must compare Opening Opposition’s contribution to the debate they were involved in with Closing Government’s contribution to the one they were. We do not disregard Opening Opposition because the debate
became about something else; that is not their fault. Direct engagement in this kind of debate (for example, on Points of Information) may be particularly important.

**Opposition**

Opposition can argue against the policy either by supporting the status quo in the context of the debate (and saying why doing the policy would be worse than the status quo) or by offering a counter-proposal. In debates about a policy, defending the status quo means arguing that doing the policy would make things worse in some way. Exactly what the status quo is varies motion by motion; in motions clearly about the USA (such as a debate about Senate Reform), the status quo is the one prevailing in the USA at present. In other debates, there may be a different status quo – such as the one prevailing in some international organisation.

Opposition teams may offer their own set of policies they may wish to implement (or position they hold), in the form of a counter-proposal. Note however, if Government can implement these policies (or hold this position) **alongside** their policy or position, they are able (although not required) to do so. Additionally, Opposition must continue to oppose the motion as interpreted by Opening Government.

Note that counter-proposals are not required from Opposition teams. While in some debates, Opposition taking such a position may enhance (perhaps significantly) the clarity of their position, they are at liberty to merely defend not doing the policy.

The counter-proposal is only one tool being used by Opposition teams to beat a policy. If you are convinced by the debate that the policy is a bad idea and would make the status quo worse, then even if the counter-proposal is also a bad idea, the fact that the policy would be bad means that the Opposition team should win.

**Summary Speeches**

Summary speeches are still argumentative. However, their role is to not add any new arguments. Any new arguments should be ignored by the judges; the teams should not be penalised for this. They have already penalised themselves by wasting time.

A ‘new argument’ is adding a new reason to do something, a claim that new things will occur, or claims that new moral truths are the case. It is **NOT** any of the following:

1. New defences of arguments already made.
2. Rebuttal.
3. New examples to support existing arguments.
4. Anything the other side can reasonably be expected to understand the team intends from the 3rd speech.

If you are having trouble adjudicating this, remember that the reasons for this rule are that it ensures the other team have a chance to fairly engage with the material. In situations where it’s unclear whether the material is new, ask yourself – was this fair on the opposing team?
Other Roles

All other aspects of debating – rebuttal, new argumentation etc. – are not required by a speaker’s role. It’s generally a good idea to do rebuttal. It is not a failure of role fulfilment to not do so. Remember; role fulfilment is not a metric to judge debates. Please avoid considering it as such. Judges should look to be light-touch and non-interventionist, and only exclude rule-breaking material from consideration.

Assessing Extensions

The contribution of the Closing Government and Opposition teams are to be assessed on the basis of their addition to the Opening teams. That is, anything they do or argue that the Opening teams did not do in the same way should be credited. New arguments should clearly be credited. So too should additions to existing arguments, new examples, framing of old arguments in a more persuasive way, new rebuttal etc. Their contribution is valuable insofar as what they say benefits their side more than what has already been said. Does the new argument help their side? Does an addition to an argument help their side? Does a piece of rebuttal help their side? If so, it deserves credit. All this depends on the state-of-play of the debate.

Note that it is not adequate for a closing team to make an argument slightly better than their opening. They get credit only for the improvement in the argument they make – not for the argument as it stands at the end of their speeches. Therefore, to beat an Opening team, a closing team must make improvements and additions to the Opening case that outweighs the totality of the Opening case.

Comparing Opening and Closing Teams

It may occur that you need to compare the contributions of teams who did not engage with each other significantly in the round. This may be due to lack of responsiveness, bottom half teams shutting out other teams from offering Points of Information. In such circumstances, you should assess how robust the argument is to potential responses, especially where those responses can come from minor extensions of arguments that were made.

For example, when comparing a team with another team diagonally in front (so when comparing Closing Government to Opening Opposition), judges should first ask whether anything in the Opening Opposition case is relevant or rebuttive. Did the Closing Government team deal with this material?

If somebody (such as a Closing Government team) has an opportunity to respond to relevant arguments (from Opening Opposition) and does not do so implicitly or explicitly, this should be considered unpersuasive. Additionally, if that team does not allow the earlier team to offer a Point of Information, judges should be aware of this and consider this unpersuasive.

Style

Style will often be very important, but you mustn’t ‘double count’ it: style matters internally to persuasiveness, but not over and above the extent to which you are persuaded. Please also remember that there are lots of ways to be stylish: there is no one correct way to do it. For example,
teams should not be penalized for speaking softly, loudly, for not telling jokes, or, as we might wish the case was with some, for telling jokes. Speaking with an accent is not bad style and you should allow reasonable leeway for English as a Second Language speakers. Equally, if someone is ‘stylish’ in a way irrelevant to their persuasiveness on the issue (for example, by telling a joke unrelated to the motion at the start), this should not be rewarded. Generally we believe that style is everything you do in conveying your content to maximize its persuasiveness.

Please bear in mind that assessments of style frequently operate in a gendered manner. Please be aware of this; avoid penalising female speakers for being aggressive or assertive where you would not penalise a male speaker for the same kinds of behaviour.

Content

The content of arguments should help you to assess whether teams have effectively shown their claims to be true and effectively shown their points to be important to the debate.

Teams have to show that we should do a thing, or not; that something is true, or not. That is all. Government and Opposition teams have equal and opposite burdens, so a small margin is enough to decide a win. Opposition cannot win just be merely questioning the proposition case.

In a policy debate (that is, a debate of the format This House Would), proposition teams win by showing that the policy should be undertaken, all things considered. Opposition teams win by showing that the policy should not be undertaken, all things considered. In an analysis debate (a debate in the format This House Believes That or similar), proposition teams win by showing that the statement in the motion is true, while opposition teams win by showing that it is false.

In a policy debate, proposition teams typically argue that the policy will lead to certain desirable consequences, while opposition teams will typically argue that the policy will lead to certain undesirable consequences. Most debates contain both disputes about the consequences of a policy and disputes about whether those consequences are desirable. However, this format of debating does not presume that only the consequences of a policy matter. For instance, opposition may argue that the policy so heinously violates moral rules (e.g. those prohibiting the torture of innocents) that it should not be undertaken, whatever the consequences. Cost-benefit analysis is not the only metric for who wins a debate. Judges may be persuaded by appeals to justice, fairness, common humanity and other principles that outrun the consequences.

In some debates, teams will dispute both what framework should be used to assess the policy, and how the policy fares in the various metrics of assessment. In that case, judges should decide whose framework for assessment is most compelling, and who persuaded them whether the policy should be advanced under that framework. Sometimes, all teams in the round may agree about the framework to use, implicitly or explicitly; in those instances, the judge should accept those consensus assumptions.

Some arguments, particularly those that suggest a deontological framework (such as arguing that all war is wrong, regardless of consequences), are occasionally accused of being ‘generic’. That does not matter; arguments need to relate to the debate being had, but do not need to relate to only the debate being had.
Note that we do not consider how likely it is that the policy would be implemented; Government have access to what is regarded as ‘minimally effective fiat’ – they have the power to ensure that the policy can be implemented. Arguments of the form “The Senate would not vote for this” should be disregarded.

Effective analysis should not be confused with ‘complication’. Both complex and simple arguments can be effective; what matters is whether the claims are well-substantiated. Whether an argument is important to the debate is determined by the motion and by the claims and arguments of the other teams in the debate. You should be careful not to reconstruct arguments for the speaker. Usually, if it wasn’t said – then don’t treat it as if it was. If a team says ‘it will be much harder to educate children if you physically hurt them’, you should not be thinking ‘well, it’s obvious that they meant that children would be so terrified of the prospect of physical pain that they will fail to concentrate in class’. Instead you should be thinking ‘why?’. Debating is about explaining yourself, not hoping that the judge you drew happens to understand you.

A team should never be penalized for not running a specific argument. There is no ‘I thought you should have talked about the environment, so I gave you a 4th’. You judge the debate based on what was in it, not on what you thought should have been in it.

Rebuttal and Engagement

Engagement is a very important aspect of British Parliamentary debating. Teams who do not engage with persuasive material put forward by the opposing team are very likely to be unpersuasive. This means that teams must, either in direct refutation or through their so-called constructive material, respond to or deal with the opposing team’s arguments. A team that only puts forth its own brilliant case, and does not pertain to the arguments made by its opponent, makes a significant strategic error in the debate. That is not to say they won’t win if the arguments they have left standing at the debate clearly outweigh their opponents arguments – but it makes it significantly harder to do so.

The differentiation between ‘rebuttal’ and ‘substantive’ points is an artificial one, and aimed at making the speech clearer for the audience. A point is as important and as valid, regardless of whether it is labelled ‘rebuttal’ or ‘substantive’. Substantive material can address opposing arguments, and rebuttal can advance substantive cases. As an adjudicator, please be prepared to consider whether a constructive argument may respond to other material in the round; although if the teams don’t make this clear, this is a failure in clarity of persuasion.

It is worth distinguishing between damage limitation arguments, and arguments which offer constructive benefits or harms to a policy. If Prop says ‘this policy will solve world poverty’, and Opp argue that it won’t completely solve world poverty, Opp have only limited the damage of Prop’s point: they have not advanced a positive reason not to do the policy. They would need to additionally claim some other harm arising from the policy, and demonstrate that as being more important than the competing claims. Damage limitation can be important, but cannot win debates on its own.

Please note that there is no obligation to rebut each and every argument separately. A team could very well negate an entire rationale or a basic premise of a case, concede a point, answer all of the points with a single claim, or even focus on the strongest material of a team. In the course of a
debate some claims are sometimes forgotten or deserted by everyone, and a team that fails to rebut marginal points (especially ones that are not reiterated later) is not to be penalised.

In addition, an argument, even one of relevance to the debate, does not get full credit simply by being unrebuted if it is unpersuasive due to clear logical flaws or a straightforward factual error that would be obvious to the ordinary intelligent voter.

A Note on Inconsistency

Inconsistency is clearly unpersuasive. Teams should not contradict themselves or other teams on their bench. Teams that are internally inconsistent cannot simultaneously get credit for two areas of mutually exclusive argument – we credit them for the point that their speeches make sound more persuasive, while obviously considering it less persuasive due to their contradiction.

Note that this standard applies to the Opposition bench as well as the Government bench. It would clearly be unfair on Opening Government if Closing Opposition were allowed to run a case that contradicted Opening Opposition.

Points of Information

Speakers should accept at least one point of information (POI) at some point during the unprotected time in their speech. Accepting more than two POIs in a single speech is generally inadvisable, since it reduces time available for presenting one’s own material, but will not be penalised in and of itself. Closing teams should, if offered, accept at least one point of information from the Opening team on the other side. Not doing so frequently denies the Opening team an opportunity to defend their case or clear up a misrepresentation. Judges should see this as a sign of weakness. In particular, if a Closing team fails to engage with and respond to an Opening team, and also denies them the opportunity to give a Point of Information, that should be considered deeply unpersuasive.

There is no mandatory penalty for not taking points of information during one’s speech. We leave any penalty to the judges’ discretion. However, if a speaker took no POI during their speech even though they were offered numerous POIs in the last minute of unprotected time, then judges should take that into account as a failure to engage with the opposing teams. The consequences of this in the debate will vary according to how crucial that engagement was.

It is acceptable for speakers to preface POIs with “point of clarification”, but only if the POI is purely a query for additional information about some aspect of the policy or counter-policy.

Who is the Ordinary Intelligent Voter?

Judges need to abstract themselves from their own personal positions and opinions when adjudicating debates. We therefore attempt to judge as the ‘Ordinary Intelligent Voter’ to minimise the impact of our own knowledge and opinions on the debate. Clearly, we still evaluate carefully the logical claims in the debate, and determine which teams seemed to win them.

Particularly experienced judges should bear in mind that exposure to debating may lead you to preference certain styles, certain kinds of arguments and certain types of references. You should avoid this as far as possible; the best way to do this is to consider yourself a voter assessing a real policy, and ask who persuaded you the policy should or shouldn’t be done.
The ordinary intelligent voter should be understood to read newspapers occasionally, but not cover to cover. They are not a specialist, but have a broad understanding of major issues in high-level terms. They will not know details of specific situations. They will not be familiar with complicated or technical language from specialist fields.

Teams may still make reference to knowledge, or use language, that is beyond the ordinary intelligent voter. However, they must be sure to explain this, rather than merely cite it. For example, it would be inadequate to say “This is like the situation in Malawi”; there would need to be an explanation of why the situations were similar.

If this is not explained, and would be beyond the ordinary intelligent voter, the judge should discard it – even if they themselves are familiar with the example.

**How to Conduct an Adjudication (as a Chair Judge)**

After the debate, send teams out of the room to start your adjudication. You have 15 minutes to reach a decision. You may wish to take some time to allow yourself or your wing judge(s) to review your notes; you should limit this time to no more than 2 minutes. After this, it may be useful for you to ask your wings for their ranking of the teams, first through to fourth. You should focus any discussion on areas of disagreement. For example, it may be that you both agree that Opening Government beat Closing Government. However, you may disagree on their exact positions, perhaps because you disagree on whether Opening Opposition beat Opening Government.

You should therefore focus your discussion on isolating two teams (about which you and your wing judge disagree as to which beat the other) and comparing them directly.

If you agree with each other, you should fill in your ballot from first to fourth, and then assign speaker marks. “Low-point wins” are not allowed; this means that if a team beats another team, the winning team’s total speaker points **MUST** be higher than the other team.

Unlike other formats, British Parliamentary Debate encourages judges to change their rankings if they hear a compelling reason for doing so. Consequently, the desired outcome of deliberation is decision by consensus. Judges should be open-minded and willing to change their rankings if necessary. There will, obviously, be situations in which consensus is impossible and a decision by majority is necessary. However, voting should be a last resort and used only if: (1) there is significant disagreement on the panel and consensus is very unlikely, or (2) time for deliberation has run out and the ballot must be turned. In the case of tied votes, chair adjudicators have the casting vote.

After filling in the ballot and handing it to a runner (or sending a wing judge to take it back to the tab room), you should then bring the teams back into the room and give them the decision and the justification for the decision. Try to make your feedback directly comparative; explain why each team beat the teams behind them, and lost to the teams ahead of them. You can give teams feedback on how to improve, but you should be careful to separate this from the reasons for the decision in the debate.
Speaker Scale

100-95
Plausibly one of the best debating speeches ever given, flawless and astonishingly compelling in every regard. It is incredibly difficult to think up satisfactory responses to any of the arguments made.

94-90
Brilliant arguments successfully engage with the main issues in the round. Arguments are very well explained, always central to the case being advocated, and demand extremely sophisticated responses. The speech is very clear and incredibly compelling. Structure and role fulfilment are executed flawlessly.

89-85
Very good, central arguments engage well with the most important issues on the table and are highly compelling; sophisticated responses would be required to refute them. Delivery is clear and manner very persuasive. Role fulfilment and structure probably flawless.

84-80
Relevant and pertinent arguments address key issues in the round with sufficient explanation. The speech is clear in almost its entirety, and holds one’s attention persuasively. Role is well-fulfilled and structure is unlikely to be problematic. Perhaps slight issues with balancing argumentation and refutation and/or engagement in the debate.

79-75
Arguments are almost exclusively relevant, and frequently persuasive. Occasionally, but not often, the speaker may slip into: i) deficits in explanation, ii) simplistic argumentation vulnerable to competent responses or iii) peripheral or irrelevant arguments. The speaker holds one’s attention, provides clear structure, and successfully fulfils their basic role on the table.

74-70
Arguments are generally relevant, and some explanation of them given, but there may be obvious gaps in logic, multiple points of peripheral or irrelevant material and simplistic argumentation. The speaker mostly holds the audience’s attention and is usually clear, but rarely compelling, and may sometimes be difficult to follow. There is a decent but incomplete attempt to fulfill one’s role on the table, and structure may be imperfectly delivered.

69-65
Relevant arguments are frequently made, but with very rudimentary explanation. The speaker is clear enough to be understood the vast majority of the time, but this may be difficult and/or unrewarding. Structure poor; poor attempt to fulfil role.

64-60
The speaker is often relevant, but rarely makes full arguments. Frequently unclear and confusing; really problematic structure/lack thereof; some awareness of role.

59-55
The speech rarely makes relevant claims, only occasionally formulated as arguments. Hard to follow, little/no structure; no evident awareness of role.

54-50
Content is almost never relevant, and is both confusing and confused. No structure or fulfilment of role is, in any meaningful sense, provided.