



British Parliamentary Debating:
A Guide

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1. Introduction

There is a reason why this guide is not called “How to win in British Parliamentary Debating”, or even “How to avoid losing (in BPD)” – because there is not, will never be, and cannot be a foolproof way of winning, or even avoiding last place, in a debate. If there were, the book would have been written, we would all have read it and debating as a competitive activity would cease to exist!

That being said, the aim of this guide is to help you prepare as much as possible for debate competitions conducted in the British Parliamentary style. We will look at the format of debates, and what are termed the standing orders, the speakers’ positions in the debate and the role they are required to fulfil, motions and how (and when) to define them, style and substance (also called ‘matter’ and ‘manner’), the vagaries of judging and how to cope with them, and finally, where to go, and what to do from here.

By the end of the pack, you will hopefully feel confident that you know what you are doing, and to a certain extent, how you are going to do it. Remember, you can have all the advice, encouragement and coaching in the world, but when you go into a debate and you stand up to speak, it’s all down to you.

2. The format, or, Rules of the game

There are many different styles of debating around the world – US Parliamentary, Australs, Asians, Karl Popper, Lincoln-Douglas, the list goes on - but the one that concerns us here is British Parliamentary Debating, or BP, for short. This is one of the standard forms used at university level, particularly for international competitions, and is the chosen format for both the World and European Universities Debating Championships (WUDC, and EUDC, respectively). There are also regional BP Championships held in US Universities and now in Asia too, but the format differs markedly from the World Schools' (WSDC) style and others common in high schools, to which some young debaters are used. BP debates consist of four teams of two speakers each, broken down as follows:

- Opening Government (sometimes called Proposition)
- Opening Opposition
- Closing Government, or Proposition
- Closing Opposition

The speakers speak in rotation, beginning with the first team member of the opening Government team ("the Prime Minister"). He or she is followed by the opening speaker for opening Opposition ("Leader of the Opposition"), who in turn is followed by the Government's second speaker ("the Deputy Prime Minister"), and so on down the table until all speeches have been completed. The table on the next page explains this.

1 st Speaker	Prime Minister	Leader of the Opposition	2 nd Speaker
3 rd Speaker	Deputy Prime Minister	Deputy Leader of the Opposition	4 th Speaker
5 th Speaker	Member for Government	Member for the Opposition	6 th Speaker
7 th Speaker	Government Whip	Opposition Whip	8 th Speaker

When all eight speeches have been delivered, the debate is considered at an end, and the judging process begins (see 'Judging', p.18) So far, so straightforward. But there are certain conventions and expectations in BP debates and this is what we mean when talking about the 'rules of the game'.

First, BP debating aims to recreate to a degree the style of debating practised in Parliament and in institutions such as the Oxford and Cambridge Unions. It is therefore essential that 'Parliamentary language' is used at all times. Thus, debaters are usually addressed as 'Sir' or 'Madam', the chair of the debate is often referred to as 'Mr (or Madam) Speaker', and debaters will often make reference to 'members of the House'. While this may seem excessively formal, there is good reason. A debate is not an argument in the sense that most of us understand that word – it is not about shouting more loudly or more forcefully than your opponent (see 'Style or substance?' p.16) or insulting them. They may smell a bit, look like a bulldog eating a wasp, or have the most ridiculous hair since Einstein, but pointing that out will not win you the debate.

On the contrary, if you are rude, you will be warned by the Chair, and you may lose speaker points, and subsequently, the debate if you continue. Respectful language is what is called for, and what the judges will expect to hear. It should not need to be stressed that vulgar language and swearing are never acceptable, but

unfortunately, some people still forget. Debating is about making arguments in a controlled, adult fashion and any swearing is usually severely penalised.

Second, we come to points of information (POIs). These are an integral part of BP debating, and one of the ways in which BP differs from styles such as Australs. Speeches in BP tend to be of either five or seven minutes (depending on the competition – you will generally be told which before the tournament begins), and the first and last minutes of each speech are ‘protected’. This means that no speaker from the opposing teams may interrupt the person making their speech during this time. In the interim three (or five) minutes, however, POIs are positively encouraged. We will look at POIs in more detail later (see ‘Positions and roles’, p.8), but for now it is enough to say that there are ways of making POIs which are acceptable, and some which are clearly not.

The simplest, and possibly the best, way of offering a POI (we will look at how to *make* the point later) is to stand and say “On a point of information” in a loud, clear voice. “On that point”, or more simply, “Point, Sir/Madam” are also acceptable. Whichever you choose, you must wait for the speaker to accept or decline your point. If you are accepted, make your point quickly (about 30 seconds or so). If you are declined, take your seat immediately. What is not acceptable is to stand and simply start speaking without being invited to take the floor, or to offer the point in such a way that the point is made, e.g. “On the fact that violent crime is on the rise and your model only makes this worse...” (It is extremely difficult to give an example in the abstract, but hopefully, you get the idea.)

The last point regarding format and ‘rules’ is that when a speaker has the floor, that is the only person to whom the judges want to listen and should be listening. You may want to discuss issues as they arise with your partner, for example when to offer a POI and what to say, but you should be able to do this in such a way that the judges are not distracted. If you cannot speak quietly enough (and judges will not be shy about letting you know!), then pass small notes to each

other. The House is a respectful one at all times, and you should show other speakers in the debate the same courtesy that you would hope they would extend to you.

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3. Positions and roles

This section will be broken down by speaker, outlining what the speaker's position in a debate means, and what is required for 'role fulfilment'. At the end, we will look briefly at the common elements of the debate – that is, things which all speakers need to do in order to score well.

a. The Prime Minister

The job of the first speaker, or Prime Minister, is to set up the debate. This may sound obvious, but is so often overlooked, or simply badly done, that it is worth stressing. What this means in the most basic terms is that the PM states what the debate is about, and what are the boundaries.

The speech will need to consist of some, or all, of the following elements: definition of the motion (if required), the case being presented (what the problem is, why it is a problem, what will be done to solve it), supporting arguments as to how objectives will be achieved, and why achieving those objectives is a good thing.

A case will usually require some form of mechanism, but this is not always true. It is acceptable for opening Government, and the PM, to set up the debate as one of principle. An example of this would be a motion stating "This House Supports Positive Discrimination for Women in the Army". opening Government have the option of a mechanism (i.e. exactly how they would positively discriminate) but may choose to run the debate on the principle that positive discrimination for women in the army is a good thing *per se*, rather than introduce any specific form of discrimination. That may be a weaker (or 'soft') case in the eyes of the judges (and may be hard for opening Government to sustain over two speeches), but it is legitimate.

Depending on whether or not a mechanism is put forward, and how involved that mechanism is, the PM will usually make two or three arguments in support of his position, and may outline the further arguments to be made by his/her Deputy.

b. Leader of the Opposition

The Leader of the Opposition performs a role that is in essence similar to that of all remaining speakers in the debate, excepting the Whips on both sides. The speaker should point out any flaws in the mechanism chosen (if there is one), rebut the arguments made by the PM and make substantive arguments that support his/her position.

Rebuttal is essential if you are to defeat opening Government, but don't get too bogged down in it. If the mechanism is obviously ridiculous, there is no need to spend three of your five minutes pointing out all that is wrong with it. If you make the 'big' points as to why the mechanism is unworkable, or will make the identified problem worse and not better, that is usually enough for the mechanism to fall. You can then move on to deal with why the supporting arguments (the principles underpinning the mechanism) are also wrong, both directly with rebuttal, and by making your own arguments.

It must be mentioned here that rebuttal is not simply contradiction – what is sometimes called 'the confusion of rebuttal, refutation and repudiation'. All of these are ways of contradicting, but with important differences. If you refute something, you deny the accuracy or the truth of the argument. If you repudiate something, you reject the validity or authority of it, reject it as unfounded or untrue, or simply refuse to recognize it. Neither of these is enough in a debate. When rebutting, you not only do one or both of the above, but in addition, you say how and why it is wrong or false, and provide the counter-argument that proves it. If you

can do that, then the points made by the PM can be made to look very lightweight indeed.

Finally comes your own substantive material. These are points that stand in their own right, and are not the same as rebuttal. The points should introduce new material to the debate, and be supportive of your position in the debate. These are the arguments which the Deputy PM will be expected to deal with in his/her speech.

c. Deputy PM & Deputy Leader of the Opposition

These two positions may be dealt with together, as both speeches are essentially the same. As with the Leader of the Opposition the speeches are expected to consist of rebuttal of the previous speaker's material and new substantive arguments in favour of, or against the motion. The Deputy PM may also need to include some 'reinforcement' of the case, depending on the job done by the Leader of the Opposition. If the mechanism has been attacked, it will need defending, or the attack may stand in the eyes of the judges, but this will form part of the Deputy PM's rebuttal. In both Deputies' speeches, though, there will need to be significant new arguments in support of their Leaders', and, ideally, little left for the second half of the table.

d. Extension Speakers

The Members for Government and Opposition are also known as extension speakers – quite simply, because their role is to extend the debate. There is a lot of confusion, even at university level, as to what constitutes a valid extension, and it is probably easier to define in terms of what it is not, rather than what it is.

An extension is not something which extends the mechanism or definition provided by opening Government. If the debate is about EU

expansion into Turkey, for example, you don't extend by adding Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria! If a motion stating that 'This House Believes in Corporal Punishment' is defined as parents' right to smack their children, it is not legitimate to say that schoolteachers should be allowed to do it as well. You get the idea.

What an extension does do may be defined as one of two things: it either provides a significantly deeper level of analysis of material on the table, or introduces a new element or direction to the debate. New examples to support existing arguments are again not enough. By way of an example, let us imagine that the first half of the debate on corporal punishment has concentrated on rights of the parents, rights of the child, affects on behaviour and development, and the benefits or otherwise to society. A legitimate extension would be to talk about when corporal punishment is used in general, when society does allow or condone, or even practice physical punishment and the principles behind physical/non-physical punishment in general. This is known as widening the debate.

Similarly, but conversely, where the opening Government has set up a principled debate (e.g. on positive discrimination) it is entirely legitimate to 'narrow' the debate to talk about the specific effects of affirmative action, quota systems, etc. Neither of the above contradicts what has been said in the first half of the debate, and adds significant new arguments to the debate, which is precisely for what extension speakers should be aiming.

Don't worry if this seems difficult, confusing, or even gibberish. Some of the best debaters in the world struggle with extensions, and the position of third speaker on either side of the table is recognised as possibly the hardest position from which to speak. Put simply, try to say something new, something interesting, and something relevant to the debate. Oh, and don't forget that, on top of all this, you still need to rebut what was said before!!!

e. Summaries

The final speaker on each side (the Whip) has a very different role to all others in the debate (and, it must be said, sometimes to each other).

The Government Whip begins much like the others – that is, with rebuttal. But following that, the speech is very different. The Whip's job is to summarise the case for the Government and as far as possible, to ensure that the arguments made by his/her teammate are put to the fore.

Stressing the strong points of opening Government, whilst sometimes necessary, is going to convince judges of one thing – that all the good arguments came from opening Government! On the other hand, don't ignore what was said in the first half of the debate. If you do, then you are only summarising half the debate, and will be marked down accordingly. It is acceptable for the Government Whip to introduce new material in the form of new examples that support existing arguments, but not to introduce new arguments *per se*. However, given the vagaries of judges, it is probably best to avoid anything that seems too new in the way of examples as well, in case these are misconstrued by the judges.

The Opposition Whip, by contrast, must not introduce any new material whatsoever. The other difference is that, along with the PM, the Opposition Whip may be the only other speaker not required to provide rebuttal. This depends on whether new material is introduced by his/her counterpart. When new material has been introduced it should always be rebutted. If there is nothing new, however, no rebuttal should be necessary. The Opposition Whip, like the speaker before should then summarise the whole debate, focusing on why his/her side have won, and attempting to bring his/her partner's arguments to the fore. The advantage of being Opposition Whip is obvious – as the last speaker in the debate, you have a fantastic opportunity to tell the judges exactly what the debate has been about, why opposition beats proposition, and why the strongest

arguments were those made by your teammate. Best of all, there's no-one standing up after you to contradict what you have said!

f. Common Elements

It is essential to remain as involved in the whole debate as possible when not giving your speech, which means offering POIs whenever you can. If as PM you say nothing following your opening speech, or as Whip you say nothing until it is your turn to speak, in a close debate it is unlikely that you will win, especially when everyone else has engaged with all the speakers on the other side of the table. Similarly, you must take POIs during your speech to show that you are responding to the moment and not just reading a prepared text. As to how many POIs you should take, a good rule of thumb is at least one, and no more than two, for a five minute speech (remember, there are only three 'unprotected' minutes) and at least two, and no more than three, for a seven minute speech. POIs are not separate to your role, they are part of it and not offering or taking one can again be enough to cost you the win in a close room.

So what should you say? The POI should be as relevant as possible to what is being said, and should help your side and damage the arguments of the other. It is difficult, obviously to give an example in the abstract, but you could try something like "Statistics show that while crime is decreasing, violent crime is increasing. How does your proposal for 24-hour pub licences help this?"

And only accept the offer of a POI? When you know you are on solid ground. If you are unsure about the validity of one of your arguments, and all four people on the other side leap to their feet, it's probably not a good idea to invite them to tell you why you are wrong! Wait until you're making your strong arguments, and take a point then, if you can.

4. Motions and definitions

Most debate competitions that use BP format prefer motions which are 'closed' or 'semi-closed' – that is, motions which require little or no definition. They may require a mechanism, but that is the choice of opening Government. What they do not need is redefining in terms of what is to be debated.

An example of a 'closed' motion is 'This House Believes the EU Should Begin Expansion Talks with the Ukraine'. It is clear and unequivocal what is to be debated, and no definition is necessary, or even desirable. A 'semi-closed' motion would be 'This House Believes the EU Should Begin Expansion Talks with North Africa' – again it is clear what is to be debated, but it would be acceptable for opening Government to redefine North Africa as Morocco and Algeria but not Tunisia, for example. This is sometimes called a policy definition, because the redefinition of the motion is linked to the specific case and arguments which opening Government wish to present. It may also be called a 'mechanistic' definition, again, because the redefinition is essential to the workability of the mechanism.

As was said earlier, the decision whether to include a mechanism or run a principled case rests with opening Government. Either is legitimate, although it must be said again that some judges will perceive the absence of a mechanism as a 'soft' case, i.e. you have shied away from the difficult part of opening Government's job. You will not necessarily lose because of this, but you may make Opposition's job easier for them.

By the same token, if opening Government chooses not to include a mechanism, opening Opposition should mention the fact, but should not make it the whole of their opposition, or even their rebuttal. Doing so shows a reluctance to engage with the principled arguments of Government, which may be seen as a concession. The best advice is to include a mechanism where possible, as long as

the mechanism is not so complicated and involved that it takes up almost all the PM's speech! That gives too much to Opposition, as it likely that the more complicated the mechanism, the more difficulties there will be with it, and you are also leaving open the first arguments for Opposition to make – never a good thing.

5. Style or substance?

The question here is what matters most? Being a charming, witty and engaging speaker, or having so many facts and figures to support your arguments, and the analysis to go with it that you cannot be beaten on substance? Once again, if there were one right answer, we wouldn't need a guide like this.

The fact is, even judges at World Championships cannot begin to agree on this! Some will always prioritise your matter (substance) over your manner; for others (although mercifully few) you could win a debate just telling jokes for seven minutes. Happily, the more experienced fall somewhere between the two, and marks for speakers are awarded in roughly equal proportion for manner and matter. This is the fairest way, as it does not give an unfair advantage to either the comic or the human encyclopaedia that sends you to sleep.

Matter is important – you cannot win a debate without providing examples to support your argument, and some analysis as to why that example works, why it works for *your* case, and why it is better than the example given by the other side of the table. But there is nothing more boring than someone who reels off facts and figures in a barely audible, monotonous voice, looking down at the floor. If the judge is so bored that he stops listening then it doesn't matter how good your argument is – if the judge doesn't hear it, you won't get the credit.

That is not to say that you must be the funniest person in the world to win. Not everyone is, or can be funny, and when someone tries and fails, it can be worse than not trying. But what everyone can, and should do, is have inflection, stress the words and the points you want the judges to notice (try slowing down your speech when making your 'killer' point), and make regular eye contact with all the judges. If you can crack a joke, great, you should do so, but do not make your speech a stand-up routine. Being funny won't win the debate (except in Ireland!) so make sure that,

if you are funny, you are funny whilst being relevant and making strong arguments. If you can do that, you will be very hard to beat.

A word must also be said about structure, which is part of both manner and matter. The simple fact is, most judges are quite simple, and will get lost in your speech if you don't 'signpost' what you are saying. At the university level, some of the best speakers lose because they forget their structure (or they think they are good enough not to need it!)

Everybody needs good structure. This is because when you are speaking and making good eye contact with the judges it can be difficult for them to note everything down. A clear structure highlights points at the beginning in big bold headings ("This is what I am going to talk about today [1,2,3]), flags each new point as it is raised ("This is the opening/2nd/3rd point I am going to bring to the table"), and finishes by briefly recapping those points ("So what have I told you? I've told you [1...2...3...]).

You can then be sure that the judge has had plenty of opportunity to note down what the points are, so that when you are developing them in the middle of your speech, he/she can concentrate on the argument and analysis that goes with it. Every debate culture in the world recognizes the importance of clear structure, and it is, fortunately, one of the few things on which we all agree!

6. Judging

All judges, although it may not seem like it, are human – honest! That is to say, they are not perfect, debate-judging machines. They can (and do) make mistakes. But they try very, very hard not to make mistakes, and most of the time, they succeed.

So what will they look for from you? Put simply, all of the above! Structure, style, arguments backed up by examples and supported by analysis, good rebuttal of an opposing team's arguments, and plenty of POIs being offered. All these help you win a debate, but there will be times when you do all of this, and still don't win. So what happened?

The judge has to balance the arguments he/she has heard – what were the 'killer' points, and who made them? Did the style of the PM overcome the substance of the Leader of the Opposition? It is very rare that debaters will be evenly matched in all areas, and the judge must decide what was more important *in that debate*.

What a judge should never do is bring his/her own knowledge to the debate. Judges are not there to judge you on what *wasn't* said, or on what they *expect* to be said, they judge on what has been brought to the table by you. That is not to say that, if the 'big' arguments have been missed, they cannot mention it in their feedback (e.g. "I was surprised that nobody mentioned X, as it is central to the debate, [but it has not affected the decision in any way]...") as feedback is not just about why they made the decision they did, it is about helping you to become better debaters.

So what will happen when the debate is done, and judgment has been made? For most debates, you will receive 'open' adjudication – you will be told your position in the debate, and reasons for it. For later rounds, semi-finals, etc., it will generally be kept secret until the finalists are announced. This helps to keep the

suspense. In any case, once a decision is announced, you can then approach your judges for feedback.

Remember, even if you disagree with the decision, listen to the reasons for it. Most judges have debated before, some to an exceptionally high level, and will be able to justify their choice of winner and loser. If you think a decision is wrong, and the 'justification' given also seems wrong, you may wish to complain to the tournament organisers – they won't change the decision, but will look carefully at that judge in the future.

Be careful, though. If you complain about every decision where you lose or come third, people may start to think that the problem lies with you rather than with your judges. Bad judging does sometimes happen, and it can be devastating, but all debaters suffer from it, and all have to deal with it. It is unfortunate, but it is also the nature of debating, and how you cope with a bad decision, and how you respond to it in the next round, often says more about you as a debater than winning every round.

7. What next?

There is only so much that can be taught in a guide such as this. It can explain the basics, but there really is no substitute for practice. Have as many debates as you can, try your hand at judging one or two (you'll soon see how difficult it can be!), read as much as you can about current affairs, as these are likely to be the issues you will be debating. Most importantly, if you have strong beliefs about one topic or another, try building a case that puts forward the opposite point of view. You may not always be asked to debate on the side with which you already agree! Above all, whenever, wherever and whichever topic you debate, remember – it may be a serious activity whilst you are doing it, but it should also be fun! So practice as much as you can, read as much as you can, be prepared to think on your feet, and enjoy it!