

PHSSL Guide to Parliamentary Debate

Introduction:

The impetus for Parliamentary Debate in PHSSL came from a desire of the Executive Board to expand debate opportunities for students. Five years after the inception of the event – at the Summer 2014 PHSSL Executive Board meeting – we reviewed a survey of PHSSL members and made changes in the event. It was the Board’s intention to retain this argumentation event without erecting high entry-level barriers that would keep schools or individual students from participating. Extensive changes were made at the 2017 Summer meeting and those changes are reflected here. Additional changes were made at the 2020 Summer meeting involving the number of competitors

Motions:

The topics for parliamentary debate are stated as general beliefs of the parliamentary house that is debating them. The judge(s) and the four students form a legislative body. The team in favor of the motion is known as The Government. The team opposed to the motion is known as The Opposition. Arguments flow pro and con on the motion at hand and then a decision is rendered in the form of a vote by the judge(s). Judges are expected to set aside their personal beliefs and vote to accept or reject a motion based on the arguments made by the debaters. There is no need for The Government to advance a plan of action or to be bound in their arguments to a specific country or a specific time period.

The Government has the freedom and burden of defining "This House" and the key terms of the resolution as well as defining the Government and Opposition burdens for the round (On-Case). Unless the government's definitions violate the educational value of the debate, their definitions should frame the round. If Government definitions harm the educational value of debate, they may be challenged with a "topicality" argument. Therefore, the focus of the round should be on the arguments set forth by the Government in the Prime Minister's speech (1st Speech). The goal of the Opposition is primarily to rebut this position, and secondarily to advance their own case (Off-case) to enhance the educational value of debate.

Also, the language that follows “This House” is important to the style of debate that is expected.

- “Should” implies more of a Lincoln-Douglas-style resolution where competitors are welcome to include a value and value criterion in their framing of debate
- “Believes” implies a Cross-X-style debate where the teams are welcome to include a “plan” to solve a problem in the real world.
- “Will/Is/No keyword following” implies a Public Forum-style fact-based debate that looks generally looks at the status quo and its impacts, on balance.

Format:

The Prime Minister (PM) speaks first and outlines definitions for the resolution and frames the scope of debate and burdens for each side.

The Leader of Opposition (LO) follows and attacks the Government's (GOV) case. Time permitting, he should present an "Off Case" which can include another side for debate but is of secondary importance to the GOV case. The LO should NOT redefine the resolution unless it is obvious the resolution is non-topical, a truism, or detracts from the educational value of debate. This topicality argument becomes another point the judge can vote off in the round: was the way the GOV defined the resolution educational? If it is deemed abusive, the OPP should win the round regardless of arguments presented.

The Member of Government (MG) supports the "On Case" and attack the "Off Case" and Member of Opposition (MOP) do the reverse. The focus should be one the case provided by the Government. No new arguments should be given in the member speeches by either team (Speeches 3&4 in the round).

After all speakers have spoken once, the first or second speaker for each side gives a reply speech, with The Opposition's reply happening first and The Government's reply second.

The reply speeches are not going to delve into fine detail, but will take a broad approach to the issues of the debate. They should also summarize their own case either as part the analysis of the issues or towards the end of the speech as a separate section. For obvious reasons the reply speeches cannot introduce new arguments. Not only is this unfair but a complete misunderstanding of the role of reply speeches. The reply speech is a summing up of the whole debate, not a chance to introduce new ideas. Voting Issues are welcomed in this section.

Speaking time for speeches is 7 minutes, and for reply speeches 5 minutes (must be given by PM or LO). There is no extra preparation time provided.

Clash between the teams is vital. However, individuals do not have a burden to respond to any specific number of arguments. Adding additional argumentation to the debate is far more important than pointing out arguments that went unrefuted by the other team. Judges should have the sole discretion to determine what arguments were dropped and what arguments were responded to.

Interruptions:

A Point of Information, Clarification, or Order is offered in the course of a speech by a member of the opposing team. The speaker may either accept the point or decline it. If accepted, the opponent may make a short point or ask a short question (15 seconds or less) that deals with some issue in the debate (preferably one just made by the speaker). There is no limit to questions asked or answered during a given debate, but there should be some clashing interactions between teams during debate.

- *Points of Clarification* – Stand, be recognized, and ask for clarification of something the speaker has said.
- *Points of Information* – Stand, be recognized, and ask a question where the speaker is challenged directly to defend their statement.
- *Points of Order* – Stand during reply speeches or 2nd member speeches to indicate a new argument when it cannot be refuted. If the judge feels the argument (not new support of a prior argument) is new, the judge may note this on the ballot and disregard the argument.

A Point of Information is offered by standing and saying “Point of Information/Clarification/Order.” The speaker on the floor is not obliged to accept every point. He may ask the interrupter to sit down, may finish the sentence and then accept the point, or may accept the point then and there.

More than one member of the opposing team may rise simultaneously. The speaker on the floor may decline all or some, and may choose which one to take. The others then sit down. Opposing speakers must sometimes tread a fine line between the legitimate offering of Points of Information on the one hand, and overwhelming the speaker on the other. The fact that Points of Information must be offered makes the parliamentary debate more aggressive and more prone to interruptions. However, continuous offering by a team really amounts to excessive interruption. This should incur penalties in for the team members involved. Follow-up questions are allowed of the discretion of the speaker and the questioner should ask permission before asking a follow-up question.

In general, speakers should not offer Points of Information only a few seconds after a previous offer has been declined or while the speaker on the floor is clearly in the early stages of answering a Point of Information he just accepted: frequent violations of these principles might reasonably be penalized.

The Point of Information may be in the form of a question to the person making a speech, or it may be a remark addressed to the speaker. The Point of Information must be brief. 10 to 15 seconds is the norm, and over that the questioner should be told to sit down by the speaker. As well, when the person making the speech understands the point, he can tell the interrupter to sit down - the speaker does not have to let the interrupter complete his point in all cases.

Communication During the Round

While debaters should not be disruptive during the round—and should be penalized appropriately if they are—they should be able to communicate quietly and nonverbally with their own team without penalty throughout debate through passing notes, electronic chat, etc. without incurring penalty. This practice is necessary since there is no allocated preparation time and a good Parliamentary debate team should function as a team.

Technology and Parliamentary Debate

Technology is allowed during all phases of PHSSL competition, and Parliamentary debate is no exception. Students may use technology during the preparation and competition phases of the round to access previously prepared evidence and analysis, gather information or communicate with those in the round. Students should NOT be communicating with anyone outside of the round including teammates they might share online documents with during the round. The judge has the right to check this at any time during the round.

Winning the Debate:

The goal of every Parliamentary debate round is to either uphold or defeat the Government case, as is the case in British Parliament. The “Off Case” can also be factored into the decision, but “off case” arguments should be given lower priority than “On case” arguments. Winning clashes, presenting sound logical arguments, offering appropriate evidence, and presenting persuasively should all be weighed in deciding the round. Although empirical evidence is allowed and encouraged, good argumentation and logical reasoning should triumph over empirical evidence. Therefore, the official Debate Evidence Rules do not apply to Parliamentary Debate.