

How to Judge Speech & Debate

There are two types of competitive public speaking: Individual Events (IE's) and Debate. There are several modes of speaking (events) for both IE's and Debate.

What's the procedure of judging from the moment I arrive?

Begin by going to the judges registration table to let them know you've arrived. When the "tab room" is ready (tournament director's headquarters where they schedule judges and tabulate results from rounds) you will be given a ballot. Generally the type of event you are assigned is random. Note: Due to the complexities of assigning judges, it isn't protocol to pick the event you personally wish to judge.

Q: I have a ballot. Now what?

A: First look on your ballot for your room number (and in the case of tournaments hosted at colleges) and which building you're round will take place. If you're the first person at your room, go in. You may want to leave the door open so competitors know it's ok to enter, or you may greet them at the door. If students arrive before you, they will respectfully wait for you at the door before entering. They are not allowed to enter without you.

Q: I found my room. Now what?

A: Call roll. You will have a cover sheet with all the speakers listed for your round. There will typically be anywhere from 4-8 speakers. You may call students by name or their code which is printed on your cover sheet. It's entirely possible not everyone will be there when you call roll. It's ok. If it isn't time for the round to start yet, you may wait for them. If it's time (or even past time if the tournament is running late) you may begin even if all speakers aren't in the room. When late speakers arrive, they'll wait for the speaker to finish before entering the room. They'll apologize and let you know who they are for your roll.

Q: I've called roll. Now what?

A: Ask the first speaker on the list to begin. It is not necessary to have direct eye contact with the speaker during the entire time of their speech. Speakers do appreciate direct eye contact with their audience and judge, but also use time during the speaker's speech to make notes on the speaker's ballot. If you wait until the round is over, you'll have forgotten much of what you wanted to write and will significantly slow down the tournament.

Q: All the speakers in my round are done. Now what?

A: Thank the speakers. This will be their cue that they're dismissed. As they are leaving, you can finish any notes on ballots and mark the cover sheet. When finished, promptly return to where you were given the ballot. Hand it to the person reviewing ballots. They will visually scan your cover sheet and ballots to search for errors (like missing rankings, unsigned cover sheet, etc.). Errors happen often even among experienced coaches, so don't feel bad if they catch an error. Once they're satisfied all is well, they will say "thank you", and you're now ready to get your ballot for the next round (or if not assigned to the next round, to get a cup of coffee and take a little break).

How do I fill out a ballot?

(demo)

- IE Ranking: 1 is best, 2 is 2nd best, etc. Typically we don't rank past "4". For example, a round with 6 speakers will have a 1st, 2nd, 3rd place speaker and three "4's". (Exception- Some tournaments will notify judges ahead of time if they want them to rank students 1-6)
- IE Rating: This number is less important, but may be used in deciding who advances if several students finish preliminary rounds with the same "rank". Whatever scale is used, say for instance, a 10-30 range. 30 is outstanding and 10 is very unprepared. It's rare for a speaker to be a "10" or "30", but usually somewhere in between in your evaluation. **One way to look at this range is like grading where 27-30 is an "A", 24-26 is a "B", etc.
- Debate: One team gets a "W" (a win) and the other team gets an "L" (a loss).
- Debate: Each speaker also gets a score for "speaker points". It is possible for a judge to give higher speaker points to the losing team.

** In debate, we want judges to temporarily set aside their personal world view, and for about an hour, be neither liberal nor conservative. Please choose a winner based on which team did the best job supporting their arguments. Keep in mind that the bottom line for a debater is to win the round. Students are assigned to defend a resolution one round, and attack the resolution the next; they have no choice but to bring well-researched arguments both for and against the resolution at the tournament. So we ask judges not to "punish" students for advocating a position with which he or she doesn't agree.

Common questions from new judges

Q: Am I really qualified to be a judge?

A: Ever watched a movie and had an opinion about it afterward? Or a candidate running for office? Of course you have, because you're an observant, feeling, and

thinking individual who interprets what is being presented to you. You are in fact highly qualified to judge high school speakers in both speech and debate.

Q: Am I the only judge during the round?

A: Preliminary rounds have one judge. Generally there are 3-5 preliminary rounds depending on the size of the tournament and number of total entrants in an event. Speakers with the best scores in the preliminary rounds get to advance to “out rounds” (quarterfinals, semi-finals, finals). These rounds typically have 3 judges.

Q: What if I “make a mistake” and choose the “wrong” speaker as the “best”?

A: It is not possible for you to make a mistake, because speakers are not evaluated by any sort of secret system. It is their job to prove to you, in your honest opinion, who is the best speaker. Just like when you watch a disappointing movie with poor acting, the movie goes next to you may have thought it was very realistic. You’re both right because it’s your interpretation.

Q: But what if I give a speaker the best score, but he or she goes on to get poor scores in following rounds from other judges. Didn’t I make a mistake?

A: Nope. There’s too many variables to second guess yourself. Perhaps the speaker you rated #1 had a great round for you, but didn’t perform so well in subsequent rounds. Or the random assignment of speakers in subsequent rounds were just much better than the speakers you saw in the first round. It’s all relative!

Q: Will I judge anyone I know?

A: No, the tab room works hard not to assign any speakers from a school you’re affiliated with to any round you judge. If you do notice an error, please contact a tournament official and notify them. They will fix the error for you.

Q: Will the speakers see the ballots I fill out?

A: Only after the tournament is over. They will carefully read your notes so they know what to improve on and what went well before their next tournament.

Q: Do I give kids verbal feedback?

A: No! Giving verbal feedback means some would get extra “coaching” while the tournament is in session and give them an unfair advantage over others. Resist the temptation. Even if they ask, remind them tournament rules forbid verbal feedback.

Q: So what do I say on the ballot?

A: Every speaker not only wants to know what they did well, but what you think they should work on. They're counting on your honest feedback. Try to make at least 1 positive comment on the ballot and at least 1 constructive criticism. It's your call regarding what to focus on whether it's the speaker's organization, content, style, or any combination.

Here are samples of common positive comments/constructive criticisms...

ORGANIZATION

"Loved the description in your intro- created a picture for me..."

"Thanks for the roadmap in the intro, but sounds like you forgot to bring up your 3rd point later in the speech"

"Great job connecting your conclusion to your intro- really helped me see the big picture"

"I was a little confused on the ending- didn't seem like it was the end of the story"

CONTENT

"You really know your facts. And they were important facts that went beyond common knowledge"

"You know your facts, but you may want to look for more convincing evidence"

"Examples are perfect, impactful illustrations for your ideas"

"Connection between your ideas and your examples didn't always connect for me"

STYLE

"Great job with facial expression and pacing of your words to create a mood"

"Sometimes had a really hard time following everything- you spoke so quickly"

"You've obviously practiced where to put your pauses for dramatic impact- nice!"

"Be careful about distracting gestures or playing with the buttons on your shirt"