

An Introduction to Parliamentary Debate

Presented by Andrew Riley, Lincoln High School (ariley@pps.net)

1

- What is Parliamentary Debate?
 - At the most basic level, Parli is a form of debate in which you and a partner from your own team debate 2 people from another team. You are debating to support or oppose a “resolution,” which is the topic of the round. The side supporting the resolution is usually trying to solve a problem in how the world works now, while the side opposing the resolution is usually arguing that the supporters’ ideas are wrong, or that the world isn’t broken.
 - Unlike the other three debate forms (CX, LD, Public Forum), Parliamentary (“Parli”) is *unprepared*: you don’t know the topic of the round or the arguments you’ll be making in advance. After the debaters decide on the topic for the round (more about that later), each team has 15 minutes to work with your partner privately to develop your arguments. You can’t consult anyone but your partner during this 15 minutes of “prep time.”
 - Also unlike the other three debate forms, Parli debaters don’t bring scripts, evidence, or outside materials to the round, except for an English dictionary and blank paper to take notes on.
 - Parli topics are often political, and usually have something to do with events in the news (e.g. Syria and immigration reform).
 - Parli is considered a “common knowledge” form of debate, which means that you and your partner should be able to make arguments for or against a topic without having to delve into the latest nuances of academic research. Arguments should be understood by the average person brought in off the street; if I didn’t know anything about the topic you were debating and I’d never heard of Speech & Debate, I should still be able to judge a Parli round.
- Key terms & principles
 - Affirmative / “Aff” / Government: the team responsible for supporting the resolution.
 - Negation / “Neg” / Opposition: the team responsible for arguing against the resolution.
 - Resolution: the topic of the round. In Parli, you won’t know what the resolution is before the round. When both teams - aff and neg - have arrived in their assigned rooms at a tournament, the judge will give the aff team a slip of paper with 3 topics on it. The aff team crosses out a topic they don’t want to debate, and then hands the slip of paper to the neg team. The neg team crosses out a topic they don’t want to debate, and the remaining topic is the resolution for the round.
 - Definitions / resolitional analysis: sometimes, resolutions will be very straightforward, and it’ll be easy to understand and agree on what they mean. More likely, though, is that there’ll be some key term or idea in the

An Introduction to Parliamentary Debate

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2

resolution which you could interpret in different ways. For example, “The United States should support the nuclear family.” The term “nuclear family” refers to parents and children as a unit, not a family which is suffering from radiation sickness. So defining that term would be very important in order to have a good debate. The affirmative team should begin every debate by defining and analyzing any key terms in the resolution.

- “This House”: In most rounds, the resolution begins with the phrase “This House” (or “TH”), because Parli is modeled after debates in the British House of Commons (the Parliament that the name refers to). Aff should *always* define the term “This House,” rather than leaving it undefined. “TH” should be defined as the person you’re hoping to act to make the resolution happen; for example, in the resolution “This House should invade Syria,” “This House” is going to be defined as whoever the aff wants to invade Syria. Usually, a good definition is “the United States federal government.”
- Topicality: sometimes, the definitions that the aff provides are problematic or abusive to the neg. “Topicality” is a special kind of argument that allows neg to replace bad definitions with more reasonable ones. Topicality, also called “T,” is a complicated kind of argument, so it’s wise to ask your coaches about it before you use it. Generally, though, you explain a) why the aff’s definitions are poor, b) propose some better definitions, c) explain how and why your definitions are preferable, and d) then analyze why it’s important to have good definitions in a round.
- Prep time: the 15 minutes at the start of a round - after the resolution has been chosen - where debaters confer with their partners and develop their cases.
- Constructive speech: the first four speeches of a round are called “constructive speeches,” and it’s the place where you can bring up new arguments, analysis, and evidence to support your side.
- Contention / advantage / argument: the basic unit of a debate. Whatever you call them, contentions support your side of the debate with logic, analysis, and reasoning. Each contention makes one basic argument, and often follows the structure below. You’ll usually have 2 to 4 contentions in your case.
 - Tagline: a snappy, witty title summarizing your contention. It’s just fine to call your contention something dry, but judges appreciate cleverness. Compare these two taglines for the same argument about immigration

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3

reform: “The Senate immigration bill increases the risk of deportation for undocumented families” vs. “This bill tears families apart.”

- **Background:** a contention should provide enough background information for the judge and your opponents to understand your argument. You should phrase the main claim (the thesis statement) of your contention clearly and explicitly. For example, following the immigration example, I might spend some time analyzing what Congress is saying about immigration reform, and what the current law is. If you’re aff, you should also include information about the problems that you want to solve by affirming the resolution.
- **Link:** your contention should identify how your argument relates to the resolution. If the topic of the round is “The United States should pass immigration reform,” and my argument is about tearing families apart, I might explain here how my case or my side (aff or neg) keeps families together.
- **Impact:** this is often the most important part of the contention, where you explain to the judge why your argument matters. Let’s keep the same example: I’ve already argued that the immigration bill we’re debating tears families apart, and I’ve established that I want to keep families together. To analyze the impact, I might talk about why it’s important to keep families together, and what the effects of complete families are (for example, I could argue that keeping families together makes it easier for young folks to excel in school, and thus to get high-quality, well-paying jobs years from now).
- **Refutation:** both aff and neg should spend some time in the constructive speeches refuting their opponents’ case, which means coming up with arguments for why your opponents’ arguments are wrong. You might argue that your opponents are wrong when it comes to facts, you might argue that what they’re saying is a good thing is actually bad, or you can talk about how - even if their arguments are all right - your case is more compelling. There are dozens of other ways to refute arguments, and your coaches will work with you on that.
- **Rebuttal speech:** the two speeches at the end of a Parli round are “rebuttals,” where you summarize your side’s basic arguments and tell the judge why you think you’ve won the debate. You *cannot* bring up new arguments or new information in a rebuttal speech.
 - **Voting issues / “voters”:** Most of the time in a rebuttal speech should be spent on “voting issues,” which analyze reasons that you feel your side has won the debate. Instead of just rephrasing your contentions, it’s

An Introduction to Parliamentary Debate

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4

helpful and engaging to analyze 3 or 4 overarching themes about in the round, and then talk about why your side wins each of them. For example, let's say we're debating whether to take action in Syria. Aff might argue that military action is justified because President Assad's use of chemical weapons threatens lives. Neg might argue that a war in Syria would lead to high civilian casualties. A voting issue for either side might be "Saving Lives."

- Questions / "points of information": most forms of debate offer special periods of time for competitors to ask questions of one another. Parli is a little different, in that it allows you to ask questions during your opponents' speeches. First, the rules: you can only ask questions during constructive speeches, and only after your opponent has spent a minute talking. And in the last minute of the speech, you can't ask questions, either. If you want to ask a question, you simply stand up silently and wait for your opponent to acknowledge you. Once they do, then you can ask your question.
 - It's considered bad form to ask multiple questions at a time.
 - If you are giving a speech and your opponent stands to ask a question, you don't have to respond immediately. You can - and should - wait until you've finished a thought, and then acknowledge the question.
 - If your opponents are asking a lot of questions or you're running out of time, you also don't have to acknowledge them. It's usually appropriate to say, "I'm sorry, but I don't think I'll have time to address your question." If you're waiting to ask a question and your opponents signal that they don't have time to answer it, you and your partner should respect that.
- "Dropping" an argument: it's important in every speech to address each and every one of your own arguments, as well as your opponents' arguments. If you don't say anything about a given contention, you've "dropped" the argument. The principle we often use in debate is "silence is compliance," which means that ignoring an argument implies you agree with it. Please note that the idea that silence = consent is only ever true in a debate round; it's a really bad piece of advice outside of that context.
- Flow: during the round, you should take notes on what everyone (your opponents and your partner) says. These don't have to be word-for-word transcripts, but you should take notes in a way that makes sense of your learning style, and allows you to capture the gist of everything that is said in the round. Getting into the habit of good flowing keeps you organized, and helps your judges follow the round!
 - Roadmapping: at the beginning of each speech, you should preview the

An Introduction to Parliamentary Debate

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5

points you're going to argue, so that your judge knows where you're going. It can be as easy as saying, "In this speech, I'll argue that the immigration reform bill passed by the US Senate tears families apart, that it ignores the root causes of unlawful migration to the US, and that it represents a massive giveaway to the military-industrial complex."

- **Signposting:** road-mapping's best friend. "Signposting" means that you tell your judge and your opponents as clearly as possible which arguments you're referring to. It can look like this: "now, my first contention is that immigration reform tears families apart. Let's talk a little bit about background..."
- **Time signals:** it's common for Parli debaters to use a stopwatch or a cell phone to keep time, and figure out how long they have left to speak. Judges are often happy to help by giving you time signals with their hands.
- **Judges and the ballot:** every round has at least one judge, and elimination rounds often have 3 or sometimes more. The judge is responsible for filling out a ballot after the round, which indicates who - in the judge's view - won the round, and usually includes constructive criticism on how debaters can improve their performance. Judging is a little bit subjective, because every judge has preconceived notions and biases. At the same time, you should avoid criticizing a decision by a judge just because you don't agree with them; keep in mind that most judges have some experience with Speech & Debate, and some of us have been judging for longer than you've been in school. Losing sucks, but it helps to think of a loss as an opportunity for improvement, rather than a setback.
 - **Speaker points:** in addition to indicating who won the round, the judge will assign each individual competitor "speaker points," on a scale from 20 to 30, which indicates how well you presented your points. Most tournaments offer awards for top speakers, based on the number of speaker points you receive.
- A Parli round, outlined
 - **Before the round:** competitors will read tournament postings to figure out which room they're in, and which side they're on. About 5 or 10 minutes before the round starts, you should get your partner and walk to the room where the round will be held. You should wait outside the room until your judge arrives. After the judge and both teams show up, the round begins.
 - **Topic selection:** first, the aff side strikes out a topic on the slip which they don't want to debate, and the neg does the same thing. The remaining topic is the resolution for the round.
 - **Paradigms:** before prep time starts, it can help to ask a judge what their

An Introduction to Parliamentary Debate

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6

“paradigms” are, which is really a way of asking what they’re looking for in the round. Not all judges will know what you mean, and not all judges will have long lists of paradigms. But for those of us who do, it can be an important way to understand the experience and perspective of that judge.

- Prep time, 15 minutes: once you’ve decided on the resolution and asked about paradigms, prep time begins. The aff side gets to determine whether they prepare in the room or the hallway outside of it (the neg team will prep in whichever space the aff didn’t choose). For 15 minutes exactly (which the judge will time), you’ll work with your partner to develop arguments which support your side, either aff or neg. If need be, you’ll also agree on definitions for the resolution, and also try to anticipate what kind of arguments your opponents will use. After the 15 minutes is up, both teams will return to the room and begin the debate.
- 1st Aff Constructive (1AC), 7 minutes: in this speech, the first speaker for the affirmation will start by providing brief thanks to everyone in the room for making the debate possible. They’ll state the exact wording of the resolution, and then offer any definitions which they’ve developed. After that, they’ll present each of their contentions to support their side, in order. At the end of the speech, they’ll usually say something like, “and for all of these reasons, I urge a strong vote in the affirmative” and they’ll sit down.
- 1st Neg Constructive (1NC), 8 minutes: in this speech, the first speaker for the negation also provides brief thanks to everyone in the room. They’ll then either accept or refute the affirmation’s definitions, and proceed to present the neg’s case. After presenting the neg’s case, the speaker will begin to refute the aff’s contentions, as well.
- 2nd Aff Constructive (2AC), 8 minutes: in this speech, the second speaker for the affirmation will “rebuild” their case. They do this by first clashing with neg’s refutations on the aff case. Then the speaker will spend time refuting the neg’s case
- 2nd Neg Constructive (2NC), 8 minutes: in this speech, the second speaker for the negation will also “rebuild” their case. They do this by first clashing with aff’s refutations on the neg case. Then the speaker will spend time refuting the aff’s case
- Neg Rebuttal (NR), 4 minutes: in this speech, the negation’s first speaker presents any last-minute refutations, and then moves straight into voting issues, trying to persuade the judge that their side has won the debate, and illustrating how.
- Aff Rebuttal (AR), 5 minutes: in this speech, the affirmation’s first speaker

An Introduction to Parliamentary Debate

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7

presents any last-minute refutations, and then moves straight into voting issues, trying to persuade the judge that their side has won the debate, and illustrating how.

- After the round ends: after the round ends, the judge will privately decide who won, will assign competitors speaker points, and will turn their ballot in to the tournament staff. You will not usually know who won the round until the end of the tournament, when you get a look at your ballots. Good etiquette: shake your opponents' hands after the round, thank them (sincerely) for the debate, and then thank your judge for judging. After that, you should leave the room to let the judge think, and go to either your next round, or wherever your team is congregating at that tournament.