

Vassar Invitational Parliamentary Style Guide¹

We generally follow the college American Parliamentary Debate Association (APDA), of which the Vassar Debate Association is a member. More details can be found on their web site: <http://www.apdaweb.org/guide> .

The Basics

Parliamentary debate features a Government team and an Opposition team, each with two debaters. The Government strives to convince the judge the given motion should be adopted, the Opposition to show the motion should be defeated. Teams should expect to stand for the both the Government and the Opposition in different rounds on different motions. During the debate, each team gives three speeches. A judge will evaluate both the arguments and the speaking skills of each debater. The team that best supports their side wins.

The Motions

The motion is a short statement that serves as the topic of debate. The motions will concern issues that should be familiar to the average high school student. Some sample motions:

This house believes assisted suicide should be legal in the United States.

This house would allow foreign-born citizens to be President of the United States.

This house would use force to spread democracy internationally.

Three motions will be provided before each round, either publicly to all teams or directly to the judge. A different set of motions will be used for each round (or flight if the round is double-flighted).

The motion is chosen as follows:

- If the motions have not been provided publicly, the judge reads the three motions to the two teams.
- The judge flips a coin, and one team calls it in the air. The winner of the coin flip decides whether that team would prefer choice of motion or choice of side.
- The team that has the right to choose the motion as the result of the coin flip picks a motion.
- The team that has the right to choose the side then makes its choice of Government or Opposition.

Choices should be made promptly, the whole process taking no more than a minute or two. The teams then have fifteen minutes to prepare their cases.

The Cases

During the fifteen-minute prep time each team should prepare a short "case" with several reasons (2-4 are typical) why their side of the motion is correct. Research materials or prepared briefs may not be used. Statistics, expert quotes, and remote facts are discouraged because they cannot be readily verified. However, both teams are encouraged to use information that one would expect to be familiar to a well-read person, or that they explain in detail.

The Government has the right to set the terms of the debate and should provide a brief interpretation of the motion and/or a definition of key terms. They may interpret the motion more narrowly than given (e.g., "Court penalties should be determined by judges, not juries" may be applied only to civil cases, rather than criminal cases). The Government interpretation may be novel, but should respect common usage and must leave the Opposition reasonable grounds to argue against it. It should not rely on specific facts or information that the Opposition or the Judge are not likely to know.

The Opposition should prepare for what they expect the Government to present. However, they will likely have to adapt their case to the specifics of the Government's interpretation and the Government's actual case.

The Positions and Speeches

On each team, one debater is the lead speaker and the other is the member. The leader delivers the opening and

¹ This was originally based on the Osterweis Style Guide, which can be found at the Yale Debate Association web site, www.yaledebate.org . We follow the APDA timings, not the shorter Osterweis format.

closing speeches for their team. The member presents the middle speech. For the Government, the leader is known as the Prime Minister (PM) and the member is called the Member of Government (MG). On the Opposition team, the debaters are the Leader of Opposition (LO) and the Member of Opposition (MO).

Prime Minister Constructive (PMC)	7 minutes	Provides an interpretation of the resolution and lays out the Government's case
Leader of Opposition Constructive (LOC)	8 minutes	Lays out the Opposition case and replies to the Government case.
Member of Government Constructive (MGC)	8 minutes	Responds to previous arguments, and may introduce new points while doing so
Member of Opposition Constructive (MOC)	8 minutes	
Leader of Opposition Rebuttal (LOR)	4 minutes	Summarizes the debate from the Opposition perspective, while responding to previous arguments.
Prime Minister Rebuttal (PMR)	5 minutes	Summarizes the debate from the Government perspective, while responding to previous arguments.

Each speaker has a 30 second grace period at the end of their allotted time to finish their speech, after which they are out of order. There is no preparation time or pause between speeches other than a reasonable allowance for one speaker to be seated and the next to rise.

Constructives: Each team presents its case and responds to their opponent's case. New arguments may be introduced into the debate, either as independent points or responses to a previous argument.

Rebuttals: Each side should summarize the debate, emphasizing the team's strongest points and explaining why they should win the debate. New arguments cannot be raised in the rebuttals unless it is the PM's first opportunity to respond to a new point made in the MOC. New explanations and examples to illustrate previous arguments, and connecting and contrasting points already made are encouraged.

Questions

There is no cross-examination. The non-speaking team interrupts the speaker with three types of questions:

Points of Clarification (POC): At the beginning of the PMC right after the speaker has presented the Government interpretation of the motion, the PM may pause briefly and ask the Opposition if the interpretation is clear and acceptable, essentially asking if the Opposition wishes to raise a POC. Alternately, the Opposition may rise and ask for clarification. The clock stops while the opposing team briefly asks the speaker for further details about their case. The speaker must accept these questions. These questions should be intended to make the terms of the debate clear, not to introduce arguments or rebuttal.

If the Opposition believes the Government interpretation leaves no room for Opposition (called a "tight case") or relies on specific knowledge unavailable to the Opposition, they should make these arguments in the LOC.

Points of Information (POI): The clock continues while a member of the opposing team stands, traditionally with one hand on his head (to keep his wig in place) and the other arm outstretched. The speaker may accept the question, wave it off, or take it after finishing a point. The questioner asks a short question or makes a statement intended to undermine the argument being made. The speaker responds and continues speaking. There is no right to follow up with another question, though the opposing team may stand for another POI.

POIs are permitted only during the constructive speeches, and are not permitted during the first or last minute of the speech (called "protected time"). A speaker may refuse or defer a POI, but it is considered poor form not to accept some POIs if offered, and poor form for opponents not to offer any POIs.

Point of Order: A Point of Order is raised if a team believes the speaker has violated a rule of debate, for example, exceeding the 30 second grace period at the end of a speech, or presenting a new argument in rebuttal. The questioner stands, states "Point of Order," to the judge, and briefly explains the issue. The speaker has no right to reply. The judge may say "Point well taken" if she agrees, "Point not well taken" if she does not agree, or "Point under consideration" if she is still deciding. Time stops during a Point of Order and resumes after the judge's decision when the speaker continues.

Vassar Invitational Parliamentary Judge Instructions

Basics

The judge (or Speaker of the House) has three basic duties: see that the debate moves along expeditiously, rule on certain issues that arise during the debate, and decide the round by returning a completed ballot.

Starting the Round

Three motions will be given before each round, and a different set of motions will be used for each round (or flight if the round is double flighted).

The motion is chosen as follows:

1. If the motions have not been made public, the judge reads the three motions to the two teams.
2. The judge flips a coin, and one team calls it in the air. The winner of the coin flip decides whether that team would prefer choice of motion or choice of side.
3. The team that has the right to choose the motion as the result of the coin flip picks a motion.
4. The team that has the right to choose the side then makes its choice of side.

The teams should make their choices promptly, the whole process taking no more than a minute or two. The teams then have fifteen minutes to prepare their cases. They are not permitted to use research materials.

For some rounds—particularly the second flight of double flighted rounds—the debaters may have been given the motion, made their selections and begun case preparation before arriving at the room, in which case the judge will simply need to wait until their prep time is finished.

Script

The Judge may follow a script, patterned after English parliamentary practice, though this is not required.

Constructives

- To begin the round: “I call this house to order and call upon the honorable Prime Minister to deliver the first speech of the round not to exceed seven minutes.”
- Before LOC: “I thank the honorable Prime Minister and call upon the Leader of the Opposition to deliver a speech not to exceed eight minutes.”
- Before MGC: “I thank the honorable Leader of the Opposition and call upon the Member of Government to deliver a speech not to exceed eight minutes.”
- Before MOC: “I thank the honorable Member of Government and call upon the Member of Opposition to close out the constructive portion of the round in a speech not to exceed eight minutes.”

Rebuttals

- Before LOR: “I thank the honorable Member of Opposition and call upon the Leader of Opposition to deliver the first rebuttal speech of the round not to exceed four minutes, reminding him/her that while new examples are welcome, new arguments are not.”
- Before PMR: “I thank the honorable Member of Opposition and call upon the Prime Minister to deliver the final speech of the round not to exceed five minutes, reminding him/her that while new examples are welcome, new arguments are not.”

There is no prep time between speeches, and speakers should rise in turn with only a reasonable delay to collect their papers and move to the podium.

Questions

There are three types of questions: Point of Clarification (POC), Point of Information (POI) and Point of Order (PO). The judge should be aware that time stops during a POC and a PO, but not during a POI. The POC and the POI are managed by the debaters, but the judge is required to make a decision if a Point of Order is raised.

Keeping Time

Debaters will usually time themselves and their opponents, and raise a Point of Order if a speaker exceeds their grace period. The judge may want to also keep time to monitor the round. Remember time stops during a Point of Clarification (POC) or a Point of Order (PO), but not during a Point of Information (POI). See the Style Guide for a discussion of these questions.

After the Round

After the final speech, the judge may give a brief oral critique to the debaters, and should promptly decide the round and fill out the ballot. To keep the tournament on time, the critique and balloting should take no more than 15 minutes total. The ballot should always include a clear reason for decision, and a justification for any points awarded below 23 or 28 and above. If a low point win is intended, this should also be clearly explained.

Ballots should be returned to tab promptly. However, a judge hearing both flights of a single round should hold and return both ballots when the second flight is over.

Making the Decision

We suggest the following approach to deciding the round:

First decide which side won. Make your decision based on which team carried the more important issues in the round. The teams should tell you which issues they think are most important during rebuttals, why they believe that they won those issues, and why they are more important than issues they may have lost. If they fail to do so explicitly, then you must use your discretion. In a tie, the decision should go to the Opposition.

Second, rank the speakers from 1 to 4, with 1 being the best and 4 the worst. A speaker's rank should take into account both argument and presentation skills. Speakers may not tie on ranks. The sum of the ranks assigned to the winning team should be less than the sum of the ranks assigned to the losing team.

Assign each debater points from 23 (generally weak debater), 25 (average debater, average round) to 27 (Winston Churchill on a good day). Debaters may tie in speaker points but not in ranks. Points 28 or above, or below 23 should be justified on the ballot and may be questioned by the tab director. They should be rare. Ties or low point wins should be explained on the ballot, may be questioned and should also be rare.

The ballot should always have a clear, written reason for the decision. Additional feedback may be provided at the judge's discretion

Again, we emphasize the need for judges to balance their desire to provide detailed feedback with the need to keep the tournament running on time.

Evidence

Debaters are not given the motions or subject areas prior to the tournament, and are not permitted to use research material or prepared briefs during their case preparation before a round. This does not mean they cannot use facts, data, quotations or other information to support their arguments, only that what they use either be generally known or clearly explained. The evidentiary standard is "what a well-read person should know" or "The New York Times standard," that is, what someone who regularly reads a national newspaper should know. Debaters may introduce more obscure facts provided they explain them thoroughly, including any aspects that may weaken their usefulness and benefit their opponents. As this is difficult to enforce, using obscure information is discouraged.

Debaters may often present "facts" that their opponents will claim are false, or that the judge does not believe are true. We all innocently present such facts every day. As noted, there is no research prior to the round, and no opportunity to check facts prior to the decision. A judge has no choice but to use discretion in these cases whether and how to consider these facts in awarding the ballot.

Our suggestion is that debates are won by arguments that are clearly explained, illustrated, and weighed in terms of importance against those presented by the other side. In our experience, debates rarely come down to the truth or falsehood of specific data presented by either side.