

**A Primer on Public Forum Debate**  
**By Darin M. Maier, St. Andrew's Episcopal School**  
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**What is Public Forum Debate?**

Public Forum Debate is an event that was created by the National Forensics League at the start of the 2002 debate season. Initially called Controversy, and later Ted Turner, the idea was to create a form of debate that was not as jargon-laden as policy debate (and to a lesser extent, Lincoln-Douglas) had become and offer students who want to debate but cannot dedicate the time to an event like policy an option for competition. Additionally, there was some talk that the event would be something that could be put on television, a way for the NFL to gain exposure in a format people could understand.

More specifically, Public Forum Debate is a contest pitting two teams against each other. These teams, known as “pro” and “con”, debate a resolution that changes every month. The resolution (typically released about two to three weeks before it is to first be used) may be a proposition of policy, value, or fact, and usually deals closely with ongoing current events (for example, the September 2010 resolution was “Resolved: Allowing deep water offshore drilling is in the best interest of the United States.”). While it is not an absolute guarantee that teams will have to debate both sides, it is all but a certain guarantee that such will happen and so, teams need to prepare for both sides of this debate.

**What happens in a Public Forum Debate round?**

The first thing that happens is that there is a coin toss. The team that wins the toss has the option of EITHER choosing the side they wish to debate (pro or con) OR choosing whether to speak first or second – they do not get to decide both of these things. The team that loses the toss gets the remaining choice. Therefore, it is entirely possible that the team opposed to the resolution may get to speak first, a departure from virtually every other debate format (this is also the place at where lay judges can get the most confused).

After the coin toss, the debate begins. The first team’s first speaker gets up and delivers a constructive speech of no longer than 4 minutes. Often, this speech is likely to be entirely scripted out ahead of time. After that, the second team’s first speaker gets up and delivers a constructive speech not longer than 4 minutes. This speech might also be fully scripted, but may also be partially scripted, maybe 2 to 2 ½ minutes of prepared text and the remainder of the time dedicated to attacking the previous speaker’s arguments (all this depends on the preferences of the coach and debaters involved). After this, a 3-minute crossfire period takes place where the two speakers may ask questions and respond to each other. Unlike traditional debate (where there is a clear delineation between cross-examiner and witness), the questioning is bidirectional (meaning either opponent may put forth a question).

After this first exchange, the second speakers for each side deliver speeches not to exceed four minutes and engage in their own 3-minute crossfire. These speeches are generally not going to be prepared ahead of time, though evidence may be cut ahead of time and introduced here (it can be introduced in the first round of speeches of well). Generally, these speeches are designed to answer back arguments made by the other team. Thus, to this point, the round would have proceeded as follows:

Team A, Speaker 1: 4 minute constructive  
Team B, Speaker 1: 4 minute constructive  
Crossfire: 3 minutes

Team A, Speaker 2: 4 minute constructive  
Team B, Speaker 2: 4 minute constructive  
Crossfire: 3 minutes

At this point, there is a round of summary speeches given by each team's first speakers. Functionally, these operate as rebuttals, where teams should rebut arguments that they are losing and stress arguments that they are winning, but should not introduce new arguments into the debate. About the only exception for this might be if the B2 speaker introduced new arguments in his speech – then the A team's summary would be the first chance to respond to these points. After these summary speeches, a "Grand Crossfire" is held, where all four speakers have the floor for a total of 3 minutes. After the Grand Crossfire, the second speaker for each team delivers a 2 minute "Final Focus" in an attempt to crystallize the round down to the key issues in an attempt to win the debate.

Thus, the whole Public Forum Round looks like this:

Team A, Speaker 1: 4 minute constructive  
Team B, Speaker 1: 4 minute constructive  
Crossfire: 3 minutes

Team A, Speaker 2: 4 minute constructive  
Team B, Speaker 2: 4 minute constructive  
Crossfire: 3 minutes

Team A, Speaker 1: 2 minute summary  
Team B, Speaker 1: 2 minute summary  
Grand Crossfire: 3 minutes

Team A, Speaker 2: 2 minute Final Focus  
Team B, Speaker 2: 2 minute Final Focus

Additionally, each team has 2 minutes of preparation time they may use at any point during the debate to prepare upcoming speeches.

## **Building the Case**

One thing to keep in mind is that neither side has a particular burden of proof that must be overcome, unlike a criminal trial. Basically, if one side wins by just a little bit, they win the round. As you put together a case, keep that in mind.

Before actually writing your cases, a good idea is for all your squad's public forum debaters to spend time brainstorming about the topic. Typically, you first want to go through the resolution and determine what the key words in the topic are, for the purposes of finding definitions to those terms. This is more of a self-preservation measure than anything else, so that you don't have to accept an opponent's offbeat definition of a key word in the resolution. After that task is complete, you should generate a list of all possible arguments that you can see on both sides of the resolution. Even arguments you don't plan on using should be included, as you can figure out what your opponents might argue against you and anticipate for it.

Once you decide what arguments you plan to use in your case, then you can begin the process of writing the case itself. Typically, a four-minute constructive will have the following elements:

- A brief quote that summarizes a key argument in support of your position.
- The definition of key terms within the resolution, but keep this focused on the essential terms.
- Two or three contentions that outline major arguments to support your position, with evidence and analysis as needed to develop the position.

When speaking second, you likely will write a two or two-and-a-half minute case, and thus will probably have difficulty getting out more than two contentions, and even those are likely to not be exceptionally well developed. You also should forgo defining terms unless your opponent comes up with a definition for a key term that is either really slanted or just off the wall entirely.

In using evidence to support your arguments, the idea is to find quotes that are brief, on point, and clear in their meaning. Unlike policy debate, you won't have time to read long pieces of evidence with significant warrants behind the authors claim. Clarity and succinctness are the order of the day in public forum debate.

In writing the case, also keep in mind that how arguments are worded and the way they will sound is just as important as the argument itself within the context of public forum debate. Therefore, pay close attention to the elements of spoken grammar and precision within your wording. Particularly when dealing with lay judges, your articulation should be as exact as possible.

## **Speaking Positions**

As with policy debate, certain speaking positions demand certain strengths and talents. For example, in policy debate, the first affirmative should typically be your fastest and most efficient speaker, while the second negative should have the ability to see all the ways that a second affirmative rebuttal can win a round and then be able to preempt those arguments. Typically, a policy debater will do one first position and one second position (i.e. first affirmative/second negative).

This is no different for public forum, though the decision making process is considerably simpler. Often times, a public forum debater will be the first speaker on both sides or the second speaker on both sides. In general, the better speaker will be the first speaker in a public forum round, while the better debater will be the second speaker on a team in a round.

## Getting Information

In general, most resolutions will have a political element to them. Thus, it seems to be a good idea to do some research through the various public policy institutes or special interest groups that operate around the nation. A list of some, including their political bent, is given below. Websites are current as of March 2011.

- CATO – libertarian (CATO refers to itself as being “market-liberal”), supporters of small government on both economic and social issues. Website located at [www.cato.org](http://www.cato.org)
- Progressive Policy Institute – this group identifies itself as a “third way” approach to policy issues, adapting the nation’s progressive traditions to the realities of the Information Age (from the group’s website). They are connected to the Democratic Leadership Council, which represents the modernist and often centrist wing of the Democratic Party. Website located at [www.ppionline.org](http://www.ppionline.org)
- Heritage Foundation – this group is your traditional conservative policy organization, along the lines of what one might call the mainstream Republican Party. Website found at [www.heritage.org](http://www.heritage.org)
- American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) – civil libertarians, generally not taking stands on economic issues. The ACLU’s advocacy of civil liberties takes place through both the legislature and the courts and they base their defense of those ideas on the Bill of Rights. Website at [www.aclu.org](http://www.aclu.org)
- Brookings Institute – self-identified as nonpartisan, the Brookings Institute specializes in economics, foreign policy, issues of governance, and metropolitan policy (cities). Website accessed through either [www.brook.edu](http://www.brook.edu) or [www.brookings.edu](http://www.brookings.edu)
- Center on Budget and Policy Priorities – liberal but focused primarily on economic policy as it affects lower and middle-income individuals. Website located at [www.cbpp.org](http://www.cbpp.org)
- Carnegie Endowment for International Peace – self-identified as non-partisan, focused on issues of international engagement. Website is located at [www.carnegieendowment.org](http://www.carnegieendowment.org)
- People for the American Way – founded to counteract the rise of the Christian right in America, focused primarily on social and civil liberty issues. Website located at [www.pfaw.org](http://www.pfaw.org)

Beyond that, among the print sources that a Public Forum debater might wish to look at would include:

- National newspapers – these would typically include the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times*. Some regional newspapers, such as the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Boston Globe*, and *New Orleans Times-Picayune* may also be good sources of information.
- While the “big three” news magazines (*Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*) will provide a steady supply of information about what is going on in the nation, the depth of coverage may be a bit thin. Other magazines, such as *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper’s* will provide more depth of coverage but will not cover as many issues. Some other magazines will have depth and breadth but also a clear political slant. Among these on the right would include *National Review* and *American Spectator*, while those on the left would include *The Nation*, *The Progressive* and *The New Republic*.

### **Strategic Considerations**

Note: All of the following are offered as things to *think about* in the course of preparing for Public Forum and competing in the event itself. There **will** be times when these considerations contradict each other and you will have to make a choice based on your judgment. There **will** be times when circumstances create an exception to at least some of the considerations.

- Don’t flip the coin until you know for sure who the judge is going to be. That does not mean that you have read the pairing sheet but rather, you actually see the judge in the room with a ballot. The reason for this is that certain judges may be more inclined to a particular side of an argument.
- For both sides, write two versions of a first constructive. One should take up the full four minutes (generally, that will be about 600 words) and the other should run about two or two-and-a-half minutes. This way, you have the option of tailoring your presentation to the style of the particular judge.
- If you are seeing the same arguments being run against you consistently on one side of the debate, consider putting together prepared responses to those arguments, so that you can pull that brief out and read it right away to save you valuable prep time. In the same vein, if you know that you are going to go for the same argument a lot in the Final Focus, consider writing a 2 minute script that makes the case as powerfully and as efficiently as you can make it.
- If you are not participating in the crossfire, then your turn to speak is coming up. Use the time that others are using in the crossfire to prepare your own speech – after all, that is three free minutes of prep time available to you.
- You may consider writing multiple versions of your four-minute constructive speech. For example, you may write one for conservative judges and another for liberal judges. You may write one case with lots of arguments but none particularly developed and another with only two or three arguments, but with significant development behind it.
- Many judges in Public Forum are not likely to have significant debate experience. Thus, they may or may not flow the round, and even if they take notes, they may

be rather disorganized. Part of knowing how to approach the “flow” is being aware of who the judge is and what their background is. Don’t be afraid to ask your coach about a judge if you have time to do so.

- Be willing to use prep time, but do so judiciously. Save your prep time when you can to use at the end of the speech, but keep in mind that if you or your partner gives a horrible 2<sup>nd</sup> constructive or summary, all the prep time in the world might not be enough to save you in the final focus..
- One thing that you may consider doing is compiling a “judge book,” particularly if you have the same core group of judges hearing public forum rounds. Use the ballots that you receive at the end of a tournament to draw conclusions about the various preferences of judges (communication skills versus arguments in the round, what sorts of arguments a judge tends to buy in a round, etc.). Having access to this information can provide you with an edge that will allow you to adapt to the particular judge more readily, and judge adaptation is a substantial part of what debate in general is about.