THE EDGE

20 WAYS TO BENEFIT MORE FROM DEBATE TOURNAMENTS

by

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The vast majority of debate's educational benefits do not come from coaching or at-home practice, but from the intensive experience of participation in tournaments. Anyone who has successfully competed in policy debate at the regional or national level will confirm that nothing exceeds the benefit of sustained encounters with smart students from other schools, and specific feedback from thoughtful judges. And yet there's a common tendency, even among the most skilled debaters, to waste hours of time at tournaments. At events where the pairing process tends to be slower even more time is lost while students hang out with friends or entertain themselves in other ways. The point of this essay is to provide some tips for how to more productively benefit from tournament time.

Many debaters have learned to succeed by concentrating almost all their work into their tournament schedule — some whose other school and family responsibilities are large purposely go into weekend overdrive since it may be their only available time for focused work. While it's not a strategy I'd recommend, it is possible, if you set your mind to it, to get an enormous amount of work done over the weekend.

The recommendations I make here for harder work will probably strike some as a little bizarre. Don't all of us work hard enough at tournaments as is? Well, yes, a lot of work does get done, even if only considering the time we spend in scheduled rounds. And there's no question the typical tournament day is too long. But there is also a lot of wasted time between debates, and just sitting around can be as exhausting as actually speaking.

Some might balk at these ideas because for them, tournaments are too stressful an environment in which to accomplish real work. Without intending to insult anyone, I think those who beg out of work on account of their already racing adrenaline ("I'm too stressed as it is!") mainly haven't tried working outside of rounds. I'm confident of this conviction since I know from experience that concentrated and productive work between rounds actually reduces and does not increase stress. Effective work habits help debaters who have developed them feel less scattered; students who don't work between rounds tend simply to bounce off the walls while they wait for the release of the next pairings.

Debate tournaments should be and are fun, but the point of the advice that follows is not to steal all your play time; in fact several are designed to make the time you give to work more efficient.

Try as many of these as you can, but don't try to incorporate them all at once or it'll be overwhelming. Most are simple common sense. Emphasize the ones that work for you and your partner. It'll make a big difference.

1. Do as much filing at home as possible. Much of the work I see at tournaments is actually basic catch-up work that should already have been done at home. Yes, of course, last minute arguments are produced and copied, and last minute filing is to some extent unavoidable. But one common habit can lead to a deluge of last minute filing. There is the temptation to let the evidence stack up — after all, the logic goes, one can always file in the van or on the airplane. Don't fall prey to that idea! Take a little time every day to file or re-file. That way you can use valuable time right before the tournament to carefully read files, as opposed to expending all your precious pre-tournament time in panic prep. Or try taking one argument home every evening to file.

2. At the last second, don't try to learn everything you file — concentrate on what matters. This tip concerns last minute filing, the kind we all do right before contests, for obviously as a general rule you would want to learn everything available on the topic. But at the last minute (as in, the day or night before rounds start), I often see debaters who have 2000 pages of evidence to file. Desperate to learn it all, they wade in, only to be forced into panic filing at 3:00 a.m. as they finally discover how slow the reading process has become.

Try something different. Start by quickly filing everything. Once you've done that, then make a thoughtful decision about which arguments you must learn carefully, and concentrate on highlighting those.

3. Don't pull an all-nighter the evening before. Fatigue is the greatest enemy of otherwise smart debaters. It produces sluggish thinking, which cannot be compensated for by the work done in the middle of the previous night. No matter what your situation, it is imperative that you get rest at tournaments. Debate is too physically demanding to be done well on no sleep.

4. Take along a video camera or tape recorder and have some of your debates taped. Almost certainly, your school's media center has at least one video camera, which can be checked out (if only by your teacher) for use on the road. Yes, it can be a little inconvenient to videotape a full debate; in fact it is difficult to videotape your own round. But if someone else is along or has the free time (if they are not participating in elimination debates, for example), have them tape you in even one or two full rounds. You'd be amazed at how educational watching the tape later can be. Videotaping reveals speaking quirks you're unaware of, can be assessed later by your partner and coach as the basis of conversations about improving your arguments, and more reliably than post-round reports provides a true record of what actually happened.

If you cannot acquire access to a portable video camera, take along a cassette recorder. Again, it's not necessary to tape record every round. Just pick two of the most demanding (against your toughest opponents) and tape those. The record of your debating is an invaluable resource in becoming a better speaker and debater.

5. Bring a laptop, preferably with network access and a printer. Having a computer can be of great benefit, since it enables online evidence searches in a jam, and because you can type in citations and notes from the debates you are in or observing.

6. Do some timed practice speaking in the morning. When I debated, I was desperately eager to squeeze in every last possible second of sleep, and so I was impossible to awaken and dragged my way to the shower at the last minute, all to my competitive detriment. Years later, I still see hundreds of debaters at every tournament who are simply not awake during the first round of the day, or who pay a specific competitive price for their sluggishness, even if it only effects their first speech.

The last twenty minutes of sleep are not making that much difference in your overall energy level. Get up in time to take a real shower, and, as important, do some practice speaking in the morning. If you can time yourself, so the practice contains a full speech, all the better. If you can find a way to involve yourself in some morning physical activity, if only briefly, as a way of snapping out of your lethargy, do it. Your debating, if only in the first round, will be markedly improved.

7. Buy available newspapers. In the morning you should purchase the available newspapers — the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the local paper too. The more you can track down, the better. Yes, all their major articles will appear later on Lexis, but hard copy morning newspapers remain the best source of update evidence around, and the ability to scan and discover the day's news can be enormously useful as the day proceeds. Briefing critical articles on the latest economic or political news will give you an undeniable edge.

8. Concentrate pre-round talk on the key issues you expect to debate. The precious fifteen minutes after the pairing schematic is released and before speaking begins are among the most important in the whole tournament experience. But too often, they become a source of stress as scattered and panicky debaters race around trying to get their acts together. Or, nearly as bad, valuable time is wasted while discussions occur regarding basic strategy decisions. The time immediately prior to a round is not the place for a discussion on what your basic strategy will be against an affirmative banning national missile defense. The basic strategies should have been decided already, and written down, at home.

Ideally, pre-round discussion should concentrate on adapting your case specific strategy to the team you're meeting. It should be filled with talk about how to answer this team's hegemony turn, or how to deal with their uniqueness story. It can even be a good time to think through which ar-

guments, of the ones selected at home, you want to extend in the last rebuttals, or to talk through your last rebuttal overviews given your knowledge of the case and team. Such discussions are more specifically productive when it comes to developing effective strategies, and are also more calming than the melee produced by having to look through every folder to find an argument that will stick.

9. Take good flows, and save them for later in a specific place. Hopefully, the first part of this tip is self-evident. But I want to concentrate on the latter part, since the most complete and perfectly formed flowsheets are worthless if they cannot be found later. You might consider keeping all your flowsheets in an expanding file dedicated for that purpose. And obviously at the end of the debate you should mark the flow so you can later tell which debate it came from.

10. Systematically copy evidence citations. If you are the first negative or first affirmative, as soon as your rebuttal is done (and your work essentially completed), start copying citations from the other team. Keep citations in a central place — don't just put them on a flowsheet that may be lost. Better to write them into a notebook. And make a record of what the evidence is about, so you can know what to follow up on when you return home. Of course, when asked, you should always show a willingness to share your own citations with other teams.

11. Carefully re-file your evidence while the judge is deciding. It's a common habit for debaters to race out of the room right after the debate, leaving their materials scattered all over the room. That's a mistake for a lot of reasons — judges are easily annoyed to look up, eager to see a piece of evidence, only to discover the debater in question is hanging out with friends in the next county. Re-file immediately at round's end, preferably before the judge decides. That way, if you're debating at an event where new pairings are quickly distributed, you'll be ready to go without just cramming evidence into tubs. And if pairing time is taken, you'll be able to use it more effectively, writing briefs or collecting information.

12. Have productive post-round conversations with judges. High school judges, even the occasional ones you may not consider very talented, are often teachers by trade. It is thus foolish not to take advantage of a judge's pedagogical skill for your own improvement. Obviously there is nothing to be gained, and a lot to be lost, by challenging your judge's decision in a hostile or condescending manner. So, never do that. Instead, ask questions designed to find a basis for better communicating (if only with that judge) in the future. Make sure you understand the basis of the judge's decision, even if you disagree with it, since knowledge of the rationale for decisions can help you adjust your debating the next time around. Talk in an interested and friendly way with your judges whether you won or lost their ballot. Ask for quick speaking advice. And ask directed questions: Instead of "what did you think of my counterplan," a question too vague to often elicit truly usable feedback, ask, "do you have any ideas for how we might have permuted this?" In other words, be focused and specific and you'll get judge information you can actually use. And take careful notes while the judge delivers the critique.

13. Write fast post-round extension briefs. In a previous essay I recommended this strategy as a way of improving your prep time allocation. The fact is that many debaters spend too much preparation time reinventing the wheel, rethinking asserted responses to arguments they should be able to anticipate. We all know this, but in briefing positions have an understandable tendency to brief only as the evidence requires. So we tend not to write scripted answers to the inevitable permutation, performative contradiction, "no threshold" and "empirically denied" presses we hear every debate.

My recommendation is simple. At the end of the debate, as soon as you've packed up and the judge's work has been done, take just five minutes to script out extension briefs to two answers you heard against your favorite position for the first time. Perhaps the two arguments you're briefing were not that original; maybe they were even stupid. All the more reason to write out convincing and word efficient answers now (while you recall their stupidity in specific terms), so when you hear them again (and you will) you won't have to take one second's preparation time to think up obvious responses again.

If you do this at the end of every debate, by the end of your third tournament you will have high quality extension briefs against almost every response imaginable, thereby freeing your prep time for work on the truly innovative and new arguments that do crop up. And, having drafted response briefs at the tournament, you'll have them ready for revision at home, where arguments can be reviewed, refined, and evidenced.

14. Keep a comprehensive case information book, and work at updating it. You should have a notebook with at least a page for every team, organized coherently. The information you collect should ideally include specific plan texts, case outlines, and evidence citations where you have collected them. Keep notes on a team-by-team basis about the effectiveness of your main strategies. What worked, and what backfired? What arguments is the team overly concerned about, and paranoid to over-allocate time for? It often works best for a squad to develop a one page "report" form, which would be completed right at the end of every round, while memories are fresh and flowsheets still legible. These sheets can then be collected in one notebook, or copied so every team has a copy available.

15. Talk to your friends about other teams' tricks. Don't simply ask your friends what their opponent ran against them. Specially ask what the argumentative tricks were. Were there any unusual turns you had problems with? Did their case have any twists you weren't expecting? Asking questions like these can elicit valuable information you'll wish to have at hand later.

16. Keep a judge notebook. Many coaches keep a squad record of the feedback they receive from their judges, and that is a good idea. If your coach is too overextended to keep track of judge commentary, or if you are the only team regularly competing on a particular circuit, think about keeping one for yourself. Different students organize their notes differently. But the basic idea is to keep a binder section (preferably loose-leaf, so you can insert and rearrange the pages as necessary) free for the purpose of maintaining judge notes. What information might you want to have on hand? It might be useful to know the judges' affiliation and level of experience. Any stylistic or theoretical preferences expressed in pre- or post-round comments should be written down. Obviously recommendations from the judge should be recorded, as already noted. Some go so far as to keep track of whom (at the tourna-

ment) a particular critic has judged, so if she or he is assigned to hear you next, preferences can be quickly tracked down in the absence of other information.

On rare occasions I've known coaches who try to keep track of a judge's voting record. Mainly they try to keep information for the purpose of determining whether a judge has a specific side bias. In my opinion such data is too time-consuming to collect for the benefit it produces. After all, very few judges "always" vote negative or affirmative — and if they do, there may not be much you can do to adapt.

It's also a good idea for students observing elimination rounds to listen carefully to judge criticisms, since elim rounds provide an occasion to collect good data on three or five judges at once. Does the judge seem to take a careful flow sheet? Does their post-round commentary reveal that they have a good or not-so-good handle on the more arcane details of the resolution? How do they react when questioned by students? What opinions do they express about arguments they view as smart, or foolish? Do they express stylistic concerns ("Debaters talk too fast!" or "I'm sick of hearing so much Lexis evidence!" or "I wish students would read source qualifications!")? Write down any comments that can be generalized to your own debating, even if the commentary comes from debates in which you are not a direct participant.

17. Keep a note pad and pen with you at all times. People mention valuable information all the time in the most casual ways. "You'll never believe the turn so-and-so went for against our threat construction arguments" or "yes, so-and-so does run 'ban tactical nuclear weapons' but their plan is different from the top team's." We pay attention and expect to remember it, but if we don't write it down most of it is forgotten. Keeping a note pad and pen in a pocket, purse, or backpack means you can keep a record of the important information you hear without having to struggle to recall it later.

18. Keep nightly research work tightly focused. One problem I see in the hardest working debaters is a tendency to think they have to stay up all night doing Lexus updates. In point of fact, late night work is only occasionally truly necessary. Plan your computer work so the vital bases are covered, but without obligating yourself to prepare massive new files on Bush or the new case you've heard. One reason this is so relates to the time it takes to process and organize new evidence at tournaments, which can be considerable, and especially in the distracting environment of a tournament contest. Thus the danger of doing massive new searches on site is both that the cards will not finally be processed in an efficient way, and that you'll have been diverted and distracted in the meantime by all the extraneous new information racing across your laptop screen. In my experience, there is almost invariably more value in carefully reading and highlighting an existing file you don't know very well than in trying to create a new one at the tournament site.

19. Brainstorm against new arguments at dinner. Pretty much everyone I know talks debate at dinner –– it's on everyone's mind, so why not? My advice is to be somewhat systematic when having this inevitable conversation. A squad meal does not have to be overtaken with planning work, but there's nothing wrong with discussing three new cases in a coordinated way, where one person takes some notes. Even if the only upshot is a better understanding of what the case says, everyone participating will still have benefited.

20. Watch and systematically scout elimination rounds. If you are not competing in elimination round, you have something to learn from those who are. It is absolutely vital that debaters, once defeated, watch their competition. Take a full flow — what good does it do to lay on the floor and drift in and out of consciousness? Flow the debate from beginning to end. As I've recommended, even take notes on judge commentary. If you are having a problem staying awake (after all, debate is exhausting), volunteer to time the round as a way to keep yourself occupied. Unobtrusively collect citation information.

Beyond the substance of the debate, pay attention to the "stories" being told by the best debaters in the room. Does the second negative have particularly effective ways of explaining the counterplan competition or the kritik implications? Write them down. Does the 2AR invariably deploy a certain argumentative trick as a way of getting more mileage out of their case? Write that down too. The notes you take will both prepare you for debating against the team later, and also reinforce explanations that can improve your own rebuttals.

That so much of our collective education occurs during the tournament experience is both a blessing and a curse. While the intensive nature of debate instruction cannot be matched, much is also forgotten — in one ear, out the other. It's a natural reaction to the sea of information floating through the hallways of a big event. That reason is why so many of the tips I've suggested are basic and organizational in nature: if all of us worked a little harder to keep a record of what we were hearing, and to keep such information organized, our experiences would be immeasurably enriched.

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