

25 TIPS FOR TAKING A BETTER FLOWSHEET

by David M. Cheshier

Notetaking is a prerequisite skill for debate success, and yet as many students struggle with “flowing” as with any other aspect of speaking or researching. I’m often surprised to discover how many superlative in-round arguers admit to terrible notetaking habits, and by the number of top-flight debates where a student confesses to losing the key argument because she or he simply missed it. I’m also surprised at how many smart debaters, when asked why their flowing suffers so much, simply shrug and say “flowing fast makes my hand hurt.”

Of course successful flowing is a skill that for most does not come naturally. It takes a combination of legible handwriting, sophisticated listening skills, genuine concentration, a lot of practice, a refusal to be distracted by other apparently urgent tasks (like preparing the next speech), and some experience. Sometimes coaches don’t even teach flowing after the novice year — after all, individual notetaking styles are necessarily idiosyncratic, and after students make it past the novice year, it can seem a little insulting to review so basic a skill with students whose other debate aptitudes are quickly reaching maturity. But the need is great and the skills involved are more than secretarial. Thus in this essay I want to suggest some tips for improving flowing. Some are obvious — skip the ones you already know. For the others, try them in practice debates and see if they help.

TIP 1:

Practice, practice, practice.

Better flowing involves increasingly precise muscle memory, and, let’s be honest, making the hand stronger. This can only happen with practice. Debaters who don’t completely flow everything in elimination rounds they’re not debating in are missing out on great practice. Use elimination rounds as flowing exercise: flow them from beginning to end, working to get every single argument and a citation for every piece of evidence.

TIP 2:

Use multiple flowpads.

Some students flow the case on one legal or art pad, and all the off-case arguments on another. But as the debate grows more complicated, pages must inevitably be

torn off the pad, which risks losing critical pieces of paper. So try this: use multiple pads, even as many as ten, and only flow one argument per pad. It is harder to lose a whole tablet of paper than a single page. Some react to this idea by wondering if they aren’t wasting paper, but a moment’s consideration eases the concern. After all, it’s not more paper you’re using, just more pads. One more benefit of multiple flowpads, where each pad holds only one position and where pages are never torn off, is that it will quickly break students of the bad habit of flowing on the back side of paper sheets.

TIP 3:

Try different colors.

The idea is basic, and some resist it on that account alone, but many debaters find their flowing is improved by use of multiple pens of different colors. Make one color your own (“our side is always blue!”), and they are speaking. I’ve often wondered if the assistance provided by using multiple colors isn’t offset by the hassle of switching pens as you write your own responses, but the advocates of multiple colors are adamant about its benefits. Especially if you find that the flowpad is visually confusing to you in the rush of speaking, using different colors may help.

TIP 4:

Are you a lefty? Try flowing right to left.

The problem with flowing in the regular left-to-right direction if you are left-handed is that your writing arm obscures the arguments you’re writing responses for. And as you write quickly, ink in the preceding column often smears. Many students I’ve coached have discovered that by flowing in columns from right-to-left (where the IAC is all the way on the right side of the page and each subsequent speech is a column over to the left), their notetaking dramatically improves, often without a major transition to the new direction.

TIP 5:

Spread it out on the page.

Responses to an argument should never be closer to one another than an inch and a half, and even more space should be

left between answers on a difficult or important position. Spreading out the flow of responses leaves you with room, should it prove necessary, for multiple responses from your opponent. So if your innocuous “no link” press is destined to elicit twenty new link arguments from the 2NC, at least you’ll have some extra paper to get them all down.

TIP 6:

Anticipate the overviews.

The circuit has been overtaken by the rebuttal overview, now even characteristic of most constructives, but our flowing habits have by and large not kept pace. We flow the 2AC answers right at the top of the column, leaving no room at all for major overviews. Leave a couple inches at the top of the page, if not for their overviews, then for your own.

TIP 7:

Flow yourself.

Only in the rarest of circumstances should you leave major flowing it seems like an efficient usage of preparation time, or of the cross examination, and my point is not recommending that you keep it to a minimum, where you flow as much of your own speaking as possible given the constraints of the debate. It is easier for you to read your own handwriting than someone else’s, apart from the unusual circumstance where you award.

TIP 8:

Work on your handwriting legibility.

Practice writing more clearly. Here is where the old drill of flowing the television news can come in handy. You may have heard some recommend that you try to get word for word a teacher’s lecture, or the evening news. I know many students who can honestly say they tried the drill, but very few who do it seriously or for an extended period of time (that is, past a minute or two). Some end up too bored to continue. Or their writing hand starts to tire (though of course, that is the point of the drill). But whether students find it an effective drill for flowing more quickly or not, it can be a good way to improve the quality of handwriting. A warning: Some students

end up gravitating to writing in all capital letters as a fast cure for illegibility. But it takes more work to write in all CAPS, and students who do it almost invariably end up getting less down than those who use a more natural cursive style.

TIP 9:

Write more down.

If you are well rehearsed and effective at getting down the tags, then work on getting down a portion of the cite. Start with the author name and then try to get the date. And if you can get both, work to get down something of the substance of the evidence. The practice will speed up your flowing, and force you to attend more closely to the details of the evidence. Too many great debaters write the tag down, perhaps with a notation signifying that evidence was read, and then they simply sit there, pen poised, waiting for something else to come along. Get in the habit of constantly writing.

TIP 10:

Think about using Post-It tape.

The Post-It people sell rolls of tape designed for people who still use typewriters and need correction tape (it's an alternative to Wite-Out, the liquid form). The widest tape they make is six lines wide, about an inch. It so happens that 6-line Post-It tape is about the perfect width for making pre-flowed notes on the arguments you routinely make. Since the tape peels off the flow paper (just like regular Post-It notes) and is thus fully reusable, some debaters are in the habit of pre-flowing their, say, Clinton uniqueness responses on a piece of the tape that stays with the brief. When the 2AC makes the uniqueness answer that the Senate just passed PNTR, you pull the brief and simultaneously move the preflowed tape from the brief to your flow.

There are some drawbacks to the use of Post-It tape for flowing. For one, the tape is a little pricey. More important, removal of the tape after the debate (it would normally get returned to the original brief) effectively erases your flowsheet, making it harder to look at it productively later. But it can be a helpful backflowing device.

TIP 11:

Don't stop practicing until the flow is so clear others can plainly read it.

It is a difficult end point to imagine for many debaters, who would be satisfied even to be able to read their own handwriting. But aiming to produce a flow so clean and clear that someone else (say, a coach)

can make sense of it afterward is a good goal anyway. After all, part of the reason to take a good flowsheet is so it can be referenced later, and made the basis for later speaking drills.

TIP 12:

Don't stop flowing the debate just because your part in it is through.

There are good strategic reasons to continue flowing after your 1NR (for example) is done. For one, it can serve as a double check on your colleague, a way to prevent later disasters like dropped topicality arguments where the colleague sits there oblivious to the apocalypse in the making. But it can be good flowing practice too.

TIP 13:

Integrate flowing into the squad's speaking drills.

If a debater is working to improve his or her emphasis of key words, the drill can and should become a flowing drill for others observing the speech. If speed drills are underway, the others should take notes. Flowing in this way is a good check on what is actually heard as fast talking proceeds, and better involves student peers in the process of speaking improvement.

TIP 14:

Supplement the flow with other useful information.

As the 2AC is speaking, the 1AC may be struggling to take a good flow. Good answers end up blurred together with bad ones in the deadening monotony of numbering. In such a situation, the 1AR should not only aim to flow the specific 2AC arguments, but on hearing them should make a quick about their relative strength. If the third 2AC answer to the Morgan Powers counterplan seems especially strong, circle the number of that response. The 1AR may only circle three or four of her partner's responses, but when she gives her own 1AR, and all the arguments on the counterplan risk blurring together in the heat of speaking, at least the circled arguments will leap off the page, and the best answers more easily extended. Or, if time is simply running out, and only fifteen seconds remain to cover the critical topicality argument, the eyes will at least immediately jump to the key responses.

TIP 15:

At least make the major headings and tags clear.

OK, so the handwriting improvement project is taking a little longer than planned. What to do in the meantime? Concentrate on legibly writing the argument tags, so they can be plainly signposted in subsequent speeches. Work on filling in the details as you acquire more experience and practice.

TIP 16:

Sit closer if necessary.

Sometimes it's not your fault, honestly. Maybe the room's acoustics are bad, or perhaps the speaker is just downright incomprehensible. In such cases move closer to the speaker. This accomplishes a double benefit: the flow will probably improve, and a not-so-subliminal signal will have been sent to the judge that the speaker cannot be understood.

TIP 17:

Try art pads.

Running out of room? Expand the writing surface. Buy some of those huge art pads and see if that helps. Some find larger pads difficult to manage, especially if their impromptu podiums are constructed out of stretched out expanding files. But if you are willing to set up something more secure, larger pads may work for you.

TIP 18:

Develop your own abbreviations.

This is basic, but still worth keeping in mind. Flowing efficiency is enhanced to the extent students succeed in finding memorable ways to abbreviate the main terms of a topic. One has to be careful, of course. If your way of abbreviating both the terms "permutation" and "privacy" is by writing a large P inside a circle, then speaking will be confused when, in the heat of the speech, deciphering has to happen. Of course the abbreviation system is always somewhat personal and individualistic, but that's fine. Work on explicitly making up some abbreviations and then integrating them into flowing debates.

TIP 19:

Get what you can.

Sometimes, whether through inexperience or an opponent's incomprehensibility, flowing breaks down completely. But this, of course, sets into motion a cascade effect, where every subsequent speech becomes even more difficult to flow, and by the end the flowsheet is a hopeless mess. The only cure for this is to just write down

everything you can. Work to flow responses where they seem to go. You'll actually be surprised at how much you can get down even when you have no idea where your opponent is on the flowsheet. Such a tactic can make the cross-examination more productive too. Instead of having to ask the 2NC to repeat all her responses to the permutation, you can simply ask her to name her first argument (which helps you identify where the dividing lines go on your flow while denying your opponent the opportunity to deliver the oration a second time, more clearly).

TIP 20:

Use quality pens.

Some students prefer to flow in big bold pens, but I wonder at the additional muscle work they take on. The majority, of course, prefer fine or medium point pens. Whatever the preference, pens should be of high quality — nothing is more frustrating than having the ink skip during a critical argument. Don't be cheap: invest in decent writing instruments.

TIP 21:

Don't talk to your partner while your opponent is talking.

Yes, of course this is obvious. Then why does it happen so often? Because partners cannot resist trying to coach each other as they hear arguments that sound foolish. But this is terribly counterproductive. The recipient of the free advice is completely, if temporarily, derailed from the more important task of flowing and listening to the opposition. If you want to tell your colleague something during a speech, resist the temptation. Circle the argument on the flowsheet and then communicate your thoughts on it during preparation time or cross-examination.

TIP 22:

Steal prep time to clean up your flow.

No, I don't advocate the actual theft of prep time (you've heard the tricks before, like asking for permission to use the bathroom before both speeches as a way to figure out what you're going to say on a critical argument). But a typical debate is filled with moments of inactivity. So use those seconds here and there to clean up the flow. Underline the major headings. Put boxes around points you know you'll want to emphasize later. Draw connecting lines where they were missing before. Add numbering if the speaker you just heard left it

out — even if your numbering ends up off a bit, your own debating will be improved by having a clearer sense of the argument dependencies.

TIP 23:

Try flowing yourself while you speak.

This is risky, since for some students flowing while speaking is as difficult as patting the stomach while rubbing one's head at the same time: that is, physically impossible. I recommend this as a practice drill only, unless you discover you have a talent for it. What does the drill accomplish? For one, it fosters the total concentration necessary to high level debating. For another, if you discover you are able to actually flow yourself as arguments pop into your head, you will have discovered a rare and useful skill. And doubled attention is a knack that can be learned and improved.

TIP 24:

Copy tricks from peers who flow better than you.

It doesn't take long to discover who takes the best flowsheet on a squad. So start a conversation about what she or he does differently. Have the students on your debate team make a list of the critical three or five tricks each uses to flow better, and see if their tricks can work for you.

TIP 25:

Translate opposition arguments into your own words, then flow them.

This is standard advice from study skill classes. It turns out that students who engage in this process of translation acquire better concentration skills, and end up more successfully internalizing the substance of the material. Try it in debate; it works there too. Of course one has to be a little more careful. After all, totally translating a 2AC answer into your own words risks making more difficult the process of plainly signposting the point later. But often you'll find that translation can simplify your signposting, especially against opponents who like to play cute with their argument tags.

Let's end where we started: It is a foolish tragedy so many bright debaters struggle to take adequate notes during debate rounds, and so easily give up the task of self-improvement. Everyone understands that with practice, speaking and researching can be improved. But too often we give

up on flowing as if our early limitations cannot be stretched. The irony is that flowing is the easiest debate skill to improve with a little work. Think about it this way: There are millions of Americans who have developed the ability to type accurately over 150 words per minute, and many more who, working as court stenographers, accurately transcribe fast-moving legal proceedings word for word (yes, they did it even before the machines were invented), or who can simultaneously sign or translate word for word from one language into another. Many of these people are brilliant, but then key requirement. All these professionals have done is simply worked to cultivate the sheer mental and physical discipline to get down what others have said. Smart debaters who work at it will quickly find they can do it too.

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