How to Debate

What is Debate?
A debate is a structured argument. Two sides speak alternately for and against a particular contention usually based on a topical issue. Unlike the arguments you might have with your family or friends however, each person is allocated a time they are allowed to speak for and any interjections are carefully controlled. The subject of the dispute is often prearranged so you may find yourself having to support opinions with which you do not normally agree. You also have to argue as part of a team, being careful not to contradict what others on your side have said.

Why debate?
It is an excellent way of improving speaking skills and is particularly helpful in providing experience in developing a convincing argument. Those of you who are forced to argue against your natural point of view realize that arguments, like coins, always have at least two sides.

The Basic Debate Skills - Style, Speed, Tone, Volume, Clarity, Content

Style
Style is the manner in which you communicate your arguments. This is the most basic part of debating to master. Content and strategy are worth little unless you deliver your material in a confident and persuasive way.

Speed
It is vital to talk at a pace which is fast enough to sound intelligent and allow you time to say what you want, but slow enough to be easily understood.

Tone
Varying tone is what makes you sound interesting. Listening to one tone for an entire presentation is boring.

Volume
Speaking quite loudly is sometimes a necessity, but it is by no means necessary to shout through every debate regardless of context. There is absolutely no need speak any more loudly than the volume at which everyone in the room can comfortably hear you. Shouting does not win debates. Speaking too quietly is clearly disastrous since no one will be able to hear you.

Clarity
The ability to concisely and clearly express complex issues is what debating is all about. The main reason people begin to sound unclear is usually because they lose the “stream of thought” which is keeping them going. It is also important to keep it simple. While long words may make you sound clever, they may also make you incomprehensible.
Content
Content is what you actually say in the debate. The arguments used to develop your own side’s case and rebut the opposite side’s. The information on content provided below is a general overview of what will be expected when you debate.

Use of Notes and Eye Contact
Notes are essential, but they must be brief and well organized to be effective. There is absolutely no point in trying to speak without notes. Of course, notes should never become obtrusive and damage your contact with the audience, nor should they ever be read from verbatim. Most people sketch out the main headings of their speech, with brief notes under each.

When writing notes for rebuttal during the debate, it is usually better to use a separate sheet of paper so you can take down the details of what the other speakers have said and then transfer a rough outline onto the notes you will actually be using.

Eye contact is very important, but, keep shifting your gaze, no one likes to be stared at.

Case (the argument and rebuttal)
Introduction - The case you make must be outlined in the introduction. This involves stating your main arguments and explaining the general thrust of your case. This must be done briefly since the most important thing is to get on and actually argue it. It is also a good idea to indicate the aspects of the subject to be discussed by each of the team members.

Conclusion - At the end, once everyone has spoken, it is useful to briefly summarize what your group has said and why.

Rebuttal
Arguments can be factually, morally or logically flawed. They may be misinterpretations or they may also be unimportant or irrelevant. A team may also contradict one another or fail to complete the tasks they set themselves. These are the basics of rebuttal and almost every argument can be found wanting in at least one of these respects.

Cross Examination
Be prepared to examine your opponent’s argument and ask questions that poke holes. These questions will be based on the notes that you are taking while you are listening to their argument/case. Be prepared to answer questions about your argument. This must be done in a manner that is persistent yet polite.

Sources