

Introduction to British Parliamentary Debating

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What is debating?

The most basic definition of debating is that it is the statement of contrasting arguments and ideas. The type of debating that is practiced in universities is loosely based around the conventions of the Houses of Parliament and is referred to as 'British Parliamentary', usually abbreviated to 'BP'.

What is the structure of a British Parliamentary debate?

There are two sides in British Parliamentary debate, the proposition and the opposition. The participants in the debate speak in turn: 1st proposition speaker, then 1st opposition speaker, and so on. Each speaker makes one speech only. There can be two, three or four speakers *per side* in BP debates.

What is the format of speeches?

Speeches are the core of debating. They are either of 5 minutes or 7 minutes in length in the formal setting of a debate, but in the training context some speaking exercises will be shorter in length. Your instructor will inform you of the length of speech that is required in good time before you are expected to speak. All speeches should have a beginning, middle and an end; or, if you prefer, introduction, exposition and conclusion. Most speeches have a three-section structure. This might consist of three arguments, three themes, or three headings, under which the substantive matter of the speech is presented.

What subjects are debated?

Any subject may be debated. Speakers are expected to argue whichever side of a debate they may find themselves in. Sometimes this means that you will have to argue something that you do not agree with. You should be prepared to do this. Similarly, you should not assume that other speakers in the debate are arguing things that they believe in. They, like you, are simply advocates for the side that they find themselves representing.

Anything else?

Within a debate speakers should always be courteous and heckling is frowned upon. At the end of a debate the conflict between speakers should be forgotten. Speakers should take care to note that within debating there is no assumption of a particular world-view: you should be prepared to explain and justify through logic and argument everything that you include in a speech.

Topic 1: Definition

Definitions are very important in debating because it is necessary at all times to make it clear *what you mean* and *what you are talking about*. Nowhere in a debate is this more important than for the 1st speaker for the proposition who must define the parameters and scope of the whole debate. While the motions that will be debated are given to you, the precise nature of the policy to be implemented is down to the 1st speaker.

Motions

A typical motion might be '**This house would ban hunting**'. It is clear what this debate is about in general terms – hunting. However, various things are not yet clear:

- what type of hunting this house wants to ban
- what animals are involved
- where the ban would apply

These are some of the questions that the **definition** of the motion needs to deal with. A good definition will present clearly and simply *how* the motion relates to the specific policy that is to be pursued, and should tie down *what* the debate is to be about.

Policy

A useful way of viewing a debate is as a specific policy debate between a government and an opposition. The government side wishes to implement a policy; the opposition does not. The policy proposal put forward should:

1. Identify a **problem** in relation to the motion
2. Propose a clear **solution** to the problem
3. Explain the **outcomes** of the solution that is proposed

An alternative way of viewing the proposal is to ask a series of questions:

1. **What** policy do we wish to pursue in relation to the motion?
2. **How** will the policy be pursued?
3. **Why** should this policy be pursued?

After you have identified the problem with relation to the motion, your solution should incorporate a **mechanism** suitable to solve the problem (this is the **'how'** of your proposal). After you have laid this out it will be necessary to give arguments in favour of your solution (this is the **'why'** of your proposal).

Topic 2A: Arguments

Once you have defined your motion – said *what* you want to do – you should give arguments in support of your case. If you are in opposition, you need to give arguments against the case that has been put forward. Arguments give reasons *why* the side you are on should win the debate. This means that there has to be a connection between the argument you are giving and the case you are arguing for.

Good arguments are:

- **relevant** – your argument must be linked to your conclusion, not just to the general area of debate.
- **internally consistent** – your argument must make logical sense.
- **consistent with your side's other arguments** – two arguments can make sense on their own while contradicting each other: be careful.
- **fully explained** – if you have thought of an argument you should then explain it. It is not adequate to cite an argument without explaining how the argument works and how it supports your side of the debate.
- **properly justified** – any part of your argument which is controversial has to be argued for, otherwise it will be an easy target for the other side: take your argument as far as it needs to go to be convincing.

Bad arguments:

"Hunting should be banned because foxes are cute furry animals" – even if this is true, so what?
"Women should be banned from employment in the army because they wouldn't pass the entry tests" – if they won't pass the tests then you don't need to ban them because none of them will qualify anyway
"We want to take action against the Taliban in Afghanistan in because [1] they have no respect for other religious groups and [2] Islamic fundamentalism is irrational and dangerous" – are these two positions compatible?
Simply stating, *"The recent US Presidential election compromised fundamental principles of democracy"* is inadequate – which fundamental principles of democracy did it compromise, and how?
"We want to ban abortion because the foetus is a human being" – many people believe this, but it is controversial and is not recognised in law. You need to argue for it before you use it as the basis of an argument.

All of these things combine to make an argument **persuasive** – above all else debating is about convincing other people that what you are saying is right. Arguments should be appealing and compelling.

Topic 2B: Arguments

Arguments can focus on various areas, of which the most important are:

- **results** – what will happen if the proposal is enforced?
- **principles** – what values underpin the proposal, and do they make sense?
- **precedent** – has anything similar been tried before, and if so what happened?
- **enforceability** – is it practically possible to do what is being proposed?

These can be used in different ways for the different sides in the debate:

Proposition

You are trying to show that your particular proposal is the one which should be adopted. Always relate your arguments to your proposal.

Results

- your proposal will have certain beneficial consequences (you may need separate arguments to show why these consequences would be beneficial) *"Introducing stricter controls on adoption would make it more difficult for potential abusers to obtain children."*
- failing to adopt your proposal will have harmful consequences (again, you may need to show why they are harmful) *"If the EU does not admit more countries it will be breaking its earlier promise to let them in; this will damage the EU's credibility."*

Principles

- your proposal upholds (and the opposition undermines) certain values which are shared by all in the debate *"We want to abolish the monarchy because we do not believe that you should qualify for a particular position of responsibility purely because of who your parents are."*

Precedent

- something similar to your proposition has been tried before or elsewhere and it worked (you need to show that your example is relevantly similar) *"We should continue to enforce sanctions on Iraq because sanctions were a major factor in removing the apartheid government in South Africa."*

It is usually inappropriate for the proposition to use enforceability arguments – the fact that a proposal is enforceable should be part of the mechanism, not an argument in favour of your proposal.

Opposition

The opposition uses similar kinds of argument, but focuses them in the opposite direction. It is usually easier for the opposition than for the proposition to employ enforceability arguments.

Results

- the proposal will have unintended negative consequences *"Allowing more immigration will result in resentment of minorities and racial tension."*
- the intended consequences are undesirable *"Introducing PR would indeed ensure that governments had smaller majorities, but this would reduce their ability to govern effectively."*
- the intended consequences will not result from the proposition *"Reintroducing the death penalty will not cut crime, because criminals do not consider the penalty while they are committing crimes."*

Principles

- the proposal goes against principles which ought to be preserved *"Cancelling third world debt sends out the message that irresponsible management of resources should be rewarded."*

Precedent

- something similar to the proposal has been tried before or elsewhere and has failed or had bad consequences (again, you need to show that the example is relevant) *"When hardcore pornography became more widely available in the USA in the 1970s, police reported the use of new practices in rapes and sexual abuse which had been almost unheard of until they were depicted in pornographic material."*

Practicalities

- the proposal is unworkable or unenforceable – even if it is desirable in principle *"You can introduce as many legal controls on biological weapons as you like, but the countries most likely to be producing such weapons won't let your inspectors in."*

NB Don't focus enforceability arguments on the fact that a policy wouldn't get through parliament, or whatever authority would have to approve it. Always assume, in the context of the debate, that the legislative body in question could in principle be persuaded that the case was good – that's what debating is about. Enforceability is about the ability of a proposal to be implemented *once it has been instituted*.

Topic 3: *Rebuttal*

Rebuttal is your response to claims and arguments made by the other side – a way of showing that *the other side is wrong* in what they are saying, independent of the substantive arguments you want to make to prove that *your side is right*. A good way of distinguishing between rebuttal and argument is to say that rebuttal is **destructive**, while arguments are **constructive**. In other words, good rebuttal is enough to suggest that the other side should lose, but is not yet enough to show that you deserve to win.

Your opponents' arguments may be vulnerable to rebuttal through being:

- untrue *"Britain's exit from the ERM contributed to the fall of Margaret Thatcher."*
- deny the claim being made, but try to justify your denial – simple contradiction will not help you, even if you're right *➤ Rebuttal: "But Britain didn't leave the ERM until 1992, two years after Thatcher's resignation."*
- based on a flawed analysis of facts or statistics *"Labour overwhelmingly won the 2001 election, giving them a clear mandate to use the private sector in improving public services."*
- explain why the facts the other side is using do not lead to the conclusion they want *➤ Rebuttal: "But Labour only won 42% of the vote, representing less than 25% of the total electorate – their mandate is not convincing at all."*
- reliant on misleading examples *"We should enforce sanctions on Iraq because sanctions helped to remove apartheid in South Africa."*
- show why the example they are using doesn't back up the other side's case *➤ Rebuttal: "But those sanctions were supported by South Africa's black majority – most Iraqis oppose sanctions."*
- based on a misunderstanding or misrepresentation of your side's arguments *"If we allow euthanasia, doctors will encourage people with minor illnesses to kill themselves just to save money."*
- restate your side's arguments clearly and simply, showing why the opposition is wrong *➤ Rebuttal: "Our definition included safeguards to ensure that euthanasia would only be allowed in the case of incurable terminal illness."*

It is a good idea to place rebuttal at the beginning of a speech, before the constructive arguments. This means that the speech's basic structure is:

1. "This is what the other side said, and this is why they're wrong" – **rebuttal**
 2. "Now here are some additional reasons to support our side" – **arguments**
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Topic 4: Teams and Teamwork

The format of the debate

The standard format for competitive BP debating is to have 8 speakers in the debate, with 4 in proposition and 4 in opposition. However, it is important to understand that there are two (2) teams on both sides, making four (4) teams in total.

1st Proposition Team <i>consisting of:</i> Prop Speaker One Prop Speaker Two	1st Opposition Team <i>consisting of:</i> Opp Speaker One Opp Speaker Two
2nd Proposition Team <i>consisting of:</i> Prop Speaker Three Prop Speaker Four	2nd Opposition Team <i>consisting of:</i> Opp Speaker Three Opp Speaker Four

Each team has a slightly different role to play in the debate. The first important role to note is that the 1st Proposition team is charged with establishing the **definition** [see *Topic 1: Definition*]. The 2nd Proposition team must accept what the 1st Proposition team has defined the debate about. It is the role of the Opposition teams, of course, to oppose the proposal.

Teamwork

Working together with your partner is very important, especially as this is the only person in the debate who you may co-operate with. In fact, **co-operative preparation with all other competitors, even those on the same side of the debate as you, is prohibited**. The task for you and your partner in the debate is to try to ensure that that your team has the best arguments and is seen as the most persuasive. So, not only are you trying to beat the two teams on the other side of the house, you are also trying to beat the team that shares your side of the house. However, there is a problem! **You may not attack the arguments given by your side of the house, nor offer your side points of information, nor contradict what they say. You must simply be better than them.**

Communication

It is vital that you communicate with your partner. You must know what your partner is going to say so that you do not contradict each other. Just as useful is the ability to filter each other's speeches for mistakes. You must share arguments so you can deploy them at the right time; there is no benefit in hanging on to a killer argument that would be better made earlier in the debate by your partner. Similarly, if you have too many arguments to fit in your speech, passing them to your partner is a good way of ensuring that your team does as well as it can.

Topic 5: *The Role of the Third Speaker*

When the 1st Prop and 1st Opp teams have finished, the debate is only halfway through. The 2nd Prop and 2nd Opp teams have to add something **new and distinctive** to the debate while remaining **consistent** with everything which has already been said on their side. As the third speaker on your side, you are the first speaker on your team, with an equally important agenda-setting role to the first speakers on either side in the debate. Indeed, as the next speaker on your team will be summing, and will therefore not be aiming to add any new arguments at all, you have a particularly important role in ensuring that your team makes a meaningful contribution to the debate. Think about:

- What **has been said** in the debate so far?
- What **has not yet been said** in the debate so far?
- What **still needs to be said** for your side to win?

In other words, you need new analysis and new arguments. In general, you should aim not only to have different arguments from your predecessors, but different *kinds* of arguments. Make it clear that you are doing something new.

The debate so far

- Mostly focused on **results**
- Mostly about **principles**

Third Speaker

- Look at the wider **principles** involved
- Narrow the debate down to a discussion of the **results** of the proposal and any relevant **precedents**

A good (but by no means universal) rule of thumb: *if the focus of the debate so far has been narrow, widen it; if it has been broad, narrow it.*

You will not be expected to have as many different arguments as the teams which went before you. You will, however, have to speak for the same length of time. This means that the arguments you give should be explained in more detail than the arguments of the previous speakers: where they probably all had around three arguments, you should usually aim to have one or two. For the third speaker, perhaps more than for anyone else in the debate, quality is more important than quantity.

Rebuttal is particularly important for the third speaker on each side. If you are third speaker on the proposition, you should be aiming to use your rebuttal to knock the 1st Opp team out of the debate – you speak immediately after their second speaker – and, by implication, to make yourself look better than the 1st Prop team by dealing with the opposition to their proposal more effectively. If you are on the opposition, you should aim your rebuttal at the third proposition speaker, and at any parts of the 1st Prop team case which have not already been dealt with by the 1st Opp team.

Topic 6: Points of Information

Points of Information are direct interjections made during speeches by other speakers in the debate. They are subject to the following rules:

- ◆ You may only offer points of information to the side opposite to you in the debate (i.e., you are not allowed to offer points of information to your own side of the debate).
- ◆ You may only offer points during unprotected time.
- ◆ To offer a point of information you must stand up and indicate that you wish to give a point of information by stating “*On a point of information*” or simply “*Information*”.
- ◆ If the principal speaker declines your point of information you must re-take your seat and you may not give a point at that time.
- ◆ Points of information should last no more than fifteen (15) seconds and ideally should be as short as possible.

If you are the principal speaker it is expected that you will take *some* but *not all* points of information that are offered to you. As a rule of thumb in a five-minute speech, you should always take at least one and never take more than two. In a seven-minute speech you should always take at least two and never take more than three.

When to use points of information

Points of information are crucial to gaining ascendancy in a debate. If you do not deal with them well in your own speech, you will look unconvincing, and if you do not offer good points of information you will look weak. A good point of information is short, succinct and puts the main speaker off balance. You should try to offer points that will expose the other side of the debate’s weaknesses.

Types of point of information:

1. **Clarification** – if what a speaker is saying is not clear, or the full scope of their argument is not revealed, ask for clarification
2. **Factual objection** – if a speaker uses a fact that is erroneous, or you can offer a competing fact that undermines the speaker’s example, challenge it

3. **Argumentative objection** – offering a counter-argument to a point that the speaker is making creates difficulties for that speaker. If they do not respond well they will look weak (be careful though, because you only have a few seconds!)
 4. **Argumentative challenge** – if you can offer an argument for your side that has not been made yet it will create difficulties for the speaker. If your team is speaking second on either side this is a good way of pre-empting what the first team might say – and gives you the credit for saying it first! However, remember that the 1st team set the theme of that side of the house – do not contradict them. Remember also that you are competing against them, so do not help them by offering too many new arguments.
 5. **A Joke** – a well timed and witty line relevant to what the speaker is saying can throw them off balance and make you look good
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Topic 7: *Summating*

In British Parliamentary debating the 4th speaker on both sides of the debate fulfils a unique role: that of summater. Put simply, the summater summarises the debate from the perspective of their side of the house. They are subject to the rule that **they may not introduce new arguments** (although new examples are acceptable). Summaters analyse the debate and present it in such a way as to show the strength of their own side, and to deconstruct the side that they are against.

A summation should:

- Have a clear structure
- Explain clearly all the main arguments of the debate
- Rephrase arguments to make them more persuasive
- Clarify and hone arguments that have become confused during the debate
- Show why your side has won the debate and why the other side has lost

How to execute a summation

Proposition –

1. Definition – an analysis of the problem, and how the solution addresses the problem
2. Mechanism – how it works, and how it solves the problem
3. Arguments – isolate the main arguments for your side, and restate them clearly and concisely. Show why they support the proposed solution. Take on the main arguments of the other side, and show why they give a reason for not implementing the proposal.

Opposition –

1. Definition – show why the analysis of the problem is wrong. Show how the proposed solution will not cure the problems illustrated.
2. Mechanism – show why it will not work. Will it be unenforceable, does it have loopholes, is it flawed in some other way?
3. Arguments – summarise the main arguments for your side, and show why they illustrate the flaws in the proposal. Show why the proposition arguments have failed to be convincing.

Tips on how to summate

- Listen carefully to everything that is said in the debate. Sometimes debates hang or fall on one key moment or point; if you miss it, you may well lose the debate.
 - Don't rush to write your speech. You have the maximum time possible to get your speech on paper. If you write too much too quickly, your summation is unlikely to deal effectively with the second half of the debate.
 - Be organised. Summating requires clarity, conciseness and good structure if you are to analyse the debate well.
 - You can't deal with all of the material dealt with in the debate. Don't try to – just hit the **big targets**. Don't concentrate on marginalia.
 - Don't keep flogging a dead horse - just drop it quietly. Sometimes an argument falls and there is nothing you can do. If however this is the main bit of your case, then you may be in trouble. Just try and ride through it.
 - Make sure that you attack the immediate previous speaker. There is always a danger that you omit that speaker because you are too focussed on summing the debate as a whole.
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