

How to be a great debate judge

Guidance for first time PF, LD and Policy judges

Thank you for agreeing to judge at a WACFL tournament! Judges are essential and we appreciate your contribution to this worthwhile activity. If you haven't done so already, please review the details of the event you will be judging on the WACFL website. If you have questions, your team's coach is a great source for additional information. At each WACFL tournament, there will be a briefing at 8:30 am in the Judges Lounge where you can ask questions directly of tournament managers (not an orientation, though).

As a debate judge, here are your three primary roles:

1. **Determine the winner and assign speaker points.** You will be the only judge in the competition room (except at MetroFilnals). As a debate judge, your primary role is to determine the winner and assign speaker points based on what occurs in the debate round. You should make a conscientious effort to set aside any pre-existing opinions and base your decision on the merits of the arguments presented in the round. It's important that you submit your decision and speaker points within a few minutes after the last speech.

Judging debates is subjective, but it's essential to evaluate the competitors as fairly as possible. Base your decision on the strength and validity of the arguments presented by the debaters, not on who is the most eloquent or "smoothest" speaker. Here are some steps you can follow to effectively judge a debate round—

- Listen attentively to each debater's arguments, evidence, and rebuttals. Focus on their clarity, organization, and logical reasoning.
- Evaluate the content by considering the strength and effectiveness of the arguments presented by each debater. Assess the quality of evidence used to support their claims and look for logical fallacies or inconsistencies in their reasoning. Even if you consider an argument to be flawed, if the opposing debater does not refute it, the argument should stand.
- Take notes ("flowing") during the round using any style of notetaking you are comfortable with. If you're new to judging, [the best option is to flow each speech in different columns](#). Ideally, the column of a speech will be adjacent to the column for the previous speech, so that you can directly compare what was said and unsaid from speech to speech.

In addition to making a decision ("Voting"), you will assign Speaker Points, which is a chance to recognize and assign value to the quality and persuasiveness of speaking style. When assigning points, ties are OK but the winning team cannot receive lower points. You will receive more details on Speaker Points at the 8:30 am Judges' Briefing.

2. **Provide constructive feedback.** Beyond determining the winner, you must also provide written feedback on areas of strength and weakness to help competitors improve. Your decision ("Vote") and Speaker Points are due immediately after the conclusion of the round. You will have all day to write feedback; however, it's smart to write comments in Tabroom.com soon after each round ends, especially since you may be judging 6 to 7 debates during the course of the day. As you gain experience, you may be able to write comments during student Prep Time.

WACFL does not allow oral feedback to the debaters. All your comments must be in writing on the ballot — Do not share your Vote with the competitors at the end of the round. There are reasons for this: it helps keep the tournament running on time, your written feedback is helpful for coaches, oral feedback is open to misinterpretation, and it's better for students to not know their results while the tournament is in-process.

That said, it's OK to be polite, friendly, and welcoming to students. Before the debate begins, be sure you confirm verbally who is in the room and what side they are debating. During the round, your only verbal cues are to call

time when each debater reaches a limit. After the debate, it's OK to thank them for their efforts and say you enjoyed listening to them. Then dismiss the debaters from the room so you can make a decision and write comments!

Your Tabroom.com ballot has 3 separate places to write feedback—

- **Reason for Decision (RFD):** These comments go to all debaters and their coaches. This explains why you voted for one team over the other. This is the most important feedback for the students. Be sure to complete this section.
- **Feedback for Affirmative/PRO:** This is only visible to the Affirmative (or PRO) team and their coach. The Negative/CON team will not see this.
- **Feedback for Negative/CON:** This is only visible to the Negative (or CON) team and their coach. The Affirmative/PRO team will not see this.

When students read your comments, the most important thing they will want to know is why you voted the way you did: What arguments or evidence was most impactful? Did one team drop arguments? Were the final speeches decisive? Comment on the strengths and areas for improvement for each competitor. A ballot should never be insulting or discouraging. On the other hand, a ballot that is entirely positive does not help the students improve.

It's acceptable to comment on delivery and style, including their organization, coherence, and persuasive abilities. Assess teamwork (if applicable) in Public Forum and Policy debate. Evaluate how well students collaborate, support each other's arguments and effectively counter the opposing team's points. Pay attention to how debaters respond to their opponents' arguments during the rebuttal phase. Evaluate their ability to address weaknesses in their opponent's case and provide effective counter arguments.

3. **Serve as a tournament official.** As a judge, you are the “adult in the room.” It is important that students have a positive experience, especially in the Novice division where they may be nervous or uncertain about what to do. Prior to the tournament, you will receive contact information for the tournament officials to use during rounds, if needed.

Computer use is allowed at WACFL tournaments. Debaters may use computers to flow and access evidence or speeches, but they may not communicate with anyone outside the competition room. They may also use phones to time themselves.

Debates can get heated, and students may sometimes become verbally aggressive. Generally, judges should let students try to convince you of the merits of their arguments without intervention. If you have concerns about student behavior, please contact tournament officials after the round.

Timekeeping is an important role during the debate. Your ballot in Tabroom.com has timers or you may use your phone. When a student reaches their time limit for a speech, it's OK to let them finish their sentence, but you should cut them off as soon as possible; same for Prep Time. This is both for fairness and to keep the tournament on schedule. Novice debaters may also need reminders about the sequence of speeches and time limits.

Students should not be in the competition room without an adult present. It is OK for students to slightly rearrange desks and chairs, but have the students return the classroom to its original layout before you leave.

Most people find judging rewarding and inspiring. The students you hear at WACFL tournaments will become our future leaders. Judging for the first time can seem daunting, but you will be surrounded by experienced judges and coaches. Feel free to ask them questions! At each successive tournament, you will feel more confident in your capability.

Thank you again for judging! We could not hold tournaments without you.