



Historical Association
The voice for history

The Great Debate:

students' public speaking guidance



www.history.org.uk



Public speaking guidance for the Great Debate

Introduction

A quick Google search will show you very quickly that there is plenty of general guidance on the Internet for effective public-speaking and for improving your debating skills. Public-speaking is a skill highly valued by universities and graduate employers. We have put together some top tips for effective public-speaking, followed by some specific advice for tackling the Great Debate including the judging criteria.

1 General tips on public speaking

Writing your speech

A good speech is usually very straightforward and logical. You should avoid complex structures and focus on the need to explain and discuss your ideas very clearly. As in any essay, an effective speech will usually include three parts:

- an introduction identifying your key points and signposting your argument
- a coherent series of main points presented in a logical sequence
- a clear, powerful and purposeful conclusion.

Start planning by making a list of all the points you wish to make, expressing each in a few words or a short sentence. Consider whether all the points you have made can be grouped together into three key points. It is much better to make three strong, well-supported points than to confuse



your audience with too many. Indeed, if you try to pack more in you will find yourself needing to rush through, thereby negating any impact you were hoping to make. Next, consider how you can embellish each of these points with an explanation and evidence. While the evidence part is where you can make things interesting for your audience, be careful not to lose the points of your argument with too much detail.

Write in your signposts to help the audience navigate their way through the different points in your speech. These can look like the following:

- 'I will begin my argument by explaining how....'
- 'Having explained how... I will move on to my next point'
- 'The final point of my argument centres on....'.



Don't neglect your conclusion. Make sure that it effectively wraps up your speech by emphasising what you have achieved, for example: 'Through points X, Y and Z I feel I have made the case for...'. Finally, you can finish with a short, powerful and memorable quote, such as: 'To conclude my argument I would like to quote.... Thank you for listening.'

Above all, your speech requires clarity. It is much better to keep it simple if you wish to make an impact upon your audience.



Rhetorical tools for emphasising your points

More advanced speech-makers will use rhetorical tools in order to make an impact and hammer their points home. One example of a rhetorical device is the **tricolon**. This is when you use three parallel words, phrases or clauses. The following are examples of the use of tricolons:

'You are talking to a man who has laughed in the face of death, sneered at doom, and chuckled at catastrophe.'
(The Wizard in *The Wizard of Oz*, 1939)

'Never was so much, owed by so many, to so few.'
(Winston Churchill, 1940)

'Government of the people, by the people, for the people'
(President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, 1863)

Using **contrasts** can also be a way of reinforcing your point. These are often with the repetition of words but in changed order. For example:

'We didn't land on Plymouth Rock; Plymouth Rock landed on us.'
(Malcolm X)

'It is not how old you are, but how you are old.'
(Jules Renard)

Don't forget also to use similes, metaphor and alliteration. These can all add to your persuasive language. In particular, metaphors at the start of a speech are very good for grabbing the audience's attention by creating vivid images. For example Victor Hugo, no mean wordsmith, brilliantly described Waterloo as the 'the **hinge of the door** to the nineteenth century'. On the subject of Gallipoli, a battle which has resonated hugely through Australian history, Shirin Yasar, at the University of Melbourne, writes 'Gallipoli ultimately served as the event that allowed the nation to **forge** its distinctively Australian identity, the beginning of **severing itself from the shadows** of collective colonial identity.' Wilfred Owen



wrote of soldiers on the frontline: 'Bent double, like old beggars under sacks, knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through the sludge' in his famous poem, *Dulce et Decorum Est*. Similes can also be used to surprise the audience – but try to avoid clichés when using these devices.

Cue cards

While there are some (rare) lucky individuals who are able to memorise their speech and deliver it without notes, most of us mortals need some sort of script to help us remember. Reading from a sheet of paper with your argument written out word-for-word will make it difficult to make eye contact with your audience and will sound unnatural. Most experienced public-speakers will use cue cards to help them. Cue cards make it easier to make eye contact, gesture and move freely. These are small postcard-sized cards with your argument written upon them. You should have a card for each of your points, using bullet points or numbers to allow your supporting explanation and evidence to stand out. Additionally, you should write out your signposting/transition sentences at the start of each card. Colour-coding the main point, supporting information and transition sentences on each cue card can also be useful in making the components stand out. Remember, each part of your speech should be reducible to a key word or phrase which should be highlighted. Don't be tempted into simply re-writing your whole argument word for word on to the cue cards.

Practice

Make sure to practise your speech. Do so with your friends and family as an audience or even in front of a mirror. It is going to be very important to get your timing right in this competition so do make sure to work your speech down to the allocated time. When you get to practise upon an



audience, be brave and ask for honest feedback. See if they can repeat back to you the main points of your argument. If they can't, then a re-draft is required. You could give your audience a check-list of questions such as: Was the opening effective? Were the words clearly spoken? Could you hear adequately? Do the transition sentences between the different points work?

Body language

Make sure to smile at and make eye contact with your audience. A smile and a hello at the start of your speech will trigger a smile in your audience as an almost reflex response, which in turn will help you feel more at your ease. Do also stand up straight and try to come out from behind the podium if there is one. Walk around a little and gesture with your hands. Don't keep your hands in your pockets or glued to the podium! Where practical, good presenters will often walk from side to side and look at different parts of the audience.

Your voice

Do practise changing your volume and tone to emphasise your points. Try not to sound like a robot with a monotonous voice. Speak with energy. The last thing you want is to come across as uninvolved, uninteresting and unenthusiastic (please note the alliteration!).

Nerves

Being nervous before one gives a speech is entirely natural. In fact, some nerves are good for you as it will make you more energised and stop you sounding 'flat' to your audience. On the other hand, too much nervousness can be a problem and can lead to breathlessness. So do take a few slow deep breaths before your talk starts. You should also make a conscious effort to slow down. When nervous you will speed



up and the audience will not be able to follow you. Moreover, you should be reassured that most of your mistakes will be far less noticeable than you think. Before you start speaking make sure to have drunk some water as this will help to open up the throat and will help to calm nerves. Having some water within easy reach when speaking is also a good idea.

A little advice from an ancient master

The first known book in western civilisation on the art of rhetoric was written by Aristotle in 350 BC. Aristotle contended that public-speaking had three core elements, which all good speakers called upon:

Ethos The art of convincing your audience that you know what you are talking about and that you are someone they will like

Pathos The art of getting your audience on your side of the argument by appealing to their emotions

Logos The hard facts and evidence that gives your argument its validity.

In other words, for the Great Debate:

- engage with your audience
- show that you are interested in what you are presenting and
- that you know something about it.

By following the guidance above your speech should contain each of Aristotle's three elements.



2 Speaking for the Great Debate competition

For the Great Debate you will have five minutes to deliver your speech. This means you will only have time for several key points and your argument will need to be very tightly organised. Most certainly if you hope to do well you will need to practise against time. The five minutes will go very quickly! Make sure each point is well made and counts.

Given the time limits you will need to weigh up carefully which factors are the most important.

The judges will be marking you using the following criteria:

- The quality of the entrant's argument – its structure, clarity and power to persuade.
- The way in which the speech is presented.
- The explicit use of and reflection on some possible *criteria* for historical significance.
- The links between their chosen topic and its wider historical context.

Structuring an argument

As previously mentioned, your argument is to last five minutes. This will be strictly enforced. You should therefore distil your argument down to several *explained* and *evidenced* points. Of course, how many points you make comes down to you but I suggest it will be difficult to make more than three or five well.



How you shape your speech is also completely down to you but do aim for clarity: you cannot convince a confused person! In your opening be direct and *identify* your key points, signposting what is ahead for your audience.

Practise

Once you have written your argument my advice is to transfer it on to cue cards as explained above. Practise your timings with a friendly and constructive critic(s). In terms of content, ask them about how clear your arguments are and whether the points you make are explained and evidenced. Be honest. Do you sound interested in the topic? Or is your delivery so flat that you are sending them to asleep?

Questions

When you are doing your practice runs we suggest you get your audience to ask you challenging questions about your ideas at the end of speech. Judges may ask post-presentation questions, and, whilst you will not be marked on your ability to respond to the judges' questions, your answer may influence the judge's decision making. Look at this as an opportunity to show off your understanding of the topic. If you are skillful enough you may also be able to use the questioning as an opportunity to re-make points that you did not put across very well originally.

....Finally

Be brave and good luck! We look forward to seeing you at your regional heat!

