



# THE GREAT DEBATE

2026



**PUBLIC SPEAKING  
GUIDANCE FOR  
THE GREAT DEBATE**



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.

## Writing your speech

A good speech is usually very straightforward and logical. For advice on what makes a good speech, see [www.history.org.uk/go/greatdebate](http://www.history.org.uk/go/greatdebate). 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. Set out a clear structure with the key points you wish to make, maybe three or four points.
- a coherent series of main points presented in a logical sequence
- a clear, powerful and purposeful conclusion.

## Planning

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.

## Research, explanation and evidence

Make sure you have researched your topic and that your argument is historically correct from the beginning. Use the Historical Association website and other trusted sources e.g., newspaper archives and local archives, as well as local museums and speaking with older relatives or people in your community to research your argument.

Next, consider how you can embellish each of these points with an explanation and evidence e.g., quote a local museum, extract from a speech, book, article from a magazine or *The Historian*. Remember to add the year (if you know it) and where/who the reference is from.

While the evidence part of your speech 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, make sure your closing sentence is clear, succinct and powerful, to better stick in your audience's mind.

Make a draft of your speech and ask your teachers and parents to look over the draft and give feedback. Refine it if necessary.

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

## Devices for an argument

### Rhetorical tools

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)

### Contrasts

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)

### Similes, metaphor and alliteration

Don't forget you can 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 overuse of these devices since if used too much can make an argument lack coherence and make the argument less convincing. However, they are great tools to get a point across so don't be afraid to include.





**Direct quotes from history and historians in support of your argument can lend your argument immediacy, and help establish significance. Helpfully, they are often already very memorable in oratory terms – be ready to use them, but also ready to critique them.**

## Delivering Your Speech

### Cue cards

While there are some (rare) lucky individuals who are able to memorise their speech and deliver it without notes, most of us 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. Some public-speakers use cue cards to help them.

Cue cards can make it easier to make eye contact, gesture and move freely. These are small postcard-sized cards with your argument written upon them. You could 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 might want to 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 can be highlighted. Don't be tempted into simply re-writing your whole argument word for word on to the cue cards.

### Your voice

Practise changing your volume and tone to emphasise your points. Try not to sound like a robot with a monotonous voice. Let your passion for your chosen topic come through, as this will imbue your words with energy.



If you are nervous, you may already be talking faster than usual, and you may get breathless or lose clarity in your diction. Remember to breathe, to pause, and to speak slowly and clearly. You may need to make a conscious effort to slow down. This will help you stay calmer, and also allow your audience to keep up with you and your argument.

### Practise

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. Ask for practical advice in terms of whether you spoke at a good speed, and whether they could clearly hear all of your words. See if they can repeat back to you the main points of your argument.

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?

With this feedback, you can go back and redraft, and try again.





## Top Tips

- Make sure to smile at and make eye contact with your audience.
- Consider how you will stand as you deliver your speech. Do you want to stay still and planted, or move about and gesture? Choose whichever feels more comfortable for you, and stick to it.
- Look towards the back of the hall so that your head is held high. If you look down, people will not be able to hear you.
- If you slip up, keep going. Remember, most of your mistakes will be far less noticeable than you think.
- And finally - engage with your audience, show that you are interested in what you are presenting, and that you know something about it!

## A Little Advice from Antiquity

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:

1. *Ethos* – The art of convincing your audience that you know what you are talking about and that you are someone they will like.
2. *Pathos* – The art of getting your audience on your side of the argument by appealing to their emotions.
3. *Logos* – The hard facts and evidence that gives your argument its validity.

Consider whether your speech includes each of these three elements.



## 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. You will need to practise against time, speaking at a moderate pace. 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 your 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 your chosen topic and its wider historical context.

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.

Before delivering your speech why not get family and friends to ask questions like judges and or think about questions the judges might potentially ask.

You can even use the questions as an opportunity to re-make points that you did not put across very well originally, so make the most of them.

### ....Finally

Remember that even putting yourself forward to take part in a heat is a great achievement, and one to be proud of.

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