World Debating Forum.com

GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL DEBATE COACHING



Writer: Patrick Lockhart
Editor: Bill Drake

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GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL DEBATE COACHING

World Debating Forum.com

GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL DEBATE COACHING

FOR GRADES K–12

Patrick Lockhart

Edited by Bill Drake



A shared resource from the World Debating Forum (WDF)

Guide to Successful Debate Coaching for Grades K–12

Writer: Patrick Lockhart
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Created for the World Debating Forum community
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Coaches and teachers may photocopy the forms and practice plans in the appendices for use with their own students.

First edition

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Using This Book

Throughout the chapters you'll find short, practical boxes set apart from the main text. Here is what each one is for.

▶ WATCH THE VIDEO

Every chapter has a companion video. Scan the QR code at the start of the chapter with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition. All 30 are also collected in the Video Library at the back of the book.

▶ TRY THIS

An activity you can run at your next practice.

COACH'S CORNER

A short story from a coaching room, showing an idea at work.

TRY SAYING IT THIS WAY

Words you can borrow, word for word, when the moment comes.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

A common problem and a calm way through it.

IN YOUR FORMAT

A note on how the skill applies to the format your students use.

PART ONE

01

Welcome to Coaching

CHAPTER 1

You Can Do This



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 1 VIDEO

You Can Do This

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/u5wqjgqrvHU

Let's start with a confession: most people who coach debate did not plan to.

Maybe you teach English, and the principal asked who might be willing to lead the debate club. Maybe your child came home with a flyer and the club needed an adult. Maybe you were once on a team yourself, and you remember how much it mattered. Or maybe you saw a handful of kids who loved to argue about everything, and you thought, *someone should give them somewhere to put that energy.*

Whatever brought you here, you probably have the same question that nearly every new coach has: *What if I don't know enough?*

This chapter is here to answer that question honestly, and gently.

What You Don't Need

You don't need to have been a champion debater. You don't need to know the names of formats, the vocabulary of tournaments, or the tricks of the trade. You don't need to be the loudest, quickest, or most confident person in the room. You certainly don't need to have all the answers.

What the students need is much simpler, and much more within your reach.

What a Coach Actually Does

Strip away the trophies and the jargon, and a debate coach does four things.

A coach welcomes. Debate asks young people to say what they think out loud, in front of others, and risk being challenged. That takes courage. Before anything else, a coach makes a room where that courage is possible: where a wobbly first speech gets a smile instead of a smirk, and where "I'm not sure yet" is an acceptable thing to say.

A coach guides. You help students see what comes next: how to gather their thoughts, how to find a reason, how to listen to someone who disagrees. You don't have to be at the finish line to point out the next step.

A coach asks good questions. The best coaches rarely lecture. They ask: *What makes you say that? What would someone on the other side say? What's your strongest reason?* A good question can teach more than a good speech.

A coach encourages. Young debaters stumble, freeze, forget, and lose. What they remember is how the adult beside them responded. Your steadiness is part of the curriculum.

Notice what's *not* on the list: knowing every rule, or winning. Those matter, but they come later and they come more easily when the four above are in place.

What You Do Need

A handful of qualities will carry you a long way:

- **Curiosity.** An interest in what young people think, and why.
- **Patience.** Skills grow slowly, and sometimes sideways.
- **A willingness to learn alongside your students.** Telling them "I'm figuring this out too, let's find out together" does not make you a weaker coach. It makes you a more trustworthy one.
- **Care.** If the students can tell you want them to do well, many small mistakes will be forgiven.

COACH'S CORNER

Imagine a new coach, a fifth-grade teacher, who stood in front of her first practice and admitted she'd never debated in her life. A boy near the front shrugged and said, "That's okay, we're new too." By the end of the season, they had built the club together. Her honesty gave the students permission to be beginners, too.

What Debate Is For

It's worth knowing where we're heading, so you can keep your bearings when practice gets noisy. Debate is a structured way for people to disagree effectively. Students learn to form an opinion, support it with reasons, listen carefully to someone who sees things differently, and respond thoughtfully instead of angrily. These are habits for a lifetime: in classrooms, workplaces, families, and communities.

Some of your students will go on to compete and win. Many will not, and they'll still leave with something valuable: a voice, a way of thinking, and some evidence that they can stand up and be heard. Keep that in mind, especially on the hard days.

A Word About Winning

Competition can be a wonderful teacher. It sharpens thinking, builds resilience, and gives students something to aim for. But if winning becomes the only point, a coach can unintentionally teach young people that being right matters more than being fair, and that losing means failing.

This book takes a different view. We'll treat winning as one of the good things that can happen, not the reason for the work. We'll ask how a student grew, what they understood better than before, and whether they treated others well along the way. Students who learn this way tend to do better in the long run too, because they're not afraid to try, to fail, and to try again.

How to Use This Book

You don't have to read it one chapter after another. If your practice is tomorrow and you need a plan, jump to Chapter 26 (Your First Week of Practice). If you coach younger students, Part Three is for you; if you're coaching teenagers, you may want to start with Part Five. Likewise, for a general technical orientation, Chapter 4 gives a short tour of the different debate formats, so you can understand what you're working with. Throughout the book you'll see various hints and suggestions labelled:

- **Try This:** this will be a short exercise you can use at your next practice.
- **Coach's Corner:** this is a reflection or story from the coaching life.
- **When Things Go Sideways:** what to do when a plan falls apart.
- **Try Saying It This Way:** sample words for the moments when you're not sure what to say.

EXAMPLES:

▶ TRY THIS

Before you read further, take five minutes with a notebook. Write down (1) the reasons you're coaching, (2) one thing you hope your students feel at the end of the season, and (3) one worry you have. Put it somewhere safe. Reread it when the season gets hard.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"I don't know the answer."

It will happen: a student asks a question you can't answer. You can say, "*Great question. I don't know. Let's find out together*," and then do exactly that. A coach who says this and follows through models and teaches the most important skill in debate: how to find things out.

TRY SAYING IT THIS WAY

"*I'm glad you're here. Nobody has to be good at this yet. We're going to learn it together.*"

To sum up, you've already done what matters most: you showed up and raised your hand. We'll build everything else, step by step.

CHAPTER 2

What Debate Is, and Why It Matters



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 2 VIDEO

What Debate Is, and Why It Matters

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/q84YZhXfDJw

Ask ten people what debate is and you'll probably hear ten different answers. Some picture a televised political shouting match. Some picture students in suits, speaking at lightning speed. Some remember a classroom exercise where they were handed a topic and told to defend it whether they liked it or not.

All of those are debate, in a way. None of them is its heart. At its heart, debate is *thinking out loud together*, following rules that keep the conversation fair, however strong the disagreement.

That simple idea will guide everything in this book, so let's spend a little time with it.

A Conversation with Rules

All of us know what an ordinary argument feels like. Voices rise. People talk over each other. Somebody brings up something from last year. Fingers are pointed. Nobody changes their mind, and everyone is left feeling a little drained.

Debate takes the same energy and gives it a shape. Each side gets a turn. People are expected to give reasons, not just volume. Listening counts as much as speaking. And whoever is judging, whether that's a teacher, a panel, or the students themselves, pays attention to the quality of the thinking rather than the loudness of the voice.

It can help to think of a soccer game. Without rules, it would be a crowd of people chasing a ball. With rules, it becomes something skillful and beautiful, and everyone can play without getting hurt. The rules of debate do the same thing for ideas. They don't limit thinking. They make it safe enough to be bold.

Three Habits at the Center

When you strip debate down to its essential practices, three things remain.

Clear reasoning. This is the habit of saying what you think *and why*. A student who says "School should start later" has shared an opinion. A student who says "School should start later because teenagers need more sleep to learn well" has started to reason. Much of your coaching, especially early on, will be nudging students from the first kind of sentence to the second.

Careful listening. In debate, you can't answer an argument you haven't understood. Students learn to hear what someone actually said, rather than what they expected them to say, and to take notes, ask questions, and respond to the real point. **Many coaches find this is the habit that transfers most visibly to the rest of a student's life.**

Respectful disagreement. Students learn that you can challenge an idea without attacking the person who holds it, and that being challenged is not the same as being disliked. **This is a skill many adults are still practicing.**

What Debate Is Not

It helps to clear away a few common misunderstandings, because you'll meet them in students, parents, and colleagues.

- **Debate is not about being loud.** A calm, well-organized speech usually beats a shouted one, and students quickly notice.
- **Debate is not about crushing the other side.** The goal is to understand an issue well enough to explain it and test it, not to humiliate someone.
- **Debate is not only for natural talkers.** Quiet students often make wonderful debaters, because they tend to listen closely and think before they speak. They simply need a gentler way in. (Chapter 7 is about exactly this.)
- **Debate is not only competition.** Tournaments can be thrilling, but a program with no trophies at all can still change lives.

Where Debate Fits in a Young Person's Growth

Debate looks different at different ages, and that's a good thing.

For younger children, debate is mostly about finding their voice and learning that their ideas are welcome. It lives in games, stories, and the endless question *why*?

For middle schoolers, it's about growing independence. They're becoming more aware of what peers think, more sensitive to embarrassment, and more ready for structure and evidence. A good debate club gives them a place to be curious without being judged.

For high schoolers, debate becomes a training ground for serious thinking: researching, weighing sources, building cases, and facing strong opposition with poise. Many teenagers also discover that they care deeply about something, and debate gives them a way to say so.

At every age, though, the same three habits are at work. That's why this one book can serve a first-grade circle and a varsity team.

The Quiet Benefits

The benefits of debate often show up in places you didn't expect. Coaches and teachers often report that debaters become more confident speaking in class, more careful readers, more organized writers, and more willing to hear a view they disagree with. Students who have practiced arguing the other side tend to become better at imagining how other people see the world. And young people who learn to engage with public questions in a thoughtful way are better prepared to take part in their communities as adults.

You don't have to promise any of this. Just keep the three habits in view and trust the process.

> **▶ TRY THIS**
>
> At your next practice, or at dinner tonight, ask a small question with no right answer: *Is it better to have a few close friends or lots of friends?* Then pay attention to the three habits. Did people give reasons? Did they listen to each other? Did they disagree kindly? Notice what already happens naturally. That's where you build from.

COACH'S CORNER

Imagine a coach whose team included a boy who argued about everything: the rules, the snacks, the clock on the wall. At first she found him exhausting. Then she gave him a job: Your assignment this week is to disagree with someone and make them feel respected while you do it. *He took the challenge seriously. By the end of the month, the other students were asking him to be their practice partner. His energy hadn't changed. It had found a purpose.*

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"A parent says debate just teaches kids to argue."

It's a fair worry, and it deserves a friendly answer. You might explain that a debate is the opposite of a fight: students take turns, give reasons, and listen to each other. Invite the parent to visit a practice. Most come away reassured.

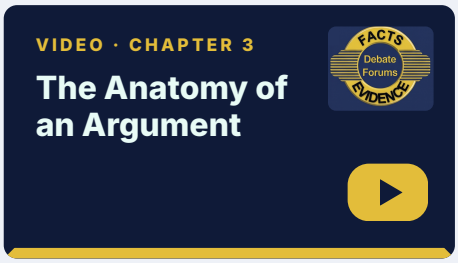
TRY SAYING IT THIS WAY

"*Debate is a way of working out what's true and what's fair by listening to more than one side.*"

Debate gives young people a place to practice the kind of conversation the world needs more of. You're about to help them do it.

CHAPTER 3

The Anatomy of an Argument



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 3 VIDEO

The Anatomy of an Argument

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/BU4DuRynTV8

Before we talk about debate, let's talk about bedtime.

Imagine a ten-year-old standing in the kitchen. "I should be allowed to stay up until 9:30," she says. Her father raises an eyebrow. "Why?" "Because I finish my homework early," she says. "Last week I was done by seven o'clock and I just watched TV until bed." Her father thinks for a moment. "But you were really tired on Thursday."

Congratulations: you've just watched a complete argument, with all four of its parts. Debate may look complicated from the outside, but this little scene contains almost everything a beginner needs to know. Let's take it apart.

The Claim: What I Think

The **claim** is the point someone is trying to make. "I should be allowed to stay up until 9:30" is the claim. It answers the question, *What do you want me to believe, or do?*

A good claim is clear enough that someone could disagree with it. "Bedtime is a thing" isn't a claim. "Bedtime should be later for kids who finish their homework" is. When students are stuck, ask them: *What is the one sentence you want me to remember?*

The Reason: Why I Think It

The **reason** is the "because." "Because I finish my homework early" is the reason. It connects the claim to something that makes it worth believing.

This is the most important single idea in this book. A claim without a reason is just an opinion, and opinions are everywhere. A claim *with* a reason is the beginning of an argument. If you teach your students nothing else this season, teach them to say "because."

The Evidence: How I Know

The **evidence** is whatever shows the reason is true. "Last week I was done by seven o'clock" is the example the girl uses to prove her point. For younger students, evidence may be a personal example or something they've seen or learned in class. For older students, it grows into facts, statistics, expert opinions, and research from credible sources. (We'll spend a good deal of time on this in Part Five.)

A useful question at every age is: *How do we know that?*

The Rebuttal: What Someone Else Might Say

The **rebuttal** is a response to someone else's argument. "But you were really tired on Thursday" is a rebuttal: it doesn't deny that she finished her homework, but it points to something that weakens her case.

Rebuttal is what turns a speech into a debate. Students stop only presenting their own ideas and start answering someone else's. It is also the part many beginners find hardest, because it requires listening carefully and thinking quickly. We'll build up to it gradually.

Putting It Together

Here is the same shape with a debate topic.

- **Claim:** Schools should start later in the morning.
- **Reason:** Because teenagers need more sleep to learn well.
- **Evidence:** Findings from sleep researchers, or a school that tried it and what happened.
- **Possible rebuttal:** A later start would make after-school activities run late and cause problems for working parents.

Notice that the shape is the same for a bedtime and a school schedule. Students can practice on small, silly topics, and the skill carries over to large, serious ones.

Strong and Weak Arguments

You don't need a long checklist to help students tell a stronger argument from a weaker one. A few simple questions go a long way:

- **Is there a reason, or did the student just say the claim again?** ("Pizza is the best food because pizza is the best.")
- **Does the reason actually support the claim?** A reason that's true but unrelated doesn't help.
- **Is the evidence believable?** Where did it come from?
- **Is the argument fair to the other side?** Does it deal with the best objection, or only the easiest one?

Beginners will stumble on these constantly. That is the learning, not a sign that something is wrong.

IN YOUR FORMAT

Every format of debate, however fancy its rules, is built from these same pieces. The names for them vary (some call a reason a "warrant," for example), and Chapter 4 will help you recognize the main variations. If you hear a new word at a tournament, ask yourself which of these four pieces it is describing.

▶ TRY THIS

The Argument Detective. Read a few everyday statements aloud and ask students to find the claim and the reason. For example: "*We should have a class pet because it would teach us to be responsible.*" "*I think we should walk to school. It's healthy and it's free.*" "*Our team shouldn't switch practice days. Last time we did, half the team missed it.*" Then invite students to add the evidence: *How could we show that's true?* Finish by asking what a person on the other side might say.

COACH'S CORNER

Picture a middle-school coach who put four sticky notes on the wall labeled Claim, Reason, Evidence, Rebuttal. *Every time a student spoke, she'd walk over and touch one of the notes: "That was a reason." "That sounded like evidence." Within a few weeks, students were doing it to each other. They hadn't memorized a rule. They had learned to see the parts of an argument.*

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"My students give opinions with no reasons."

This is the most common problem in beginning debate, and it's very fixable. Don't correct it. Ask: *What makes you say that?* Then wait. Over time, the question becomes a habit students ask themselves.

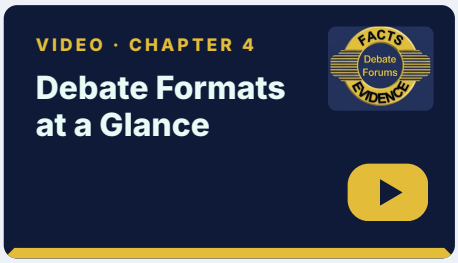
TRY SAYING IT THIS WAY

"I like where you're going. What's the reason behind that?" and *"What would someone who disagrees with you say?"*

An argument is just a claim, a reason, some evidence, and a willingness to hear a reply. Once your students can see those pieces, they can build anything on top of them.

CHAPTER 4

Debate Formats at a Glance



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 4 VIDEO

Debate Formats at a Glance

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/C95F_iqD5mQ

Sooner or later, someone will ask you, *What format are you doing*? If you've never coached before, it can sound like a question in a foreign language.

Here's the good news: a format is simply a **set of rules for how a debate is organized**. Who speaks, in what order, for how long, and what each speaker is expected to do. That's all. It's the same idea as the rules of a board game, and just like board games, some are quick and simple and some are long and strategic.

This chapter gives you a short, jargon-light tour of the main kinds of debate so that you can recognize them, choose one that fits your students, and not be thrown when someone mentions a name you haven't heard. After this chapter, the rest of the book teaches the *skills* underneath all formats. Where a format makes a real difference, you'll find a short **In your format** note.

Six Kinds of Debate

The formats you'll meet in schools around the world differ in many details, but they tend to fall into a few families. Some formats combine more than one.

One-on-one debate. Two students face each other, each speaking for themselves. This format puts a spotlight on the individual: there's nowhere to hide, and no partner to lean on. It builds independence and thorough preparation. It can feel intense for a shy student, and it's a wonderful fit for a student who likes to think deeply and work alone.

Team debate. Two or more students share a side and divide the work. One might open, another might respond to the opponents, another might sum up. Team debate teaches cooperation, trust, and planning together. It tends to be a gentler entry point for beginners, since someone is always in your corner.

Policy-style debate. The question is about *action*: Should we do this? Should our school, town, or country adopt a particular change? Speakers weigh costs and benefits, ask whether a proposal would really work, and compare it to the alternatives. It rewards research and practical, step-by-step thinking.

Values-style debate. The question is about what is *right*, *fair*, *or valuable*, rather than what to do. Is it ever acceptable to break a promise? Which matters more, freedom or safety? Speakers reason about principles and what they mean in real life. This style suits students who enjoy big questions and careful thinking about ideas.

Spontaneous (limited-preparation) debate. Students are given a topic shortly before they speak, with little time to prepare. This style rewards quick thinking, flexibility, and calm under pressure. It's also a great way to practice in a club, because it needs no research and can be used at a moment's notice.

Parliamentary-style debate. Modeled loosely on the way some legislatures work, one side "governs" and proposes a motion while the other "opposes" it, and speakers may politely interrupt with short questions or points. The style is lively and conversational, and it often combines teamwork with spontaneous thinking.

EDITOR'S NOTE · REMOVE BEFORE PUBLISHING

The names above are descriptive on purpose. Decide whether to add a brief sidebar naming widely used formats (for example, Public Forum, Lincoln–Douglas, Policy, and Parliamentary in North America, or others in your regions) and link to rule summaries on the WDF platform.

What They Have in Common

Behind the different rules, every format asks students to do the same handful of things.

- State a position clearly.
- Support it with reasons and evidence.
- Listen to the other side and answer it.
- Close by explaining why their side makes more sense.

If you remember nothing else about formats, remember this. A student who can do those four things can step into almost any format with a little orientation. That is why this book concentrates on the skills.

How Formats Differ in Practice

When you read the rules of a new format, a few questions will tell you most of what you need to know:

- **How many people are on a side?** One, two, or more.
- **How long are the speeches?** Younger students might speak for one to two minutes. Older students often speak for several minutes at a time.
- **Is there a question-and-answer period?** Many formats include a time when debaters question each other directly. We call this *cross-examination*, and we'll give it a chapter of its own.
- **How much preparation is allowed?** Weeks of research, an hour, or a few minutes?
- **Is the topic announced in advance?** In some formats, it's the same for months. In others, it's a surprise.
- **How is the winner chosen?** By a single judge, a panel, an audience, or no judge at all.

How to Choose

There is no best format, only a best fit for your group. Here are some questions to help you decide.

Who are your students? Younger students and beginners generally do best with short speeches, simple turns, and lots of teamwork. Teenagers who like research may enjoy a format with deep preparation. Students who love to improvise may thrive in a spontaneous or parliamentary-style format.

How much time do you have? A club that meets for an hour a week is not going to master a format that expects months of research. Choose something that fits the real schedule.

Will you compete? If there is a league or tournament in your area, find out what it uses, and let that guide you. If not, you are free to adapt, simplify, or invent. Many wonderful programs do.

What do you want students to learn first? If your priority is confidence, begin with team or spontaneous debate. If it is research, begin with a policy-style or values-style topic that students can prepare. You can always change.

Start small. You do not have to commit to one format forever. Many coaches begin with simple, home-made rules, and add a real format once students are comfortable. A format should serve your students, not the other way around.

▶ TRY THIS

Choose a light topic, such as *Should every school have a pet?* Divide your students into small groups and let them try a short debate in two different ways: first as pairs (one-on-one), then as teams of three with a simple order of speaking. Afterward, ask: *Which felt easier? Which felt more fun? Which made you think harder?* Their answers will tell you something about both your students and your choice of format.

COACH'S CORNER

Imagine a volunteer coach who had spent a week studying the rules of a complicated tournament format and was starting to feel overwhelmed. A veteran coach from a nearby school told her, "On the first day, nobody remembers the rules. They remember whether they felt listened to." She put the rulebook down, ran a simple team game with her students, and learned the format gradually over the season.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"I don't understand the rules of our tournament format."

You are not alone, and nobody expects you to master them overnight. Ask the tournament organizer for a one-page summary, watch a round before you coach one, and ask an experienced coach or judge to explain it. Most are delighted to help. Your students will pick up more than you expect.

TRY SAYING IT THIS WAY

"This format is new to me too. Let's read the rules together and try a practice round."

Formats are the containers. The skills are what go inside. Now that you can recognize the containers, let's get to know the young people who will fill them.

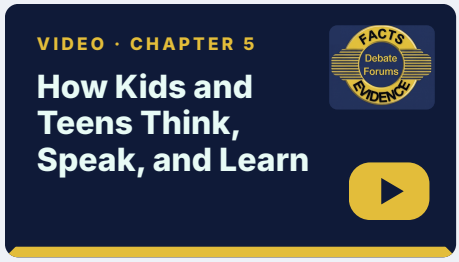
PART TWO

02

Knowing Your Young Debaters

CHAPTER 5

How Kids and Teens Think, Speak, and Learn



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 5 VIDEO

How Kids and Teens Think, Speak, and Learn

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/mFlVPb_DEUk

A six-year-old and a sixteen-year-old might both say, “I disagree.” But what’s going on inside them is very different.

The better you understand how young people think at different ages, the easier it is to choose activities that fit, to set expectations that are fair, and to avoid feeling discouraged when a student isn’t doing what you hoped. This chapter offers a gentle sketch. It is not a textbook on child development, and it can’t describe every child. Treat it as a set of general tendencies, and let your own students correct it.

A Note Before We Begin

Age is only a rough guide. Children grow at different rates. A shy nine-year-old may think more abstractly than a loud thirteen-year-old. A student who is confident in a game might freeze when speaking alone. Watch the actual young people in front of you, and let what you see outrank any chart.

Younger Children (about ages 5 to 8)

Attention. Short. Ten minutes on one activity is a lot. Movement helps, and so do changes of pace.

Confidence. Often high, and often fragile. Many young children happily say what they think, but can be crushed by laughter or a sharp correction.

Thinking. Concrete. Young children reason best about things they can see, touch, or imagine: pets, recess, favorite foods, stories. Abstract ideas such as "fairness" are easier to reach through a story or a situation than through a definition.

Speaking. Their sentences may wander, and they may tell a related story instead of answering the question. That's normal. They are practicing.

Criticism. Very sensitive. Praise effort and specific moves ("You gave a reason!"), and offer only one small next step at a time.

Older Elementary (about ages 8 to 11)

Attention. Longer, especially with something challenging or competitive.

Confidence. Starting to be shaped by comparison. Children begin to notice who is "good" at things, and some start holding back.

Thinking. More able to follow a line of reasoning, to see that two people can have different views for good reasons, and to explain the steps. Fairness and rules become very important, which can lead to passionate arguments about whether something was "not fair."

Speaking. More organized, and ready for simple structures such as *opinion*, *reason*, *example*.

Criticism. Can handle gentle, specific feedback, especially if it comes after something encouraging.

Middle School (about ages 11 to 14)

Attention. Variable. Wonderful when engaged, but pulled in many directions.

Confidence. Often the most delicate time. Students become intensely aware of how peers see them. A student who spoke freely at ten may suddenly go silent.

Thinking. Growing ability to handle abstract ideas, hypotheticals, and multiple points of view. Many students begin to enjoy challenging authority and testing ideas, which can be a wonderful energy for debate.

Speaking. Self-conscious. Pairs and small groups are far less frightening than the whole room.

Criticism. Can sting, particularly in public. Give feedback privately or in a way that doesn't put anyone on display.

Chapter 15 is devoted to this stage.

High School (about ages 14 to 18)

Attention. Can sustain long, demanding work, especially when they see the point.

Confidence. Varied. Some are polished, some are quietly anxious about being judged. Many care deeply about being taken seriously.

Thinking. Capable of abstract, layered reasoning: weighing evidence, spotting weaknesses, considering ethics, and seeing how an argument fits a bigger picture.

Speaking. Ready for more formal structures and longer speeches, though still learning to organize and to control nerves.

Criticism. Most can handle, and want, direct and honest feedback, if it is delivered with respect and a clear route to improvement. (Chapter 19 explores this.)

What This Means for You

A few practical ideas follow from this sketch.

- **Match the activity to the attention span.** If students are fidgeting, the plan is too long, not the students too restless.
- **Teach structure when they're ready for it.** Younger children need a feeling for argument before a form. Older students appreciate the form.
- **Protect self-esteem at the moments it's most fragile.** That is often between the ages of eight and fourteen, and in front of peers.
- **Treat teenagers as capable.** They often rise to what is expected of them.
- **Expect a range in any room.** Even in a single age group, you'll have students who are ahead, behind, and everywhere between.

> ▶ **TRY THIS**
>
> Keep a simple "observation notebook" for your first month. After each practice, jot down a few lines: *Who spoke up? Who didn't? What held attention? When did energy dip?* Patterns will emerge, and you will start to know your team far better than any chart could tell you.

COACH'S CORNER

Picture a coach who ran the same activity with a group of nine-year-olds and a group of thirteen-year-olds. The nine-year-olds loved it and wanted more. The thirteen-year-olds were politely bored. When she asked them why, one said, "It's fun, but it feels like it's for little kids." She kept the structure and changed the topics to ones they cared about. They were back in.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"My students can't focus."

Before blaming the students, look at the plan. Is the activity too long? Too passive? Is it late in the day, or right after lunch? Try shorter segments, more movement, or a change in seating. Focus is easier to build than to demand.

TRY SAYING IT THIS WAY

"Let's take a short stretch and come back. I want to hear everyone's ideas."

Young people are not smaller adults, and they are not all the same. Meet them where they are, and they will go farther than you expect.

CHAPTER 6

Building a Room Where It's Safe to Be Wrong



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 6 VIDEO

Building a Room Where It's Safe to Be Wrong

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/Wgthp1t92Eg

Here is a secret of good debate coaching: the most important thing you build is not an argument. It's a room.

Debate asks students to do something that makes most of us nervous: say an idea out loud, in front of others, and let someone challenge it. A student will only try that if the room feels safe. If it doesn't, they'll stay quiet, or they'll perform, or they'll stop coming. If it does, they'll take risks, make mistakes, learn from them, and grow faster than you thought possible.

This chapter is about how to create that room.

What "Safe" Means

Safe does not mean easy. A debate room should challenge students. What it must not do is make them feel mocked, dismissed, or small. In a safe room:

- It's fine not to know yet.
- Mistakes are treated as information, not failure.
- Disagreement is aimed at ideas, never at people.
- Everyone, including the quiet ones, is expected to belong.
- The coach is on everyone's side.

You Set the Weather

Students read the adult in the room constantly. Your face when someone stumbles, your tone when someone asks a basic question, and the way you respond to a wrong answer all teach more than anything you say about "respect."

A few habits make a big difference.

Thank students for taking risks. *"Thanks for trying that. It took courage."*

Treat mistakes with curiosity. Instead of "That's wrong," try "Interesting. What led you to that?" Often the student finds their own error. Even when they don't, they feel respected.

Admit your own mistakes. When you misspeak or forget something, say so cheerfully. Students learn that errors are survivable.

Keep your promises about turns. If you say everyone will get a chance, make sure they do.

Stay steady when things get loud. A calm voice teaches more than an angry one, and it's contagious.

Agreements, Not Rules

Most coaches begin with a list of rules. A better idea is to build **agreements** together with students. When children and teens help create the expectations, they're far more likely to keep them.

Start with a few of your own, such as *we listen when someone is speaking*; *we disagree with ideas, not people*; *we cheer each other on.* Then ask: *What would help you feel comfortable speaking here? What would you add?* Write the agreements where everyone can see them, and revisit them from time to time. If something goes wrong, you can point to the shared agreements rather than to your own authority: "*Remember what we agreed about listening.*"

(Chapter 26 shows how to introduce agreements in your very first practice.)

Making Mistakes Welcome

Young debaters often believe that a good speaker never stumbles. You can gently correct this idea.

- **Normalize fumbling.** Tell them that professional speakers lose their place, too.
- **Celebrate attempts.** A student who tries a difficult argument and falls short may have learned more than one who played it safe.

- **Have a ritual for restarting.** Some teams have a phrase, such as "Let me try that again," that students can say without embarrassment. Practicing a graceful restart is a skill in itself.

Belonging

Safety is more than the absence of unkindness. It's also the presence of belonging. Students need to feel that they are known, that they matter, and that the team would be different without them.

Small things help: learning every name quickly and using it; remembering something about each student; giving every student a job, such as timekeeper, note-taker, or snack captain; and making sure no one is always picked last or left out. Chapter 7 goes deeper into how to help every kind of student belong.

Kindness in the Language of Debate

Debate sometimes involves challenging language: *I disagree. That doesn't make sense. Your evidence is weak.* It's important to help students learn to say difficult things kindly. You can teach a few simple phrases.

- "*I see it a little differently.*"
- "*Can you help me understand why you think that?*"
- "*I agree with part of that, and here is where I disagree.*"
- "*My concern with that idea is…*"

These phrases are not just politeness. They make disagreement easier to hear, and that makes the thinking better.

The Physical Room

The physical setting matters more than people expect. If you can, arrange chairs in a circle or a loose horseshoe rather than rows, so students can see each other. Make sure everyone can hear. Leave a little space for movement, especially with younger students. And if students will be speaking in front of the group, consider letting them speak from where they are sitting at first, and move to the "front" once they feel ready.

▶ TRY THIS

Hold a "mistake celebration." At the start of a practice, ask each student to share a time they got something wrong and what they learned. Go first, and choose an honest, light story. Students will be surprised by how normal mistakes feel after that. You've set a tone that will last.

COACH'S CORNER

Imagine a coach who kept a jar on the table labeled "Brave Moments." Whenever a student did something that took courage, such as speaking for the first time, asking a hard question, or disagreeing politely with a friend, she wrote it on a slip of paper and dropped it in. At the end of the season, she read them aloud. A few students teared up. The jar had told them, week after week, that someone noticed.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"A student makes fun of another student."

Respond calmly and privately if you can. You might say, "*That comment didn't fit our agreement about disagreeing with ideas, not people. I think you know that. Can you help fix it?*" Then check in with the student who was hurt. If the behavior continues, talk with the student one-on-one, and involve a school counselor or parents if necessary. Keep the focus on repairing the room.

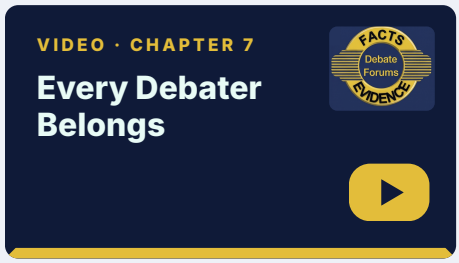
TRY SAYING IT THIS WAY

"*It's okay to be wrong here. That's how we learn.*" and "*I'd like to hear that again, with kindness for the person you disagree with.*"

A safe room doesn't make debate easier. It makes it *possible*, and it makes the learning last.

CHAPTER 7

Every Debater Belongs



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 7 VIDEO

Every Debater Belongs

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/DK1lCJUA0nM

Picture the students you hope will join your team. Now picture the ones who actually show up.

They're rarely the same. Your team will probably include a student who talks nonstop and one who has barely spoken all year. It may include a child who is still learning the language of instruction, a teenager who has been in three debate programs, a student who learns differently from the others, and a child whose parents signed them up because "they need to come out of their shell."

This is not a problem to be solved. It's the team. A strong debate program is built on the idea that **anyone who wants to be there belongs there**, and that every kind of student has something to contribute.

Open Doors

It's tempting to build a team out of the students who are already confident speakers. They're easy to coach and they win early. But they are rarely the students who need debate most, and they are rarely the whole story.

The simplest policy is also the kindest: **anyone may join.** Say it clearly in your first announcement. You don't need an audition. You don't need good grades. You don't need experience, or even a plan to speak at a tournament. Some students will find their place in front of an audience. Others will find it behind the scenes, in research, in organizing, or in helping a teammate prepare. All of it counts.

Shy and Quiet Students

A quiet student is not a student with nothing to say. Many are careful thinkers who simply need more time, more safety, and a gentler doorway.

A few things help.

Start with topics they love. A student who is nervous about debating school policy may light up discussing a favorite video game, an animal, a sport, or a book. Let early practice happen on ground where the student already feels like an expert. Confidence earned there will travel.

Use pairs before groups, and groups before the whole room. Talking to one person is a very different experience than talking to twenty.

Give advance notice. Let a quiet student know which question or topic is coming so they can think first. Surprise is a luxury shy students rarely enjoy.

Offer other ways in. Writing a first draft, sharing notes with a partner, or reading a prepared statement are all legitimate beginnings.

Celebrate small steps. A whispered answer, a raised hand, or a first "I disagree" deserves quiet recognition. Avoid making a fuss that puts them in the spotlight before they're ready. A nod and a private word is often best.

Don't equate silence with disinterest. Some of the most engaged students look the least expressive.

Bold and Talkative Students

Confident students are a gift, and they sometimes need guidance, too.

The student who always raises a hand first, who finishes other people's sentences, or who treats every disagreement as a contest may be hungry for challenge, or may simply not have learned to share space. Give them roles that stretch them: *listener*, *note-taker*, *summarizer*. Ask them to restate a teammate's argument before responding. Set up a game where each person may speak only once before anyone speaks twice. Thank their energy, and ask them to use some of it to make room for others.

English Learners

Students who are learning the language of your practice are doing something remarkable: thinking in one language while speaking in another. Debate can be a wonderful place for them, and a challenging one.

- **Slow down and simplify.** Short sentences, clear words, and a pace that gives everyone time to follow.
- **Offer sentence starters.** *I think… because… For example…* are useful frames for any beginner and especially helpful for language learners.
- **Use visuals and gestures.** Pictures, cue cards, and body language carry meaning where words fall short.
- **Allow preparation in the home language.** A student may build their ideas more fully in the language they know best and then translate.
- **Honor what they bring.** Students who have lived in more than one culture often see issues from angles the rest of the room has never considered. Invite that.
- **Be patient with accent and grammar.** Correct meaning only when it matters, and don't interrupt an idea to fix a verb.

Learning Differences

Every group includes students who learn in different ways. Some find it hard to sit still, to read quickly, to organize their thoughts, to keep track of several instructions, or to process spoken language at speed. You do not need to diagnose anything, and you should not guess. What you can do is build a room where many kinds of minds can succeed.

- **Offer clear structure.** A simple, predictable routine for each practice is calming to many students.
- **Break big tasks into small steps,** and give instructions one or two at a time, preferably spoken and written.
- **Allow more than one way to show thinking.** Speaking, writing, drawing, or using notes are all fair ways to build an argument.
- **Allow extra time,** and avoid putting a student on the spot with a surprise.
- **Ask the student, and the family, what helps.** Often they know better than anyone. If your school has a counselor or learning-support staff, they may offer useful suggestions. Always treat what you learn as private.

When you design for the students who find things hardest, you almost always make practice better for everyone.

Mixed Experience Levels

Sooner or later you'll have a seasoned debater sitting next to a beginner. That's an opportunity, if you use it well.

- **Pair thoughtfully.** Put experienced students with beginners for tasks where the veteran can help, and make clear that the goal is to support, not take over.
- **Create stretch tasks.** Give experienced students harder topics or extra roles while beginners work on foundations.
- **Honor both kinds of progress.** A beginner who finds her voice has grown as much as a veteran who masters a new skill.

A Place for Every Contribution: Research Interns

One idea many programs find valuable is an **intern** or **assistant** role. Pair a student who is not ready, or not yet willing, to speak in front of an audience with a debater who needs help preparing. The intern helps look up information, find sources, organize notes, check facts, and practice arguments with the debater. The debater gets a hand with the heavy lifting. The intern gets real responsibility, a seat at the table, and an inside view of what debate involves.

This is especially powerful for quiet students and for students who may have had fewer opportunities in school, since it gives them a meaningful role without requiring them to perform. Many interns, once they see how a speech is built and how the team treats one another, decide to try speaking on their own. Some never do, and that's fine. They're part of the team, and their work matters.

> ▶ **TRY THIS**
>
> Next practice, run a "topic of my choice" round. Each student picks something they genuinely enjoy, such as a sport, a hobby, or a show, and prepares a one-minute explanation of *why it's great*, with at least one reason. You'll learn what students care about, quiet ones will have somewhere safe to start, and the whole room will feel the pleasure of listening to someone talk about something they love.

COACH'S CORNER

Picture a coach whose newest team member was a boy who sat at the edge of the room for three weeks without saying a word. He did, however, always have his notebook open. One day the coach asked if he'd help another student find sources for a debate about video game ratings. By the following week, he was not only finding sources but arguing with the debater about them. Another month later, he stood up and gave his first speech. His voice shook, and the room applauded as though he had won a trophy.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"One student keeps dominating, and the rest are going quiet."

Change the structure rather than correcting the person. Use turn-taking tools such as a talking object, a "one person speaks, then someone new" rule, or small groups. Have a private, warm word with the dominant student about helping others find their voice. Their energy is an asset when it's aimed well.

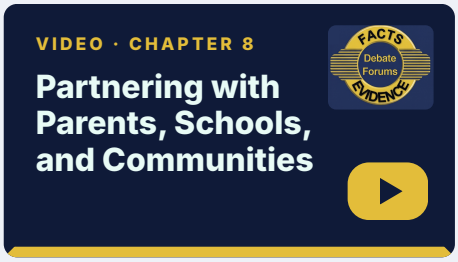
TRY SAYING IT THIS WAY

"*I'd love to hear from someone who hasn't had a turn yet*," and "*Take your time. We're happy to wait.*"

Nobody joins a team hoping to be left out. Your task is not to make every student the same. It's to make sure each one finds a way in.

CHAPTER 8

Partnering with Parents, Schools, and Communities



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 8 VIDEO

Partnering with Parents, Schools, and Communities

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/eQ08gq1uY28

No debate coach works alone, even when it feels that way.

Behind every student is a family with hopes, worries, schedules, and opinions. Behind every program is a school or organization with rules, budgets, and priorities. Around every team is a community of potential helpers, from judges and volunteers to local businesses. Building good relationships with all of these is not a distraction from coaching. It is part of coaching, and it can make the difference between a program that flickers out after one season and one that lasts.

This chapter is about those partnerships.

The Many Hats of a Coach

It helps to know, going in, that coaching is more than teaching debate. Depending on your situation, you may find yourself wearing several hats:

- **Teacher and planner,** designing practices and helping students grow.
- **Communicator,** keeping families, colleagues, and administrators informed.
- **Recruiter,** finding students who would love debate and don't know it yet.
- **Fundraiser,** securing small amounts for supplies, snacks, entry fees, or travel.
- **Organizer,** handling forms, schedules, rooms, and transportation.

This can sound like a lot. Don't try to do it all alone. Parents, older students, fellow teachers, and community members can take hats off your head if you invite them to. Chapter 29 returns to this subject, because pacing yourself is part of what keeps a coach going.

Partnering with Families

Families are your allies. Even when a parent seems demanding or confused, they almost always want what you want: for their child to flourish.

Communicate early and often, and keep it simple. A short introductory letter before the first practice, a brief update every few weeks, and a quick note to celebrate a milestone go a long way. Use plain language, avoid jargon, and say clearly when and where you meet, what students will do, and how to reach you.

Tell families what debate really is. Many parents imagine arguments and shouting. Let them know that your practices focus on listening, reasoning, and respect.

Invite them in. An open practice, a showcase, or a request for volunteers brings families into the picture and lets them see their children thriving.

Ask what they know about their child. Parents can tell you things that no observation will: that a student is nervous about speaking, loves a certain topic, or has a family situation that will affect attendance. A simple question in the first letter opens the door: *Is there anything you'd like me to know about your child?*

Be careful with privacy. Don't share one student's struggles or results with another family.

Here is a sample letter you can adapt. (It's the letter referred to in Chapter 26.)

Dear Families,

We're delighted to welcome your child to our debate club! Debate is a friendly, structured way to practice sharing ideas, giving reasons, listening carefully, and disagreeing respectfully. No experience is needed.

We'll meet on [days] from [time] to [time] in [location]. In our first few weeks, we'll play games, build teamwork, and try out short, friendly practice debates. Students don't need to prepare anything in advance.

You can reach me at [contact information]. If there's anything you'd like me to know about your child, such as interests, worries, or things that help them do their best, I'd love to hear it.

Thank you for sharing your child with us. We're looking forward to a wonderful season.

Warmly,

[Your name]

Handling Expectations

Some conversations are harder than others. A few you may meet:

"Why isn't my child winning?" Gently shift the conversation to growth. Share what you've noticed the student improving, and explain that learning takes time. If it helps, share a few of the goals you hold for the season.

"Why does another student get more speaking time?" Explain your approach to fairness, and be ready to describe how you share opportunities. If a parent has noticed something real, thank them. They may be right.

"My child wants to quit." Listen first. Often there is a specific hurt, such as a bad round, a conflict with a teammate, or embarrassment, and it can be repaired. Ask the student what is happening before assuming the worst.

"I don't think this topic is appropriate." Take the concern seriously. Explain how topics are chosen and why, listen to what troubles them, and involve your school or organization if appropriate. Chapter 21 offers more on handling sensitive topics.

In all of these, a calm voice, a willingness to listen, and a few specific examples of the student's growth go a long way.

Partnering with Your School or Organization

If you coach inside a school, the administration can be your greatest ally or your biggest obstacle. Usually, the difference is whether they understand what you're doing and why.

Make the case clearly. Administrators are busy, and they care about outcomes. When you ask for space, time, or funds, explain what debate does in terms they value: stronger speaking and listening, critical thinking, confidence, and engagement. Offer a short, one-page summary rather than a long speech. Editor: Insert link to a printable "making the case for debate" handout on the WDF platform; see the appendix on resources.

Ask for what you need, and be specific. A regular room, a set time, permission to hold a showcase, a small budget, or a bit of help with transportation are all reasonable requests. Offer something in return: invite them to a showcase, share student successes, or bring them a quick report.

Keep them informed. A brief note before and after events lets administrators feel involved and builds goodwill for next time.

Follow the rules. Permission slips, safety policies, and travel procedures may feel tedious, but they protect students and you.

Find colleagues. Teachers in English, social studies, or the arts often love having a debate program nearby. They may refer students, share a room, or help judge a showcase.

Partnering with the Community

The wider community is full of people who would love to help. You only have to ask.

- **Judges and volunteers.** Parents, retired teachers, local professionals, and older students all make excellent judges and helpers. Many have never been asked.
- **Local organizations.** Libraries, community centers, and civic groups sometimes lend rooms, sponsor events, or invite students to speak.
- **Local businesses.** A small donation toward snacks, T-shirts, or fees may be easier to get than you think. Be clear about what you need and how it will be used.
- **Other coaches.** Neighboring programs can share ideas, practice debates, and friendly competitions. Find them early.
- **Online communities.** The WDF platform offers free and low-cost resources, and a community of coaches who are also learning. Editor: Add a short description and links to the specific tools, forums, and resources coaches should know about.

▶ **TRY THIS**

Draft your own one-page "why debate" summary, in your own words, that you could hand to a principal, a parent, or a potential sponsor. Include three benefits, one story or example (imagined for now, real later), and one clear request. You will be surprised how often you use it.

COACH'S CORNER

Imagine a new coach who dreaded talking to her principal about money. She finally brought a single sheet of paper, three sentences about what debate does for students, and a request for a small supplies budget. The principal said yes in two minutes and asked whether he could attend the first showcase. The conversation she'd feared for weeks turned out to be the start of a friendship.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"No one answers my emails."

Try a different route. A hallway conversation, a short phone call, or a request through a colleague who knows the person can work where email doesn't. Keep requests short and specific, and follow up politely. Persistence, paired with kindness, is rarely wasted.

TRY SAYING IT THIS WAY

"Thank you for your support. Here's what the students have been working on, and here's one thing that would help us do even more."

A team is stronger when the adults around it pull in the same direction. Every relationship you build is one more person rooting for your students.

PART THREE

03

Coaching Grade School Debaters

CHAPTER 9

Starting with Play



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 9 VIDEO

Starting with Play

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/HMP501VCuec

If you coach younger children, here is the best news in this book: you don't have to begin with debate.

Children in the early grades think, argue, and give reasons all day long. *Why can't I stay up later? Why is recess better than math?* They're already doing the raw work of debate. Your job isn't to teach them something foreign. It's to make a place where those instincts can be played with, noticed, and gently shaped.

The best way to do that is through play.

Why Play Works

Play lowers the stakes. A child who would freeze in front of a classroom can happily explain, in a game, why a dragon would make a better pet than a hamster. Play builds a *feeling* about thinking out loud: it's fun, it's safe, and other people listen. That feeling is worth more than any technique at this age.

Play also fits how young children learn. They have short attention spans, strong imaginations, and a need to move. A game honors all three.

A Few Ground Rules for Playful Practice

- **Keep it short.** Ten minutes of one activity is plenty for most young children. Change before they tire.
- **Keep everyone involved.** Avoid games where children wait a long time for a turn.

- **Praise thinking, not just answers.** "I like that you gave a reason" matters more than "that's right."
- **Let silliness in.** Silly topics are a gift: nobody feels their identity is on the line when arguing about the best sandwich.
- **Notice who isn't talking.** Quiet children often have the most to say. Pairs and small groups give them an easier door in.

Six Games to Start With

1. Would You Rather, and Why?

Offer two choices: *Would you rather have a pet dinosaur or a pet robot?* Students pick, then explain their choice to a partner. The "why" is the whole game. Afterward, invite a few to share. You're teaching the central move of argument: a claim and a reason.

2. Four Corners

Label the corners of the room Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. Read a statement (*Dogs make better pets than cats*), and children walk to the corner that fits. In each corner, they talk about why. Then invite one child from each corner to say a reason. Children see that reasonable people can stand in different places, and they have to put their thinking into words.

3. The Great Why Chain

A child states a belief. You ask, "*Why*?" They answer. You ask again. See how many links the chain can have before they run out of reasons. Do it gently, as a game of curiosity rather than a quiz. Afterward, talk about which reasons were strongest.

4. The Wolf's Side of the Story

Pick a story children know, such as *The Three Little Pigs*, and ask: *What would the wolf say?* Children take turns giving the wolf's version of events. This is the beginning of seeing another side, which is one of the most important debate skills there is.

5. Echo Partners

In pairs, one child says an opinion and one reason. The partner must *repeat what they heard*, in their own words, before responding. Then switch. This game builds listening, which at this age is the real skill underneath debate.

6. Reason Relay

Teams line up. Pose a question (*Should children have a longer recess?*). Each child steps forward, gives one reason, and tags the next. Teams can't repeat reasons. The energy is high, and the point is subtle: *there are many different good reasons.*

> ▶ **TRY THIS**
>
> Run a ten-minute practice with just two games: Would You Rather as a warm-up, then Four Corners. Notice which children light up, which hang back, and which need a nudge. You've just started learning your team.

Reading the Room

Some days the energy is high and the game is a great success. Some days children are tired, distracted, or upset about something that happened at lunch. The best coaches learn to read the room: when to push, when to slow down, when to switch to something simpler. If a game isn't working, it's fine to stop and change. Flexibility is part of the craft.

From Play to Practice

Over the weeks, you can gradually add a little structure, building toward the simple *opinion, reason, example* form that Chapter 10 describes. A natural bridge is to ask, after a game: "*What was your reason? Can you give an example?*" Children begin to sense the shape of an argument without being told a rule.

A 30-minute session might look like this:

- **Welcome and a quiet-moment check-in (3 minutes):** *How are you feeling today, thumbs up, sideways, or down?*
- **Warm-up game (7 minutes):** Would You Rather, in pairs.
- **Main activity (12 minutes):** Four Corners or the Wolf's Side of the Story.
- **Listening game (5 minutes):** Echo Partners.
- **Closing circle (3 minutes):** Each child names one thing they liked.

COACH'S CORNER

Picture a second-grader who, for weeks, would only whisper to her partner. During a Wolf's Side of the Story game, she suddenly raised her hand and, in full voice, declared that the wolf only huffed and puffed because he had a terrible cold. The room cheered. No lecture on public speaking could have done that.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"The game turned into chaos."

It happens with young children. Try a calm signal (a raised hand, a chime), take a breath together, and restart with simpler rules or a smaller group. It isn't a failure. It's information about what this group needs.

TRY SAYING IT THIS WAY

"*That's an interesting reason. Can you tell me more?*" and "*I heard Maya say that... Did I get it right?*"

Starting with play says to every child in the room: *your ideas are welcome here.* Everything else grows from that.

CHAPTER 10

Opinion, Reason, Example



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 10 VIDEO

Opinion, Reason, Example

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/PjMkiHK92×8

Once children have played with ideas for a while, they're ready for something wonderfully simple: a three-part shape for an argument.

Opinion. Reason. Example.

That's it. *I think… because… for example…* Most of what we call "debate" for young children grows out of those three little moves. If your students can do them comfortably, they're well on their way. And if you've read Chapter 3, you'll recognize the pattern: it's the same claim, reason, and evidence, wearing its everyday clothes.

Why Three Parts?

Young children can hold three ideas in mind, and three parts is enough to make an argument feel *complete* without feeling like homework.

- **Opinion** answers: *What do you think?*
- **Reason** answers: *Why do you think that?*
- **Example** answers: *Can you show me?*

Each part does a job. The opinion says where we're going. The reason explains why it's worth going there. The example makes it real. A child who says "I think recess should be longer" has an opinion. A child who adds "because kids learn better after they've moved around" has a reason. A child who finishes with "Like when we had a long recess on Friday and everyone paid attention in math" has built a tiny, complete argument.

Teaching the Shape

You can teach this shape without a single worksheet. A sequence that many coaches find useful moves from the easiest piece to the hardest.

Step one: opinion only. Start with silly choices students already know how to make. *Which is better: summer or winter?* Let everyone state an opinion, loudly and proudly. There's no wrong answer, which is exactly the point.

Step two: add "because." Now ask *why*. Give students a sentence starter, written where everyone can see: *I think… because…* Practice it many times, in pairs, with different topics. If you hear "because it's good," thank them and ask, *What makes it good?* Gently, the reasons get better.

Step three: add "for example." Now invite a small story or a fact. *Can you tell me about a time that happened? What did you notice?* Examples are often the easiest part for children, because they love telling stories. Let them tell them.

Step four: put it together. Give the full frame: *I think… because… For example…* A few students will say it smoothly. Many will need three or four tries. Celebrate the attempts.

Making It Stick

Young children learn through repetition, but repetition doesn't have to be dull. A few ways to keep the practice fresh:

Use gestures. Hold up one finger for opinion, two for reason, three for example. Children quickly learn to show "which part am I on?"

Make a pocket card. A small card with three words and pictures (a heart for opinion, a light bulb for reason, a magnifying glass for example) can sit on a desk or in a pocket.

Play "What's missing?" Say an incomplete argument aloud and ask the group which part to add. "*We should have a class garden because plants are fun.*" *Is there an example?* Children love playing detective.

Change the topics often. Use silly questions (*Should dragons be allowed in school?*), personal questions (*What is the best game to play at recess?*), and gentle real-world ones (*Should we recycle at school?*). The structure stays the same while the content changes, and that's how children learn to carry it with them.

Let them be the coach. Pair students up and let one give an argument while the other holds up fingers to show which parts they heard. Teaching someone else deepens understanding.

Helping Children Strengthen Their Reasons

Once the three-part shape is comfortable, you can help children make each part better. Resist the urge to correct. A few questions will do the work:

- *Does your reason really connect to your opinion?* ("I think we should have a pet because I like pizza" is a charming but loose connection.)
- *Is your example a real example, or just another reason?*
- *Can you think of a second reason?* Two reasons are often stronger than one.
- *What would someone who disagrees say?* This is the doorway to rebuttal, which comes later.

Don't ask all of these at once. Pick one per child per practice. Progress is slow, steady, and joyful.

A Gentle First Look at the Other Side

When students have the three-part shape under their belts, you can add something small and powerful: **someone might say...**

After a student shares an opinion, reason, and example, ask: *What might someone who disagrees say?* The first answers are often funny or surprisingly insightful. Then ask: *What could you say back?* You don't need to call it "rebuttal." You're just helping students see that every idea lives in a conversation. (The Wolf's Side of the Story from Chapter 9 prepared them for this.)

IN YOUR FORMAT

If you're preparing students for a particular tournament or league, check how it handles speeches for younger students. Many young debaters simply deliver an opinion, reason, and example as a short speech, and use the same structure for their responses. If the format has longer speeches, you can add a second reason or a second example. The core shape stays the same.

A 30-minute practice built around the shape:

- **Welcome and check-in (3 minutes).**
- **Warm-up (5 minutes):** Would You Rather, in pairs, using the full frame: *I would rather... because... for example...*

- **Teaching moment (7 minutes):** Show the three-finger gesture and practice with a new silly topic.
- **Pair practice (10 minutes):** Partners give one short argument each, and the listener holds up fingers for each part they hear.
- **Closing circle (5 minutes):** Volunteers share a favorite example they heard.

▶ TRY THIS

The Argument Sandwich. Ask students to imagine a sandwich: the top slice is the opinion, the filling is the reason, and the bottom slice is the example, which holds everything up. Have them build "sandwiches" in pairs about a topic you choose, and then "taste test" each other's. *Does the sandwich hold together? Is anything missing?* The silliness makes the structure memorable.

COACH'S CORNER

Imagine a coach working with a group of third-graders who kept saying "because it's fun" to every question. Rather than correct them, she started asking, "What makes it fun?" *One day, a boy answered a question about field trips by saying, "Because you get to see real animals, not just pictures, and you can learn how they smell." The room laughed. The coach thought it was the best reason she'd heard all year.*

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"Every reason sounds the same."

When students repeat "because it's good," they may not yet know what a reason is. Return to games. Try the Great Why Chain from Chapter 9, or a round of "Reason Relay" where no reason can repeat. Variety in the room often teaches what explanation can't.

TRY SAYING IT THIS WAY

"I like your opinion. What's your reason?" and *"Can you give me an example, something that really happened or that you've seen?"*

Three small parts, practiced with joy, are the beginning of a lifetime of reasoning. In the next chapter, we turn to something just as important: helping children find the courage and the calm to say them out loud.

CHAPTER 11

Finding Their Voices



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 11 VIDEO

Finding Their Voices

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/IyjKzJBZX7E

At the end of the last chapter, children could say *I think… because… for example…* in a circle of friends. Now comes the part that makes many of them—and, honestly, many adults—a little queasy: saying it out loud, to a group, and being heard.

A child's "voice" is more than volume. It's the confidence to say what they think, the patience to wait for a turn, the habit of really listening, and a way of settling the butterflies. This chapter helps you build all four.

Speaking Up

Some children whisper, some mumble, and some race through a sentence as if it might catch fire. A few simple, friendly ideas help.

Give them a "big voice, slow voice" picture. Young children understand pictures better than instructions. Tell them to speak so the person in the back of the room can hear, and to talk "like you're telling a story to a friend."

Play with volume. In *Whisper to Roar*, you name a sentence (*I love pizza!*) and have the group say it as a whisper, then a normal voice, then a big voice, then back to normal. Children love the silliness, and they discover that "normal" is a comfortable middle.

Start with a friend. A child who can't speak to the room can often speak to one person. Pair practice first, then a small group, then the whole circle.

Give them the first sentence. Many children freeze at the start. A familiar opening, such as *Today I'm going to tell you why…*, gives them a running start.

Don't demand eye contact. For some children, looking at people while speaking is hard. Suggest a friendly place to look, such as a spot on the wall at the back of the room, a friend's smile, or the clock.

Taking Turns

Turn-taking is harder than it looks. It requires self-control, trust that your turn will come, and the willingness to hold a thought while someone else is speaking.

- **Use a talking object.** A stuffed animal, a ball, or a special stone passed around the circle lets everyone know whose turn it is. Only the holder speaks.
- **Offer a "pass."** Let children say "pass" and come back later. It protects the nervous child and costs you nothing.
- **Make the order visible.** A line on the floor, a list on the board, or names on cards makes it clear that everyone will get a turn.
- **Use a timer for the chatterboxes.** A gentle visible timer, set for a minute, helps eager students learn to wrap up. Thank them for what they said, and praise the child who finishes on time.
- **Teach the "park it" trick.** Give children a spot on a piece of paper to jot a word or draw a tiny picture of the thought they want to share. The thought is safe, and they can listen.

Listening

In debate, listening isn't a polite extra. It's half the activity. A child who hasn't heard the other side can't answer it.

You've already met **Echo Partners** in Chapter 9. Here are a few more ways to practice.

Listening Detective. Before a child speaks, give the audience a small job: *Listen for a reason. Listen for an example. Listen for something you agree with.* Afterward, ask what they heard.

Draw What You Heard. Younger children can draw a quick picture of the speaker's idea. It helps them stay with the speaker, and it gives you a window into what they understood.

The Thank-You Rule. Before responding to someone, a child must say one thing they liked or learned. It slows the rush to disagree.

Calming Nerves

Nerves are normal, and they are not a sign that something is wrong. Even experienced speakers feel them. The goal is not to remove nerves, but to help children feel that they can speak *with* them.

Name them kindly. *"Lots of people feel butterflies before they speak. That means you care."* Some children are surprised to learn that everyone feels this.

Teach a calm breath. One simple version: *Smell the flower, blow out the candle.* A slow breath in through the nose, and a long breath out through the mouth. Practice it together at the start of practice, not only when someone is upset.

Ground the body. Feet flat on the floor, hands resting on the desk or in the lap. Children can feel steadier when they know what to do with their bodies.

Rehearse in safe places. A speech practiced twice with a friend, once with the coach, and once alone in the mirror is much less scary than one attempted cold.

Make mistakes boring. If a child forgets a word, the room should shrug and wait. Teach students to say "Let me try that again." When that becomes normal, fear shrinks.

▶ **TRY THIS**

Play *Two-Minute Story.* In pairs, one child tells the other a short, true story about their weekend, in any order, with no preparation. The listener then retells it in two sentences. Switch. Almost every child can do this, and it shows them that speaking out loud is something they already do all the time.

COACH'S CORNER

Imagine a coach who brought a small bell to practice. When a child finished speaking, anyone who had heard a good reason could tap the bell softly. At first, only a few children dared to speak. After a few weeks, children were competing for the chance to earn bells. The bell was never about winning. It said, We heard you.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"A child freezes in the middle of a speech."

Don't rescue too fast, and don't let the silence stretch painfully. Offer a gentle choice: "*Do you want a moment, a hint, or a restart?*" Let the child pick. If they can't continue, thank them for trying, and invite them to try again later with a partner. The goal is a child who feels safe to return.

TRY SAYING IT THIS WAY

"*Take a breath. We're listening whenever you're ready.*" and "*That took courage. Thank you.*"

When a child discovers that her voice can be heard, she carries that discovery into every classroom she enters.

CHAPTER 12

Short Formats, Big Smiles



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 12 VIDEO

Short Formats, Big Smiles

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/1RhdeWFr0f0

At some point, your students will be ready to try something that looks a little more like a debate. That doesn't mean long speeches, heavy rules, or anything that feels like a test. For younger students, the best formats are **short, simple, and lively.**

This chapter offers a handful of practice formats you can use right away, plus advice on keeping sessions energetic.

Principles for Young Debaters

Short speeches. For most elementary students, thirty seconds to a minute is plenty. Two or three sentences count as a speech.

Simple turns. Each speaker knows when to start and stop. A visible timer or a hand signal helps.

Everyone is involved. Avoid formats where most children sit idle while two debate.

Low stakes. Skip scoring and winners at first. The reward is the experience.

Lots of laughter. If no one is smiling, something needs to change.

Six Practice Formats

1. The Mini-Debate (pairs). Pose a light question. Partner A speaks for one minute (*opinion, reason, example*). Partner B speaks for one minute on the other side. Then each gets thirty seconds to respond. Finish with a handshake or a high-five.

2. Team Tag. Divide the group into two teams. One child from each team speaks in turn, giving one sentence of a larger argument, and "tags" the next teammate. A team of four may build a complete argument together, one piece at a time. This is a wonderful way to include nervous children, since each contribution is small.

3. The Spectrum Line. Stretch an imaginary line across the room from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Read a statement and ask children to stand on the line where they feel. Invite children from different places to explain why. Then ask: *Did anyone hear something that made you want to move?* Children can move, and thinking changes become visible.

4. Switch Sides. Debate a light topic in pairs. After two minutes, call "Switch!" and have partners trade positions and argue the opposite. This stretches empathy and tends to produce wonderful laughter. (Chapter 24 explores why arguing the other side matters.)

5. The Fishbowl. Four students sit in the center to discuss a topic while the rest watch from a circle. Observers have a job, such as listening for one reason. After a few minutes, swap in new voices. It gives everyone a turn at being on stage while keeping the group together.

6. Silly Court. Present a playful case: *Did the wolf blow down the pigs' houses on purpose?* Divide the class into lawyers, witnesses, and a jury, and let the children argue it out. Silly Court is a great finale for a season, because it ties together reasons, examples, and listening.

Keeping Sessions Lively

Change activities often. Eight to ten minutes is usually plenty. If you notice fidgeting, you've waited a minute too long.

Mix movement and stillness. Follow a sitting activity with a standing one, and follow a loud game with a calm one.

Use props. A timer, a funny hat for the speaker, a talking object, or a bell can turn a routine into a ritual.

Share the work. Give children jobs: timekeeper, question reader, cheerleader.

Cheer, don't just clap. Create a signature team cheer or sign. It builds belonging.

Keep a few emergency games in your pocket. When a plan flops, a favorite game from Chapter 9 can rescue the session.

A sample 45-minute practice:

- **Welcome and breathing (5 minutes).**
- **Warm-up (7 minutes):** Spectrum Line on a silly question.

- **Skill moment (8 minutes):** Practice *opinion*, *reason*, *example* in pairs.
- **Main activity (15 minutes):** Mini-Debate or Team Tag.
- **Reflection (5 minutes):** *What did you like? What was tricky?*
- **Closing cheer (5 minutes).**

IN YOUR FORMAT

If your students will eventually compete in a particular format, these short activities are great preparation. A mini-debate in pairs is the first step toward a one-on-one format; Team Tag is a gentle step toward team formats; Switch Sides prepares students for formats where sides are assigned. As you add features of the real format, introduce them one at a time.

For middle schoolers: If you're starting with students in the older end of elementary or in middle school, you can use these same activities but raise the topics (*Should schools allow phones in class?*) and add a little structure sooner. They may groan at silly games at first, but almost everyone ends up laughing. Chapter 15 describes this age more fully.

▶ TRY THIS

Next practice, run two different formats back to back, such as Spectrum Line followed by Mini-Debate on the same topic. Ask afterward: *What did you notice? What changed when we switched?* You'll learn what your group enjoys and begin to build your own signature style.

COACH'S CORNER

Picture a coach who was tempted to give out points for the best speaker. Instead, she introduced "generous listener" stickers, awarded to anyone who clearly responded to what another student had said. By the end of the season, children weren't asking who won. They were asking who had listened best.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"They keep arguing about who won."

It's natural, especially in the early grades. Try saying, "In this club, we don't pick winners. We pick something we learned." Then ask each child for one thing they learned from the other side. Over time, the question of winning loses its sting.

TRY SAYING IT THIS WAY

"*That was a thoughtful turn. Who would like to respond?*" and "*Let's try that again with the other side.*"

When the format is short and the mood is light, children forget they are practicing hard things. That is exactly when they learn them best.

CHAPTER 13

Feedback That Encourages



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 13 VIDEO

Feedback That Encourages

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/ORCh2WjPgGQ

The words you say after a child speaks may matter more than anything you say before. Children remember how they felt. They remember whether the adult seemed pleased, disappointed, bored, or delighted. And what you say next shapes whether they try again.

This chapter is about giving feedback that helps young debaters grow *and* keeps them wanting to come back.

Start with Effort and Specifics

Generic praise, such as "Good job!" or "You're so smart!", feels nice but teaches little. Children can't tell what they did well, and some begin to feel that they must stay "smart" by avoiding risks.

Try praising the *effort* and the *specific move*.

- Instead of "Great speech!": "*You gave a clear reason, and you used an example from your own life. That made it easy to follow.*"
- Instead of "You're a natural!": "*I noticed you took a breath and started again when you got stuck. That's a skill.*"
- Instead of "You won!": "*You listened carefully, and your answer used what your partner said.*"

Specific praise tells children what to repeat. Praise for effort tells them that growth is possible.

One Next Step

After praise, offer a single, small suggestion, never a list. A child who hears five things to fix will hear only that they are not good enough. A child who hears one thing can try it right away.

Phrase it as an invitation, not a correction.

- *"Next time, try to slow down a little so everyone can hear your reasons."*
- *"I'd love to hear a second example. Can you think of one?"*
- *"You could look up at your partner when you say your best reason."*

Then let them try it. The best feedback is something a child can use in the very next turn.

The Star and the Step

Here is a simple routine that many coaches love: **a Star and a Step.** After each child speaks, the coach (and later, the other children) offers **one Star**, something they did well, and **one Step**, one thing to try next. It takes ten seconds, it works for every age, and children quickly learn to give each other kind, useful comments.

You can write them on index cards or sticky notes. Children love collecting them, and you can see growth over the season.

Ask Before You Tell

Sometimes the best feedback is a question. *What went well? What was hard? What would you do differently?* Children are surprisingly honest, and they often name exactly what you were going to say. Their own answers also stick better than yours.

If a child says, "I messed up," don't say "No, you didn't!" if it isn't true. Say, *"Tell me what happened. What would you try next time?"*

Peer Feedback

Children can give each other feedback, but they need a safe format and a little practice. Teach two sentence starters: "*I liked…*" and "*I wonder…*" An "I wonder" sounds friendlier than a criticism, and it invites the speaker to think: *I wonder if you could give an example.* Model the starters yourself, and gently correct comments that wander into teasing or mean remarks.

Private and Public

Most praise can be public. Most suggestions are better private, or at least quiet. A whispered word as children line up, or a note on a card, protects dignity. Be especially careful with children who are already shy or who have just had a hard moment.

Making Losses Safe

If your program includes friendly competitions, children will sometimes lose, and some will be upset. A few ideas can help.

Talk about it before it happens. Before an event, tell students: "*Some of us will get a trophy and some of us won't. Either way, you're going to learn something.*" Then follow through.

Name the feeling. "*It's okay to feel disappointed. I felt that way when I lost something I cared about, too.*" A child who feels understood recovers faster.

Find the learning. Ask: *What did you learn today that you didn't know yesterday? What was your favorite moment?*

Don't rush to fix. A child needs a little time with the feeling. Stay close, and stay kind.

Model your own grace. When a decision doesn't go your students' way, resist criticizing the judge in front of them. Your response shows them what losing well looks like.

▶ **TRY THIS**

Make a stack of "Star and Step" cards, each with two lines. After each practice, fill in a card for each child and hand it to them at the door. Keep a quick copy of what you wrote. Over time, you'll see patterns, and the children will hold a record of their own growth.

COACH'S CORNER

Imagine a coach who lost track of whom she had praised. She started keeping a small checklist, and discovered she had spent a month praising the confident speakers and rarely mentioning the quiet ones. She changed her habits, looked for one specific compliment for each child every week, and noticed that several of the quiet children began raising their hands.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"A child cries after a tough round."

Stay calm and close. Offer a quiet spot and a few minutes, with a friend nearby if they want one. Don't analyze the round yet. Later, when they're ready, ask what they're proud of. If it keeps happening, talk with the family about what the child is feeling and how you can support them.

TRY SAYING IT THIS WAY

"*Here's one thing you did really well... and here's one thing to try next time.*"

Children don't need perfect feedback. They need to know that someone noticed, believed in them, and showed them what to try next.

CHAPTER 14

Showcases and Friendly Tournaments



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 14 VIDEO

Showcases and Friendly Tournaments

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/z9QC_nmvkEQ

At some point in the season, your students will want to show someone what they've learned. Maybe it's their families. Maybe it's another class, or a team from the school down the road. This is a wonderful instinct, and you can honor it in a way that keeps the joy intact.

A **showcase** is an event where students share what they've practiced. A **friendly tournament** is a gentle gathering where teams from different groups try out debates together. Both can be low-stakes, high-spirited, and memorable. This chapter shows you how to plan them.

Why Low-Stakes Events Matter

Young children are still discovering whether speaking up is something they enjoy. A high-pressure event, where trophies, rankings, and tension take center stage, can teach the opposite lesson. A friendly event teaches that sharing ideas is a pleasure, that audiences are kind, and that the real prize is the experience.

When children leave an event saying "When can we do that again?", you've done something right.

Ideas for Showcases

- **A family showcase.** Invite families to a short demonstration. Students might play a game, give one-minute opinion-reason-example speeches, or act out a mini-debate. Add refreshments and keep it under an hour.
- **A classroom visit.** Take a few students to share a mini-debate with a younger or older class.
- **A "Debate Fair."** Set up stations around a room, each with a different game or topic. Families and visitors move from station to station, joining in.
- **A Silly Court.** Stage a playful trial (*Who really ate the last cookie?*) with children playing lawyers, witnesses, and jurors. Audiences love it, and so do the children.

Planning a Friendly Tournament

If you're ready to invite another group, begin by finding a partner. A neighboring school, library club, or community group may be glad to join.

Keep the format simple. Use one of the short formats from Chapter 12. Brief speeches, simple turns, and lots of fun.

Skip elimination. Every child should get to take part in every round. No one should go home after the first one.

Mix the groups. Consider forming mixed teams from both schools, so that children make new friends and practice flexibility.

Make judging gentle. Use friendly volunteers, such as parents, teachers, older students, or community members, and ask them to give a Star and a Step (Chapter 13), not a winner. If you do announce results, keep them light and celebrate everyone.

Honor every child. Many programs give every participant a certificate or ribbon that names something specific about them: *Best Listener. Bravest Voice. Most Creative Example. Kindest Disagreement.* Take care to find something true for each child.

Mind the clock. Young children tire quickly. Aim for two hours or less, with breaks, snacks, and movement.

A sample two-hour friendly tournament:

- **Arrival and name tags (15 minutes).**
- **Icebreaker game with mixed groups (15 minutes).**
- **Round One: mini-debates in small groups (20 minutes).**

- **Snack and stretch (15 minutes).**
- **Round Two: Team Tag or Switch Sides (20 minutes).**
- **Reflection circle (15 minutes):** *What did you learn from the other side?*
- **Closing celebration (20 minutes):** Specific, kind recognition for every child.

Preparing the Children

Good preparation turns nerves into excitement.

- **Rehearse.** Practice the format at least once beforehand, in the same kind of space if possible.
- **Explain what will happen.** Walk through the day: where to go, who will be there, what to do if you're nervous.
- **Give everyone a job.** Greeter, timekeeper, snack helper, or door monitor. Jobs lower stress.
- **Set expectations about winning and losing.** Talk about these early, as Chapter 13 suggests.
- **Reassure.** "*You can pass. You can try again. You're going to be great.*"

Preparing the Adults

Audiences and judges set the tone. Send a short note to families beforehand asking them to listen kindly, applaud every child, and avoid coaching from the audience. A friendly volunteer greeter, a posted schedule, and a few clear signs can make the event feel welcoming. Explain to judges that this is a celebration, not a competition, and give them a short card with a few kind phrases.

Afterward

Don't let the event end without a reflection. At your next practice, ask: *What was your favorite moment? What did you learn? What would you do differently?* Share a few photos if families agree. Send a thank-you note to volunteers and partners. Everything you do now builds goodwill for the next event.

> **▶ TRY THIS**
>
> Plan a small "demonstration day" for three weeks from now. Choose one game, one mini-debate, and one closing cheer. Invite just one other class, or a few families. Notice how the children prepare, and how proud they are afterward. That is a showcase, and it's already enough.

COACH'S CORNER

Picture a coach who held a showcase for families and worried that her quietest student, a fourth-grader who rarely spoke, would refuse to take part. The girl whispered that she'd rather be the timekeeper. The coach said yes. During the final game, the child was asked to hold up the timer—and she held it so proudly and so high that the whole room laughed and clapped. At the next practice, she gave a speech.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"Parents are getting too competitive."

Remind families of the purpose of the day, before and during the event. A few warm words from the coach, such as "*Today is about the students' courage. Please cheer for everyone*," often reset the tone. If a parent crosses a line, speak with them privately and kindly afterward.

TRY SAYING IT THIS WAY

"*Thank you for coming. Every one of these students tried something brave today, and we're proud of all of them.*"

A showcase is a celebration of courage. The goal is not to impress an audience. It is to give young people a place to be proud.

PART FOUR

04 The Bridge

CHAPTER 15

The Middle School Years



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 15 VIDEO

The Middle School Years

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/7U0Sop3_dKw

If you coach middle schoolers, you already know this: they are not big elementary children, and they are not small high schoolers. They are something wonderfully, challengingly in between.

This is a short chapter about a pivotal stage. Many programs lose students here, because the playful approach starts to feel childish and the serious approach feels scary. Done well, though, these years can be some of the most rewarding in a debater's life.

Who They Are

Middle schoolers are changing quickly. They're hungry for independence and acutely aware of how their peers see them. They can think in new, more abstract ways, and they love to test ideas and push back. They want to be taken seriously. And they are, often, very self-conscious.

That combination makes debate both appealing and risky. They are ready for more challenging thinking, but afraid of looking foolish. Your job is to offer challenge *and* safety.

Keep the Fun, Raise the Respect

Don't abandon play. Games still work, but choose them with care.

- **Treat them as capable.** Explain why you're doing something. Invite them to help plan the practice.
- **Pick topics they actually care about.** School rules, phones, sports, music, fairness, and social media will bring a room to life faster than any invented question.

- **Use humor, but avoid sarcasm aimed at people.** Funny is welcome. Humiliating is not.
- **Let them lead.** Give students roles as timekeepers, topic selectors, discussion leaders, or mentors for younger students.
- **Offer choices.** Choice signals respect.

Keep the Room Gentle

Self-consciousness is strongest here, so safety matters even more than before. Use the practices from Chapter 6, and add a few middle-school-specific ones.

Start with pairs and small groups, and move to larger groups slowly.

Protect them from public correction. Give feedback privately or in writing when you can.

Watch for social dynamics. Cliques, teasing, and exclusion can form quickly. Step in early, and be clear about your agreements.

Let shy students contribute in other ways, such as research, note-taking, or timekeeping (see Chapter 7).

Notice the change in a student. A previously chatty student who suddenly goes quiet may be dealing with something. A kind, private word is often enough.

Adding Evidence and Structure

Middle school is the natural time to move from *opinion, reason, example* toward something more complete.

Move from "example" to "evidence." Encourage students to bring in something beyond their own experience: a fact they've read, a number, or something an expert said. Start small. Ask them to find one source for one claim. (Chapter 16 describes evidence in more detail.)

Introduce the idea of an opposing view, and give students practice answering it. The "someone might say…" move from Chapter 10 grows naturally into rebuttal.

Offer a simple structure for a speech: an introduction that states the position, two reasons with an example or piece of evidence each, and a short conclusion. Chapter 17 will build on this for older students.

Add a little formality, gradually. Use the vocabulary of your format slowly, and explain each new word. Students enjoy feeling like "real debaters," as long as they don't feel lost.

Keeping the Stakes Gentle

As students grow, opportunities for competition appear. Introduce them gradually.

- Begin with friendly events (Chapter 14), then small, local ones.
- Prepare students for what a tournament feels like: new rooms, strangers, judges, and results.
- Talk early and often about what success means: growth, courage, and kindness, not just wins.
- Keep some practice time purely for fun. Fun is not the opposite of progress.

Where to start with a new middle schooler. If a student joins and has never debated, begin with the games of Chapter 9 and the short formats of Chapter 12, but with age-appropriate topics. If a student has some experience, add the evidence and structure ideas above. Meet each one where they are, and don't let anyone feel they're behind.

▶ TRY THIS

Hold a "Student Choice Day." Ask students to suggest and vote on three debate topics for the month. Run a short debate on one of them. You'll learn what they care about, and they'll feel the room belongs to them.

COACH'S CORNER

Imagine a coach who found that her seventh-graders rolled their eyes at the games she had loved with younger students. She told them honestly, "I'm not sure how to make this feel right for you. What would help?" One student suggested debating real school issues. Another suggested they teach the games to the younger students. The club flourished, and the eye-rolling faded.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"They say this is for little kids."

Take it seriously. Ask what feels babyish and what would make it feel more like their own. Change the topics, the pacing, or the roles. Often it's the *framing* that matters, not the activity itself.

TRY SAYING IT THIS WAY

"You're old enough to help shape this. What would make practice better?"

Middle school is a bridge, and bridges are meant to be crossed. Your job is to keep it sturdy and keep it kind.

PART FIVE

05

Coaching High School Debaters

CHAPTER 16

From Opinion to Evidence



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 16 VIDEO

From Opinion to Evidence

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/OazbBZRfKtM

There is a moment in every young debater's life when someone says, "Yeah, but how do you know that?"

At first it feels like an attack. Over time, it becomes a gift. It's the question that separates a belief from a case, and teaching students to answer it, and to ask it of themselves, is among the most valuable things a coach can do.

This chapter is about helping students move from *I think* to *here's what we know, and how we know it.*

What Counts as Evidence

Evidence is anything that helps show a claim is true. It comes in a few familiar forms:

- **Facts and statistics.** Numbers and verifiable information about the world.
- **Expert opinion.** What someone with real knowledge or experience has said.
- **Examples and cases.** Real events that illustrate a point.
- **Logical reasoning.** An argument that follows clearly from things already accepted. This isn't outside evidence, but it's often the glue.

No one kind is always best. A strong argument often uses several, and a good coach helps students notice which type of evidence a claim needs.

Where to Look

Students will need places to find good information. A few reliable starting points:

- **Libraries and librarians.** A librarian is one of the most underused resources a coach has. Many love helping students research.
- **Reputable organizations and institutions.** Universities, scientific bodies, government agencies, and well-established research groups often publish careful, documented work.
- **Responsible news sources.** Good journalism can offer current information, but students should learn to check where reporters got their facts.
- **The WDF platform.** Editor: Insert description and links to research guides, topic briefs, and source-evaluation tools available to coaches.

A word about new technology. Many students now use chat-based AI tools while researching. These tools can help with brainstorming or finding search terms, but they sometimes state false things confidently, and they may invent sources that don't exist. A simple rule works well: **never cite anything you haven't found and read in its original source.**

Judging Sources

The skill beneath research is not finding information, since anyone can do that, but *judging* it. Teach students to ask a few plain questions.

Who created this? An author, an organization, an unnamed website? Do they have expertise in the subject?

Why was it created? To inform, to sell something, to persuade, to entertain? Everyone has a perspective, and that's not automatically bad. But students should notice it.

How do they know? Do they cite evidence, explain their methods, or link to their own sources? Or do they simply assert?

Is it current? Some facts don't change. Others do, and old information can mislead.

Do other reliable sources agree? One of the best habits a student can learn is to leave a page and check what other trustworthy sources say about the claim and about the source itself. A quick look around often reveals what a single page won't.

Fact, Opinion, and Everything Between

Students often assume the world divides neatly into facts and opinions. In practice, there's a spectrum. Some claims are firmly established. Some are supported but debated. Some are predictions, and some are matters of value. Help students notice which they are dealing with, and how confident they can be. Students who can say, "The evidence strongly suggests…" or "There's real disagreement about…" tend to sound far more credible than those who claim certainty about everything.

A Gentle Guide to Statistics

Numbers are persuasive, and sometimes misleading. Without turning your students into statisticians, help them ask a few questions.

- *Compared to what?* "Crime doubled" means something very different if the number went from two to four than if it went from two thousand to four thousand.
- *How many people were studied, and who were they?* A claim based on a small or unusual group may not apply to everyone.
- *Is it a percentage or an actual number?* Both can be accurate and tell very different stories.
- *Does one thing really cause the other*, or do they just happen together?

These questions don't require advanced math. They only require curiosity.

Keeping Track and Using It Well

Good research habits protect students from confusion later.

Record the source every time. Write down the author, title, date, and where to find it. Many a lost argument began with "I read it somewhere."

Copy exact words carefully, and put quotation marks around them. When paraphrasing, make sure the meaning stays the same.

Use evidence the way you'd introduce a friend. Say who the source is, what they found, and *why it matters*. Many students drop in a quotation and move on. The explanation is where the argument happens.

A simple pattern: **Claim, source says, so what.** "*Schools should consider later start times. A report from [source] found [result]. That matters because it suggests students would learn better if they slept longer.*"

(Chapter 22 discusses honest use of sources in more depth.)

IN YOUR FORMAT

Some formats ask students to bring printed evidence and to share it with opponents on request. Others rely more on general knowledge and quick reasoning. Check what your format expects, and teach students the matching habits.

For middle schoolers: Start small. One claim, one source, and one question: *Why should we trust this?* That is plenty for a first season of research.

▶ TRY THIS

Source Detective. Give students two short articles on the same topic, one careful and well sourced, and one sensational or thinly sourced. In pairs, ask them to answer the five questions above for each. Then discuss: *Which would you trust in a debate? Why?* The contrast usually does the teaching.

COACH'S CORNER

Imagine a coach whose team was set to argue a point using a striking statistic they had found online. Before the tournament, one of the students tried to trace it back to its source and discovered it came from a study on a different topic entirely. The team was disappointed for an evening, then proud for a lifetime. They had learned how to check, and that mattered more than the statistic.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"Students copy and paste without understanding."

Don't just forbid it. Ask them to explain the evidence in their own words, aloud, without looking. If they can't, they're not ready to use it. Making explanation part of the routine does more than any lecture on plagiarism.

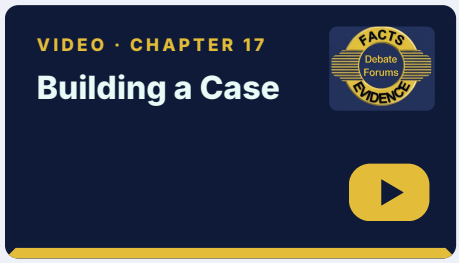
TRY SAYING IT THIS WAY

"*Where did that come from? What makes it trustworthy?*" and "*Can you explain in your own words why that matters?*"

The habit of asking “how do we know?” will serve your students in every part of their lives. You’re giving them one of the most important tools a thinker can have.

CHAPTER 17

Building a Case



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 17 VIDEO

Building a Case

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youtu.be/Sk3NRPFMG7I

A **case** is the set of arguments a debater brings to support a position. It's the whole structure: how the speech begins, what its main points are, how they connect, and how it ends.

Beginners often imagine that building a case is a mysterious art. It isn't. It's organized thinking, and you already know the pieces: claims, reasons, and evidence from Chapter 3, and the habits of research from Chapter 16. This chapter shows how to put them together, in plain language, with a little strategy.

Start by Understanding the Question

The best cases begin before any writing, with a conversation about what the question *means*.

- **What exactly are we being asked?** Read the topic aloud. Underline the key words. A topic like "Schools should require uniforms" raises questions right away: Which schools? Required how? What counts as a uniform?
- **What does each side need to show?** The side that supports the topic usually has to show that the change would be good. The side that opposes it can show that it would be bad, unnecessary, or less good than something else. Knowing this early keeps students from arguing past the point.
- **What do reasonable people on both sides care about?** Students who can describe the opposing side fairly, in a way the other side would recognize, build better cases.

A few minutes of discussion here will save hours later.

Brainstorm Wide, Then Choose Narrow

Good case-building has two moods: generous and selective.

Brainstorm for both sides. Have students write as many reasons as they can for each side, no matter what they personally believe. This builds understanding and helps students predict what opponents will say.

Then choose. A common beginner mistake is to include everything. Eight shallow arguments are weaker than two or three well-developed ones. Ask students to pick the strongest and most relevant. A helpful test is: *If the judge remembered only one thing from our side, would we want it to be this?*

Shaping Each Argument

For each main argument, encourage students to build four small pieces:

- **A label.** A short, memorable name or sentence that tells the listener what the argument is about. "*First, uniforms reduce pressure about clothing.*"
- **A reason.** *Why* is that true?
- **Evidence.** What shows it's true?
- **The "so what."** Why does this matter? What happens because of it, and for whom? This last piece is often missing, and it's what turns a fact into an argument.

Students who practice this shape (label, reason, evidence, so-what) can build an argument on almost any topic.

Putting the Case Together

A simple, flexible structure works for most formats:

1. Opening. Get attention, introduce the topic, state your position in a clear sentence, and tell the listener how many arguments are coming. ("*We believe schools should start later, for two reasons.*")

2. Main arguments. Present two or three, each shaped as above. Put the strongest first or last, where it's most likely to be remembered.

3. Closing. Remind the listener of your position and the main reasons, and finish with a clear final thought.

Some formats require different orders or add parts, such as definitions or explanations of what your side wants to change. The basic skeleton still helps.

Guiding the Listener

A judge can't re-read your speech. They can only listen, and listening is hard. Teach students to help.

Signpost. Use simple phrases that tell the listener where you are: "*My first point… My second point… In conclusion…*"

Be short. Plain sentences, familiar words, and one idea at a time.

Repeat the important thing, and say it in a slightly different way.

Pause. A silent second after a key point gives it weight.

Thinking Ahead

The strongest case-builders spend time on the other side before the round.

- **Predict the opponent's best arguments** and decide how you would answer them.
- **Prepare short responses in advance** to the most likely points.
- **Notice your own weak spots.** Every case has them. It's better to know yours than to be surprised.

This kind of preparation is where students begin to feel strategic, and it makes the next chapter's skills much easier.

Working as a Team

If your format has teams, case-building becomes a group effort. Help students decide who will present what, and make sure everyone understands the whole case, not just their part. Agree on how to handle questions and responses. A team that has clear roles, respects each other's strengths, and communicates calmly is a joy to coach.

IN YOUR FORMAT

Different formats use different vocabularies and structures. Some expect a precise order of arguments, others value flexibility. Some require definitions or a specific proposal. Read the rules of your format, then translate them into this chapter's plain skeleton. The students will quickly see where each rule fits.

▶ TRY THIS

The One-Page Case Map. Have students draw a single page with the topic at the top, their position in a box beneath it, and two or three boxes below for main arguments. In each box, they write a label, a reason, one piece of evidence, and a so-what. Add a box on the side labeled "What they'll say." A student with a complete map is ready to speak.

COACH'S CORNER

Picture a coach whose team arrived at their first practice round with long, beautifully written speeches that they read word for word. Without notes in front of them, they felt lost. She introduced the Case Map and asked them to speak from it instead. The speeches were rougher at first and a bit shorter. Within a month, they were more natural, more flexible, and far more persuasive.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"My students want to cram in too many arguments."

Remind them that the judge can only remember so much. Ask: "*If you could keep only two, which would they be, and why?*" Then watch them realize that depth wins. Cutting is a skill, and it's worth practicing.

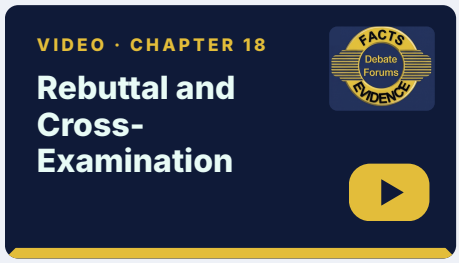
TRY SAYING IT THIS WAY

"*What's the main point of this argument? Why should the judge care?*" and "*I'm with you so far. What would the other side say?*"

A case is a story told with reasons. When students learn to build one with care, they find that they can persuade without pushing.

CHAPTER 18

Rebuttal and Cross-Examination



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 18 VIDEO

Rebuttal and Cross-Examination

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/QFmEnIvqjHQ

At some point in every debate, the speaker's prepared material runs out and a real conversation begins. That is where students stop *presenting* and start *responding*. It's the most exciting part of debate, and for many beginners, the most frightening.

This chapter is about two linked skills: **rebuttal,** which is answering the other side's arguments, and **cross-examination,** which is questioning them directly. Both depend on listening, and both can be learned.

Answering the Strongest Version

An old and wise piece of advice for debaters: *answer the best version of your opponent's argument, not the weakest.*

It's tempting to pick apart a clumsy phrase or a weak example. But a judge isn't persuaded when you defeat an argument no one really made. Students who restate the other side's point fairly, sometimes even more clearly than the other side said it, earn the audience's trust. Then, when they respond, the response carries real weight. It also makes debate a more honest and more respectful activity.

Listening and Taking Notes

You cannot answer what you did not hear. Teach students a simple note-taking method: fold a page into columns, one for each main argument. As speakers talk, note the key points in the right column, in short phrases. When it's your turn, you can see at a glance what was said and what remains unanswered. (Experienced debaters call this "flowing," and you may hear the word at tournaments.)

Start simply. Listening for *the main idea and one reason* is enough for a beginner.

A Four-Step Answer

Students often know what they want to say but not how to arrange it. A simple four-step pattern helps.

1. Point to it. "*The other side said that uniforms save families money.*"

2. Respond. "*But many uniform programs require special items that cost extra.*"

3. Explain why. "*That matters because it means families may pay more, not less.*"

4. Connect it to your case. "*So their point doesn't help them, and our argument still stands.*"

Pointing to the argument tells the listener what you're answering. Responding and explaining give it substance. Connecting shows why it matters to the final decision.

Four Ways to Respond

When students feel stuck, remind them there are only a few basic moves.

- **It isn't true.** *The evidence is wrong, outdated, or misleading.*
- **It doesn't matter.** *Even if it's true, it isn't relevant to this question.*
- **It isn't enough.** *It's true and relevant, but too small or too uncertain to carry the argument.*
- **We outweigh it.** *Even if it's true and relevant, what we're saying is more important.*

Students who can choose among these moves rarely feel at a loss. (A game worth playing: read a statement aloud and have students try all four.)

Staying Calm When Surprised

Every debater is surprised sometimes. A good coach teaches students not to panic.

- **Take a breath, and a moment.** A second or two of silence feels long to the speaker and almost unnoticeable to the audience.
- **Find the main point,** and answer that. You don't have to address every detail.
- **It's fine to say, "I hadn't thought of that."** Then say what you *do* think. Honesty earns respect.

Cross-Examination: Questions That Matter

Many formats include a time when debaters question each other directly. (Some call it cross-examination, some cross-fire, and others points of information.) It looks tricky, but it follows a few simple ideas.

Questions have jobs. A good question does one of three things: it *clarifies* something unclear, it *exposes* a weakness or contradiction, or it *sets up* a point you'll make later.

Keep questions short and clear. "*Did your study include students under twelve?*" is better than a long, winding question.

Ask one thing at a time. Stacking three questions into one gives the other person an easy way out.

Follow up. If an answer is vague, a calm "*Can you say more about that?*" is powerful.

Don't argue in the middle of a question. Cross-examination is for gathering material. Save the persuading for your speech.

Use what you learn. A good answer, or a revealing non-answer, becomes ammunition for the next speech.

Answering Questions Well

Being questioned is a skill, too.

- **Listen to the whole question first.**
- **Answer what was asked,** briefly and honestly.
- **It's okay not to know.** "*I don't know, but here's what my evidence says*" beats bluffing every time.
- **Stay friendly.** Good humor under pressure is its own kind of persuasion.

Keeping It Respectful

This is where debates sometimes turn sharp. Remind students that questions are meant to explore, not to humiliate. Interrupting, mocking, and talking over each other cost points in most formats, and cost respect in any room. Model the tone you want. When students disagree strongly while still treating each other well, it shows what debate is for.

IN YOUR FORMAT

Formats differ a great deal in how and when questions occur: in a set period, as brief interruptions, or not at all. Learn the rules for yours and practice them specifically. Even so, the skills in this chapter apply: listen, restate, respond, and question with purpose.

▶ TRY THIS

Rebuttal Ping-Pong. Two students face each other. The coach reads a one-sentence claim. Student A answers it using the Four-Step Answer in thirty seconds. Student B responds to Student A. Keep going for three or four exchanges, then swap in new players. Keep it fast, friendly, and funny. Try it with silly topics first.

COACH'S CORNER

Imagine a coach who noticed that her students' cross-examinations were becoming speeches in disguise: long, pointed statements that ended in a question mark. She introduced a rule: no question may be longer than one breath. *Students laughed, then tried it. Their questions became sharper, answers became honest, and the whole exchange became easier to follow.*

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"A student gets flustered and snippy in cross-examination."

It happens to everyone. After the round, don't scold. Ask: "*What were you feeling when that happened?*" Then practice together. Rehearse the same moment with a calm response. Students usually improve fast when they've felt the difference.

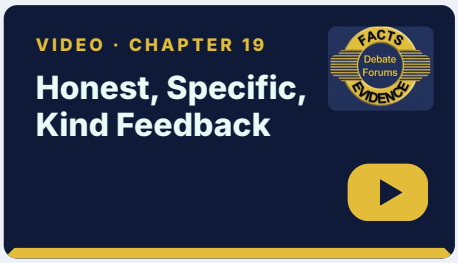
TRY SAYING IT THIS WAY

"*What did they say? What's your best answer to it?*" and "*What question would help you learn the most right now?*"

Rebuttal and cross-examination are where debate becomes a conversation. They ask students to listen as hard as they speak, and that is a lesson that lasts.

CHAPTER 19

Honest, Specific, Kind Feedback



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 19 VIDEO

Honest, Specific, Kind Feedback

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youtu.be/gHd4tM_9wzE

When your students were seven, feedback meant a star and a gentle step (Chapter 13). Now your students are sixteen, and they will notice instantly if you tiptoe around the truth.

Teenagers can handle directness, and most want it. They're preparing for competition, for college, for work. They can tell when praise is padding. What they need from you is feedback that is **honest, specific, and kind**, all three at once. That is harder than it sounds, and it's one of the most valuable gifts a coach can give.

Why All Three Matter

Honest feedback respects students. It says: *I believe you can handle the truth, and I want you to improve.* Feedback that is only encouraging, without substance, tells students you don't think they can grow.

Specific feedback is useful. "*Your second argument was confusing*" points to a place. "*You were a bit unclear*" points nowhere. Specificity also keeps feedback from feeling personal, since it points to what happened rather than who they are.

Kind feedback is delivered in a way that can be heard. A true observation, offered with contempt or exasperation, makes most people defensive. The same observation, offered with respect, makes them curious.

When one of the three is missing, feedback tends to fail. Honest and specific but unkind makes students shut down. Kind and specific but dishonest makes them complacent. Kind and honest but vague leaves them guessing.

A Simple Structure: Observe, Explain, Suggest

You don't need a complicated method. This three-part approach works for almost every situation.

1. Observe. Describe what you saw or heard, without judgment. "*You spent about half your time on your first argument and rushed the second.*"

2. Explain the effect. Say why it matters. "*That made the second argument sound less important than it is.*"

3. Suggest. Offer one clear thing to try. "*Next time, cut one example from the first argument and give the second an extra minute.*"

This keeps the focus on actions students can change, and it helps them see the reasoning behind your advice.

Choose Your Battles

A ten-minute round can generate fifty things to say. Resist. Students can't absorb fifty. Pick **two or three priorities:** the things that would make the biggest difference next time. It's often best to name one strength to keep doing, and one or two growth areas to work on.

Be wary of what some call the "compliment sandwich," where criticism is tucked between two pieces of praise. Teenagers see through it quickly. Praise honestly when it's earned, offer your suggestions plainly, and don't apologize for either.

Ask First

Before telling students what you think, ask what they think. "*How do you think that went? What would you do differently?*" Most students are surprisingly accurate. When they name the problem themselves, they own the solution, and you're free to add what they missed. When they miss something big, you can bring it up without feeling like an ambush.

Over time, you're teaching students to coach themselves, which is the real goal.

Timing and Place

The best moment for feedback is rarely right after a loss or an embarrassing moment. Give students a few minutes, some water, and a chance to breathe. Many coaches find it helpful to say: "*Let's talk in ten minutes*," or even to wait until the next practice.

Praise can be public. Hard feedback is usually better private, or in a small group where everyone is receiving feedback.

Working with Judges' Ballots

In competitive settings, students will receive written or spoken feedback from judges. Judges vary. Some write thoughtful, detailed comments. Some write three words. Some say things that are puzzling, or unfair.

- **Read ballots together.** Look for patterns across several rounds rather than treating each comment as gospel.
- **Separate the useful from the noise.** A judge's taste isn't always a student's weakness.
- **Treat disagreements as practice.** Learning to hear feedback from someone who sees things differently is a life skill.
- **Model grace.** If a ballot feels unfair, acknowledge the disappointment, then ask what can still be learned. Resist the urge to criticize the judge in front of students.

Helping Students Give Feedback to Each Other

Teenagers often listen to each other more attentively than to adults. Help them give good feedback by teaching the same structure, and by modeling it. Consider setting a norm that every critique includes something specific to try. A simple rule: *no criticism without a suggestion.*

Tools That Help

Video. Recording a practice speech and watching it together can be revelatory. Students notice pace, filler words, and posture without a word from you. Always ask permission, and treat recordings with care.

A simple rubric. Clear criteria, such as organization, evidence, responsiveness, and delivery, help students understand what you're looking for. (The appendix offers a humane model.)

Goal-setting. At the start of the season, ask each student to name one thing they want to improve. Check in on it periodically.

Self-assessment. Occasionally ask students to score their own performance against the rubric before you share your view. The gap between your view and theirs is often rich ground for conversation.

IN YOUR FORMAT

Some formats focus feedback on particular skills, such as evidence, delivery, or responsiveness. If you coach for a specific tournament, learn what its judges value, and shape your feedback to help students understand it. But keep the larger picture in view: you're raising thinkers, not only competitors.

▶ TRY THIS

Practice the Observe, Explain, Suggest structure with a colleague or friend on a video of any short speech. Say your feedback out loud, then notice how it sounds. Is it honest? Specific? Kind? A few practice rounds will make it feel natural.

COACH'S CORNER

Imagine a coach who realized she had been telling her best debater "great job" after every round for a year. One day the student said, politely, "I know you're being nice, but I don't think I'm getting better." The coach felt a pang, and then a rush of gratitude. From then on, she started naming one growth area every time. The student improved noticeably, and thanked her at the end of the season.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"A student argues with my feedback."

That isn't necessarily bad. They're debaters! Listen to what they say, and consider whether they have a point. If they do, say so. If you still disagree, say it kindly, give your reasons, and suggest they try your idea once and see. Make it an experiment rather than a contest.

TRY SAYING IT THIS WAY

"*I want you to keep doing this, and I want you to try this.*" and "*What did you notice? Here's what I noticed.*"

Feedback is one of the ways coaches say, "I believe in you enough to be honest." Say it clearly, and say it with care.

CHAPTER 20

Competition Day



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 20 VIDEO

Competition Day

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youtu.be/BkII6QtDv2g

The night before a first tournament, most coaches are awake at 2 a.m., checking their notes and wondering whether they've forgotten something.

Good news: you probably have, a little. That's normal. But with some preparation, tournament day can be one of the most joyful and rewarding experiences of your season. This chapter covers what to do before, during, and after, including the practical details, the feelings, and the people involved.

Before the Day

Learn what to expect. Find the tournament's schedule, rules, and format. Ask the organizers any questions. If you can, talk to someone who has attended before, or watch a round beforehand.

Complete the paperwork. Registration, permission slips, medical and emergency information, and any school policies about travel. Do these early, not on the bus.

Assemble your kit. A simple checklist:

- Printed schedule, directions, and contact numbers
- Student roster with parent or guardian contact information
- Notes, evidence, and any materials the format allows
- Timers, pens, paper, and a few extras of each
- Water, snacks, and a small first-aid kit

- Phone chargers, and a copy of any important documents on paper

Do a final practice, but keep it light. The week before a tournament isn't the time to learn something new. Run a full round, give a few gentle notes, and finish with something fun.

Talk about expectations. Tell students what the day will look like and what you hope for: effort, kindness, courage, and learning. If results matter to them, talk honestly about that too. (Chapter 23 offers more on winning and losing.)

Understanding Judges

Judges are central to tournament day, and understanding them takes some of the mystery out of it.

Who they are. Judges are often volunteers: parents, former debaters, teachers, community members. Some are highly experienced. Others are judging for the first time. Their level of experience will vary from room to room.

What they do. They listen, take notes, decide, and often give feedback. In most formats, they're asked to decide based on what was said in the round, not on their personal opinions.

What they're like. Judges have preferences. Some prefer a fast pace; some prefer a slow, clear one. Some like technical detail; some like plain talk. Many tournaments allow students to look at judge information or to ask a brief question before the round. Teach students to *adapt to the judge in front of them*, as a thoughtful speaker would to any audience.

What students can do. Speak clearly. Be organized. Explain ideas simply enough that someone new could follow. A student who can persuade an inexperienced judge has truly learned the skill.

What you shouldn't do. Don't lobby, argue with, or criticize judges at a tournament. If you have a real concern about a procedure, bring it quietly to the tournament organizers, not to the judge, and not in front of students.

Travel and Logistics

The practical details can make or break a day, and they're rarely glamorous.

- **Transportation.** Confirm who is driving, how many students ride in each vehicle, and what your school or organization requires. Share a clear pickup plan with families.
- **Supervision.** Know who is responsible for students at all times, including between rounds. Agree on meeting places and check-in times.
- **Arrival.** Plan to arrive early. A calm start is a gift to everyone.

- **Food and rest.** Pack water and healthy snacks, and plan a real lunch. Hungry teenagers don't think well.
- **Communication.** Make sure you can reach every student, and that families can reach you. Share your cell number and, if possible, a second contact.
- **Backup plans.** What if a student is sick? A teammate drops out? A ride falls through? Having an answer in advance keeps you calm.

On the Day

Be the calmest person in the building. Students take their emotional cues from you.

Welcome them. Greet each student warmly as they arrive. Review the plan. Remind them of what you love about their work.

Between rounds. Offer snacks, water, and a quiet moment. Skip long analyses of the last round. A few kind sentences are enough: "*I saw you do ___ really well. Take a break, and we'll look at the next round together.*"

Resist post-mortems. Students may want to replay the round with opponents or friends. Gently steer them toward rest and the next task.

Be visible, not hovering. Be nearby if students need you, but give them space to be themselves.

Watch for strain. Notice students who are unusually quiet, tearful, or tense, and check in privately.

Managing Pressure

Pressure is part of competition, and it can be a good teacher if students learn to work with it.

- **Normalize nerves.** "*I get nervous too. It means we care.*"
- **Build a pre-round routine.** A few slow breaths, a quick look at notes, a teammate's word of encouragement. Familiar routines settle the mind.
- **Focus on what students control.** They can't control the judge, the opponent, or the result. They can control their preparation, effort, and kindness.
- **Set process goals.** "*I'll speak slowly. I'll listen for their main argument. I'll ask one good question.*" Goals like these are within a student's power, and they take attention off winning.
- **Keep perspective.** Remind students, and yourself, that one round in one weekend is a small piece of a long journey.

After the Round and After the Day

Right after results, whatever they are, be present and warm. Celebrate what you can. Allow disappointment to be felt. Save analysis for later.

On the way home, let students talk, or not. Many are exhausted. Take a moment to thank them, and thank any volunteers or families who helped.

At the next practice, debrief. Ask: *What went well? What surprised you? What did you learn? What do you want to work on?* Share your own reflections. Then, over time, decide what to change.

▶ **TRY THIS**

Run a "mock tournament day" at a regular practice. Have students walk through the schedule: arrive, check in, find the room, meet the "judge," give a short speech, take a snack break, and do a second round. It sounds silly and works wonders. When the real day comes, much of it will feel familiar.

COACH'S CORNER

Imagine a coach who arrived at her first tournament so worried about details that she forgot to eat, drink, or smile. By the second round, she noticed her students watching her anxious face. She took a breath, bought a small bag of pretzels for the team, and laughed with them in the hallway. The mood changed, and so did the day.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"A student is devastated after a round."

Offer a quiet place, a drink of water, and a few minutes. Don't analyze, don't compare, and don't promise "it's okay" before they're ready to hear it. Stay close. When the student is calmer, ask what they're proud of. If the distress seems beyond ordinary disappointment, check in privately and involve the appropriate school or family contacts.

TRY SAYING IT THIS WAY

"*Whatever happens today, I'm proud of how you've prepared,*" and "*You did something hard. Let's take a minute before we talk about it.*"

A tournament is a day, and it ends. The habits you build around it, such as care, courage, and grace, last for the whole season and beyond.

CHAPTER 21

Hard Topics and Heated Moments



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 21 VIDEO

Hard Topics and Heated Moments

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/YwdYquNNmNE

Sooner or later, your students will want to debate something that matters. Not whether pizza beats tacos, but whether a policy is fair, whether a law is just, whether a decision harmed someone. These are the topics that make debate worth doing. They are also the ones that can make a room tense.

This chapter is about how to take on difficult subjects without losing the safety you've worked to build.

Why We Don't Simply Avoid Them

It can be tempting to stick to safe topics forever. But young people already live in a world full of hard questions, and many of them hear only one side, usually from people who agree with them. Debate gives them something rare: a structured, respectful place to look at a difficult question from more than one angle. Done well, it teaches students to disagree without hostility and to hold strong views and still listen.

That said, "done well" is the key phrase. A few precautions make all the difference.

Choosing Topics with Care

Match the topic to the age. Younger students do best with questions rooted in daily life. Teenagers can handle more complexity, and often want it.

Know your school's or organization's expectations. Many have guidelines about sensitive subjects. Learn them early, and ask when unsure.

Consider who is in the room. A topic can be abstract for one student and deeply personal for another. Before choosing, ask yourself: *Might this topic touch someone's family, identity, or painful experience?* If it might, think carefully about how to handle it, or whether this is the right time.

Avoid topics that question whether people deserve basic respect. A debate about a policy is different from a debate about whether a group of people has worth. The first is a fair subject. The second isn't something a team should be asked to argue.

Involve students. When teenagers help choose topics, they often take them more seriously, and you'll learn what they're ready for.

Preparing the Room

Revisit your agreements before any sensitive discussion. Read them aloud. *We disagree with ideas, not people.*

Say what's coming. Give students notice that the topic is difficult. Surprise is rarely helpful here.

Set ground rules for language. No insults, no slurs, no mocking. Talk about *positions* rather than the people who hold them.

Separate the argument from the person. Remind students that arguing a position is not the same as believing it, and that no one will be judged by what they say as an exercise. (Chapter 24 returns to this.)

Offer a way out. If a student is deeply uncomfortable, let them step aside quietly, take a different role, or work on research instead. Respect their reasons without requiring explanation.

Keeping Your Own Balance

Students will often ask what you think. It's a natural question, and the right answer depends on your setting. Many coaches choose to keep their views on contested public issues to themselves, since students may feel pressure to agree. You might say: "*My job isn't to tell you what to think. It's to help you think well.*" If you do share a view, make clear that disagreement is welcome and that you'll treat students' views with equal respect.

Whatever you do, be fair. Make sure both sides get a thoughtful hearing, and notice if you are quietly favoring one.

When Emotions Rise

Even with good preparation, feelings can run high. Signs include raised voices, shaking hands, tears, silence, or sudden anger. A few steps help.

Pause. "*Let's take a breath.*" Most heated moments cool quickly when someone slows the pace.

Name it, calmly. "*I can tell this matters a lot to people in this room.*" Feeling noticed lowers the temperature.

Return to the agreements. They exist for exactly this moment.

Restate the issue. Help students separate what was said from what they heard.

Take a break if needed. A short walk, a drink of water, or a different activity can reset the room.

Follow up privately. Check in afterward with anyone who seemed hurt or upset.

When a Student Shares Something Personal

Sometimes a student, in the middle of a discussion, will reveal something painful about their own life. Respond with warmth and without alarm. Thank them for trusting the group, and don't press for more in front of others. Afterward, speak with them privately, and follow your school's or organization's procedures for supporting students. You are not a counselor, and you shouldn't try to be one. If you ever believe a student may be in danger, involve the appropriate adults right away. Caring means knowing when to bring in help.

When Someone Says Something Hurtful

Take it seriously, and keep your voice level. Speak to the behavior, not the character of the student. "*That comment was hurtful, and it doesn't belong here. Let's reset.*" Then check in with those affected. Afterward, talk with the student privately about what happened and how to repair it. Most young people can learn from a clear, calm boundary. If the behavior continues, involve parents or school leaders as your policies require.

▶ TRY THIS

The Heat Check. At the start of a sensitive discussion, ask students to hold up a number from one to five showing how strongly they feel about the topic. You don't need to comment. Simply notice, and adjust your pacing. Return to it halfway through. It gives you a quiet read of the room, and it reminds everyone that feelings are expected, and allowed.

COACH'S CORNER

Imagine a coach whose team had chosen a topic that she hadn't realized was personal to one of her debaters. Midway through practice, the student fell silent, then said quietly, "This one is hard for me." The coach thanked her, paused the round, and asked whether she wanted to step out or switch roles. The student chose to help with research. At the end of the day, she told the coach she was glad she'd been asked rather than told.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"A debate has turned into an argument."

Stop gently, and say so: "*I think we've moved from debating the topic to arguing with each other. Let's step back.*" Return to the format's structure: turns, timing, and evidence. Structure is a wonderful cooling tool, since it gives angry energy somewhere to go.

SAY IT THIS WAY

"*This is a hard topic. We're going to treat it, and each other, with care.*"

Hard topics are where debate does some of its most important work. With preparation and a steady hand, your room can hold them.

PART SIX

06

Character and Ethics (All Ages)

CHAPTER 22

Arguing Honestly



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 22 VIDEO

Arguing Honestly

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/NzweE7_yzIc

A debate can be won in many ways. Some are good, and some aren't. What we ask students to do, and what we model ourselves, shapes what they believe winning is.

This chapter is about integrity: how to teach students to argue in ways they'd be proud of, whether or not anyone is watching.

What Honest Argument Looks Like

In plain terms, arguing honestly means:

- **Telling the truth about evidence.** Saying what a source actually says, in context, without twisting it.
- **Being fair to the other side.** Describing opponents' arguments as they meant them, not in a weakened or distorted form.
- **Admitting what you don't know.** Not bluffing, and not pretending certainty.
- **Giving credit.** Naming where ideas, words, and evidence came from.
- **Playing by the rules.** Following the format's rules even when no one would notice a violation.

These habits are good ethics, and they are also good strategy. Judges tend to trust honest speakers, and students who cut corners eventually lose credibility.

Common Temptations

Students rarely set out to cheat. Usually they're tired, anxious, and eager to win, and a small shortcut appears. Knowing the common ones helps you spot them early.

Stretching evidence. Quoting part of a sentence, leaving out words that change its meaning, or claiming a study shows more than it does.

Making things up. Inventing a statistic or a quote, or citing a source one hasn't read.

Misrepresenting the other side. Attacking a weaker version of what an opponent said, or claiming they said something they didn't.

Hiding the weak spot. Skipping the problems in one's own case, or answering a question the opponent didn't ask.

Copying work. Using someone else's words or ideas without credit.

Bending the rules. Going over time, getting unauthorized help, or using materials the format doesn't allow.

Integrity at Each Age

Younger children. Honesty here is simple and concrete: *Tell the truth. Don't pretend something happened if it didn't. Say "I don't know" when you don't.* In games where children invent examples, be clear when they are imagined: "*Let's pretend that…*"

Middle schoolers. This is the age to learn that sources deserve credit and that paraphrasing doesn't mean changing a few words. Introduce simple habits: write down where you found something, put quotation marks around exact words, and explain evidence in your own voice. (See Chapter 16.)

High schoolers. Students now face real temptations, including the pressure of competition and the ease of copying. Talk openly about how evidence can be misused and why the debate community values accuracy. Teach students to check each other's evidence before a round, to be ready to share sources with opponents who ask, and to correct mistakes promptly, even when it costs. A student who says, "I misquoted that, and here's the correct version," earns respect.

Building a Culture of Honesty

Talk about it before there's a problem. Make integrity a regular topic, not an emergency lecture.

Model it. Admit your own errors. Say "I was wrong" when you are. Cite where you found things.

Praise honest behavior. Notice and thank the student who corrects herself.

Make honesty safe. If students fear harsh punishment for mistakes, they hide them. Distinguish between honest errors, which are learning opportunities, and deliberate deception, which needs a serious response.

Teach students how to check. Together, trace a quotation back to its source. Make it a normal part of preparation.

When Something Goes Wrong

Sooner or later, you may discover that a student has fabricated or distorted something, or copied work. It's a hard moment. A few principles help.

Find out the facts first, privately and calmly. Avoid accusing before you understand.

Speak with the student alone. Describe what you found, and listen. Often there's fear, pressure, or a misunderstanding behind it.

Be clear that it matters. Say plainly why the behavior is unacceptable, without humiliating the student.

Focus on repair. What can the student do to make it right? Correct the record, apologize, redo the work.

Follow the rules. If your tournament, school, or league has policies, apply them consistently and fairly. If a violation affected a competition, notify the organizers as required.

Keep it private, and let the student come back.

> ▶ **TRY THIS**
>
> The Fair Restatement. Before responding to an argument in practice, each student must restate it in a way the other side would accept: "*Did I get that right*?" Only when the other side says yes may they respond. It builds both honesty and understanding, and it makes rebuttals sharper.

COACH'S CORNER

Imagine a coach who learned, the night before a tournament, that a student had cited a statistic she could not find a source for. The coach sat down with her and said, "Let's figure this out together." They searched, and found the number had come from a misread headline. The student was embarrassed, then relieved. She rewrote the argument that night and later told the team the story herself, so that others would learn from it.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"An opponent seems to have bent the truth."

Teach students to respond calmly and factually: "*Could we see the source for that*?" Not "*They're lying*!" Follow the format's procedures for challenging evidence, and let judges decide. Model patience and fairness, even when you're upset.

SAY IT THIS WAY

"*Let's check that together*," and "*Thank you for catching that. It took integrity to say so.*"

Winning with integrity feels better and lasts longer. Teach students that how they argue is part of what they're arguing for.

CHAPTER 23

Winning, Losing, and Everything Between



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 23 VIDEO

Winning, Losing, and Everything Between

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/_MqHnaXhkXQ

Every coach loves the moment when a student's hard work pays off. And every coach dreads the moment when it doesn't. How you and your students handle both will shape your program more than any technique in this book.

This chapter is about grace: in victory, in defeat, and in the long, ordinary stretch in between.

What Winning Can Teach—and Mistaught

Winning feels wonderful, and it can teach real lessons: hard work matters, preparation helps, and risk can pay off. But it can also teach the wrong ones: that being right is the same as being better, that others are obstacles, or that one's worth is measured by a result.

Losing, too, is a teacher. It can teach resilience, humility, and the courage to try again. It can also teach that failure is shameful or that effort is pointless.

Your influence matters here. Young people take their cues from what the adults around them celebrate and how they react.

Helping Students Win Well

Celebrate honestly, and briefly. Enjoy it. Then turn attention to others.

Credit others. Winners who thank their partners, coaches, judges, and opponents show real strength.

Keep perspective. Remind students that one result is one result. The best debaters often lose rounds.

Avoid gloating. Teach students that how you treat people when you're winning is who you are.

Look for what made it work, so the win becomes a lesson and not only a trophy.

Helping Students Lose Well

Allow the feeling. Disappointment is natural. Don't hurry students past it.

Stay kind. Stay close, offer water and quiet, and save analysis for later. (Chapters 13 and 20 offer more.)

Look for the learning. When they're ready, ask: *What did you learn? What would you do differently? What are you proud of?*

Challenge blame. It's common for students, and adults, to blame the judge, the topic, or the opponent. Gently acknowledge the feeling, then redirect toward what they can control.

Normalize it. Share stories of your own setbacks, and of experienced debaters who lost often before they won.

Show that losing does not change how you see them. Students watch for this.

The Coach's Own Heart

Here is a hard truth: coaches have feelings about results, too. You may feel disappointed, embarrassed, proud, or protective, and sometimes jealous of other programs. That's human.

What matters is what you do with those feelings.

- **Notice them.** Name what you're feeling, at least to yourself.
- **Wait before reacting.** Don't send the email or make the comment while you're upset.
- **Avoid criticizing judges or opponents in front of students.** If you have a real concern, raise it later, through the proper channels.
- **Remember your purpose.** Your goal is to develop young people, not to build a trophy case.

Students are paying close attention to how you handle a loss. Let them see that you can be disappointed and still gracious.

Defining a Good Season

If the only measure of a season is results, you'll often be disappointed, and your students will, too. Consider a wider set of questions:

- Did students grow in confidence, thinking, and skill?
- Did they treat one another and their opponents well?
- Did they take on challenges they would have avoided before?
- Do they want to come back?

Wins matter, and so do these. A program that does well on these questions will, over time, usually do well in competitions too.

Talking with Families

Parents have feelings about results, too. Set expectations early, in your first letter and at meetings. After a hard result, share what you saw that was good, and what the student is working on. If a parent expresses frustration with a judge or the process, listen first. Then, gently, redirect to the child's growth. (Chapter 8 offers more.)

▶ TRY THIS

The Three Questions. After any competition or showcase, whatever the result, ask each student the same three questions: *What are you proud of? What surprised you? What will you try next?* Write the answers down, and revisit them at the next practice. Over time, students begin asking them of themselves.

COACH'S CORNER

Picture a coach whose team lost the final round of a tournament they had hoped to win. The students were stunned. Instead of saying anything, the coach sat down on the floor of the hallway beside them and passed out snacks. After a few minutes, one student said, "The other team was really good." Another said, "I think we learned a lot." The coach said nothing, which was exactly right.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"A student gloats, or blames the judge."

Speak privately and kindly. "*I know you're excited. And I want you to think about how that sounded to the other team.*" or "*I hear that you're upset about the decision. Let's talk about what we can learn.*" Redirect the energy toward something constructive.

SAY IT THIS WAY

"*Congratulations. I'm proud of how you carried yourself,*" and "*I'm proud of you whatever the ballot says.*"

Winning and losing are both temporary. The character students build in between is the part that lasts.

CHAPTER 24

Arguing the Other Side



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 24 VIDEO

Arguing the Other Side

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/NrvivFv3AE0

Here is one of debate's most surprising gifts: it asks you to argue a position you may not hold, and in doing so, it makes you wiser.

Many students find this strange at first. *Why would I defend something I don't believe?* The answer is not that truth doesn't matter. It's that you can't judge an idea well until you've understood the best case for it. Arguing the other side builds empathy, sharpens judgment, and makes students more thoughtful about the positions they do hold.

What It Is, and What It Isn't

Arguing a side is **an exercise in understanding,** not a statement of belief. A student who presents the case for a position is saying, *Here is how thoughtful people reason toward this.* They aren't saying, *This is what I think.*

That distinction matters, and it's worth saying aloud to students, parents, and colleagues. Lawyers, scientists, and judges do this all the time: they set aside their own views to examine an argument fairly. It's a discipline, not a dishonesty.

What Students Gain

Empathy. Reasoning from another's starting point helps students see why intelligent, decent people disagree. It is hard to dismiss someone whose argument you've had to make yourself.

Better arguments for their own side. Students who understand the opposition anticipate objections, avoid weak points, and respond with specifics.

Intellectual humility. Some students find their views shifting, and others find them deepening. Either outcome is a kind of growth.

Flexibility. Debaters who can move between sides are harder to surprise and quicker on their feet.

Better citizenship. A society needs people who can disagree without contempt, and who can say "I see what you mean" and still hold their ground.

Introducing It by Age

Younger children. Start with play. *The Wolf's Side of the Story* (Chapter 9) and *Switch Sides* (Chapter 12) invite children to imagine another point of view with laughter and ease. Ask: *Why might someone feel that way?*

Middle schoolers. Introduce light, structured switching. After a short debate, have students trade sides and try again. Debrief: *What was easier? What surprised you? What did you realize the other side cares about?*

High schoolers. Many formats assign sides, sometimes by coin flip. Prepare students for this early. Practice building the strongest case for a side they disagree with, and ask them to explain it so well that someone who believes it would say, "*Yes, that's exactly it.*"

Coaching the Hard Moments

"I don't want to argue that." Honor the feeling and ask what is behind it. Sometimes it's discomfort with the idea, sometimes with how others will see them. Remind the student that the room understands the difference between exploring and endorsing. Offer support, such as practicing the case with you first.

When the topic is personal. Some students have strong personal ties to a topic, and for them, arguing against it can be painful. Use judgment. You may offer an alternative role, a different topic, or a conversation about what they want. Never push a student to argue something that denies other people's basic dignity, and trust your instincts as a coach.

When a student argues a view too enthusiastically. Occasionally a student seems to be using an assigned position to express something harsher than the exercise calls for. Ask privately what's behind it, and remind them of your agreements.

When students begin to doubt. Some students feel unsettled when their views are challenged. That's a normal part of thinking. Reassure them that exploring doesn't betray their values.

The Debrief Matters

After any round that includes arguing an assigned side, make time to step back out. Ask:

- *What was the strongest argument on the side you argued?*
- *What did you learn about how others think?*
- *Did anything change in how you see the topic?*
- *What do you still believe, and why?*

The debrief turns performance into learning, and gives students a chance to reconnect with their own views.

▶ TRY THIS

The Two-Sided Notebook. For any topic, have each student write two columns: the best reasons for one side, and the best reasons for the other. Then ask them to read the column they *disagree* with to a partner. The partner may say only: "*Did I hear that right?*" and "*What's the strongest part?*"

COACH'S CORNER

Imagine a coach who assigned a student to argue for a position the student strongly disagreed with. He grumbled all week. On the day of the round, he gave a surprisingly good speech. Afterward he said, "I still don't agree. But I get why people do." The coach felt it was the most important sentence of the season.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"A student refuses to argue a side."

Listen first. If the reason is discomfort with the exercise, explain its purpose and offer support. If it involves something deeply personal, consider alternatives. Avoid shaming, and avoid making an example. The long-term goal is a student who understands the exercise, not one who is forced through it.

SAY IT THIS WAY

"*You don't have to believe it. I'm asking you to understand it*," and "*What's the best reason a thoughtful person might hold this view*?"

Students who can understand an idea they don't share have learned something that most adults are still practicing.

CHAPTER 25

Sportsmanship and the Culture of the Team



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 25 VIDEO

Sportsmanship and the Culture of the Team

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/ncbBfwhxaRo

A team is more than a roster. It's a small community with its own habits, stories, and way of treating people. You can influence what kind of community it becomes, and that influence outlasts any season.

This chapter is about how to build a team culture where students feel proud, kind, and welcome, and where sportsmanship is simply how things are done.

What Sportsmanship Means

Sportsmanship is the practice of treating others well while you compete. In debate, it includes:

- Listening respectfully to opponents, even when you disagree strongly.
- Speaking about others fairly, in the room and outside it.
- Thanking judges and organizers, even after a disappointing ballot.
- Winning without gloating and losing without bitterness.
- Following the rules, and being honest even when no one is watching.
- Helping others when you can, including competitors.

It's partly a set of behaviors, and partly an attitude: *the people across the table are people.*

Rituals That Build Culture

Culture lives in small, repeated things. Rituals tell students who they are without a lecture.

Greetings. Welcome every student by name. A handshake, a wave, or a team greeting at the start of practice makes belonging visible.

Handshakes and thank-yous. Build in a moment after every round for students to shake hands, say "good round," and thank the judge. Even young children can do it.

Team cheers or traditions. A silly chant, a team motto, a lucky snack, or an end-of-practice circle gives students something to belong to.

Recognition. Celebrate the whole range of contributions: best question, kindest disagreement, most improved, helpful teammate. (Chapter 14 describes this for younger students; it works at every age.)

Reflection. End practices with a minute of gratitude or learning. *What's one thing you learned from someone today?*

Shared Ownership

Students care more about a team they help shape.

- **Create a team charter.** Together, write a short statement of what your team values and how members will treat each other. Post it. Return to it.
- **Share leadership.** Rotate roles such as captain, timekeeper, welcome leader, or equipment manager. Include quiet students.
- **Invite older students to mentor younger ones.** Mentors grow in responsibility, and mentees gain a friendly guide. (Chapter 28 says more.)
- **Ask for ideas.** What would make practice better? What traditions should we start?

Keeping the Culture Healthy

Even good teams have rough patches. Watch for early signs and address them kindly.

Cliques and exclusion. Mix partners and groups often. Notice who is always left out, and quietly make space for them.

Gossip and rivalry. Teams sometimes develop a habit of talking about other students or teams in unkind ways. Don't join in, and don't let it pass. "*In our team, we don't talk about people that way.*"

Pressure to win. If a team begins to treat results as the only thing that matters, return to your values. Revisit the questions from Chapter 23.

Online behavior. Group chats and social media are now part of team life. Set clear expectations for respectful conduct, agree on what is shared, and be sure that any communication with students follows your school or organization's policies. Keep communication transparent: include another adult, and avoid private one-on-one messaging whenever possible.

Power imbalances. Older or more experienced students can unintentionally dominate. Teach them to make room.

Sportsmanship Toward Other Teams

Your students' behavior reflects on your program. Teach them to greet opponents warmly, to cheer for other teams' successes, to avoid commenting on opponents' mistakes, and to share notes or help a nervous competitor. Some of the most lasting friendships in debate form between rivals.

It also helps to build relationships among coaches. A friendly word with another coach can set a tone for the whole day.

The Coach's Part

Culture is mostly caught, not taught. Students watch how you treat them, other coaches, judges, and parents. They notice whether your praise is fair, whether your standards are consistent, and whether your words match your actions.

- **Model what you ask.** Show courtesy, patience, and honesty.
- **Be consistent.** Apply the same standards to your star and your newest member.
- **Correct privately, praise publicly.**
- **Repair quickly.** If you make a mistake, admit it, and make it right.

> ▶ **TRY THIS**
>
> Create a Team Charter. At the start of a season, ask students to answer: *What kind of team do we want to be? How do we want to treat each other? What do we want to be remembered for?* Write their words, in their language, on a large sheet. Everyone signs. Put it where you meet, and revisit it midseason.

COACH'S CORNER

Picture a team whose members began arriving early, not to practice, but because they'd started sharing breakfast on Fridays. No coach had suggested it. Nobody had made a rule. A culture had formed, and the coach's only job, from then on, was to protect it.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"Students are gossiping about another team."

Address it early, calmly, and without shaming. "*I've noticed some comments about the other team. Let's talk about what we want to be known for.*" Invite students to imagine how they'd feel if the comments were about them. Revisit your charter, and thank those who model kindness.

SAY IT THIS WAY

"*That's not how our team treats people*," and "*I love how you supported each other today.*"

A team culture is a gift students carry into every group they join. Build one worth carrying.

PART SEVEN

07

Running Your Program

CHAPTER 26

Your First Week of Practice



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 26 VIDEO

Your First Week of Practice

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/KwVLs6sAqSo

You've read, you've thought, you've maybe lain awake wondering what you'll say. Now the first practice is days away, and you want a plan.

Here is one. Take what helps and change the rest. [CONFIRM: this plan assumes three meetings in the first week of about an hour each; adjust to your schedule.]

Before the First Practice

A little preparation makes the first meeting calmer for everyone, including you.

Space and supplies. Find a room where students can talk without disturbing others, with chairs they can move. Bring name tags, paper, pens, a timer you can see, and a few index cards.

A letter home. Tell families when and where you meet, what students will do (in friendly, simple words), and how to reach you. Chapter 8 offers sample wording.

A simple set of agreements. Decide on three or four shared expectations, such as *we listen*, *we disagree with ideas rather than people*, *we cheer each other on*. You'll invite students to add to them.

A plan for a few unknowns. What if only three students come? What if thirty do? Have a version of your plan for both.

A moment of calm for yourself. Your steadiness will set the tone.

Practice One: Meeting Each Other (about 60 minutes)

The goal of the first meeting isn't debate. It's to make students feel they belong and want to come back.

- **Welcome and names (10 minutes).** Say a warm hello at the door. Do a simple name game: each student says their name and something they enjoy.
- **Why we're here (5 minutes).** Share, in your own words, what debate is: "A *way of sharing what we think and listening to others, so we can all think better.*"
- **Build agreements together (10 minutes).** Offer your few and ask what they'd add. Write them where all can see.
- **An opening game (15 minutes).** *Grade school:* Would You Rather, and Why. *High school:* Four Corners with a light topic.
- **A listening exercise (10 minutes).** Echo Partners (see Chapter 9), adapted for older students by making the topics more thoughtful.
- **Closing circle (10 minutes).** Each student says one thing they liked, or one thing they're curious about. Explain what comes next.

SAY IT THIS WAY

"*Thanks for coming today. I'm excited for next time.*" Say it to each student on the way out.

Practice Two: Finding Our Voices (about 60 minutes)

- **Welcome back (5 minutes).** Greet students by name. Revisit the agreements.
- **Quick warm-up (10 minutes).** A fast game of Reason Relay.
- **The shape of an argument (15 minutes).** Introduce the idea of a claim and a reason (see Chapter 3). *Grade school:* use *opinion*, *reason*, *example* with silly topics. *High school:* have students pick a topic and build a claim with two supporting reasons.
- **Practice in pairs (15 minutes).** Students give a short one-minute speech to a partner, then swap. The partner says one thing they liked and one thing they'd like to hear more about.
- **Share and celebrate (10 minutes).** Invite volunteers to share, and let everyone cheer.
- **Closing circle (5 minutes).**

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"Nobody wants to volunteer."

That's normal. Keep the pair work, and invite a student you know is ready first, so that others see it's safe. Never force a student up front in the first week.

Practice Three: Trying It On (about 60 minutes)

- **Welcome and warm-up (10 minutes).**
- **A small, friendly practice debate (20–25 minutes).** Divide students into small groups. Give them a light topic. Let each side speak briefly, with simple turns. Keep time gently. *Grade school:* two or three sentences per speaker. *High school:* a short, structured exchange.
- **Reflect together (10 minutes).** Ask: *What went well? What was hard? What would you try next time?*
- **Looking ahead (5 minutes).** Share the plan for the next few weeks.
- **Closing circle (5 minutes).**

Between Practices

A few small things make a big difference:

- **Send a brief note home** after the first week saying how it went and thanking families.
- **Jot down a few observations** about each student: something they did well, something you'd like to learn about them.
- **Reach out to anyone who seemed uncomfortable** with a kind word, not a correction.

End-of-Week Checklist

- I know every student's name.
- Every student spoke at least once, even in a pair.
- We have a set of agreements the students helped shape.
- Families know when, where, and how to reach me.
- I wrote down one thing that worked and one I'd change.
- I have a general plan for the next two weeks.

Adjusting for Age

The skeleton works for all ages, but the details shift. Younger children need shorter activities, more movement, and more play. Older students can handle longer discussions and more directness, and they often appreciate being treated as capable and being asked what they want from the club. Middle schoolers sit in between and tend to be self-conscious, so keep early activities in pairs and small groups. (More on this in Chapter 15.)

COACH'S CORNER

Imagine a volunteer coach who spent her first practice so nervous that she over-planned every minute. About twenty minutes in, she noticed the students were having fun with a game and abandoned her next three planned activities to let it run. She said afterward it was the best decision of the day. Plans are a map, not a contract.

The first week doesn't have to be perfect. It has to be welcoming. If your students leave looking forward to the next meeting, you've done the most important part.

CHAPTER 27

Planning a Season



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 27 VIDEO

Planning a Season

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youtu.be/3E__Ay_jiJc

A first week is a beginning. A season is a story, and stories are easier to tell when you know roughly how they end.

This chapter helps you think through a season from start to finish: finding students, keeping them, shaping the weeks, and keeping simple records that will make next year easier. Nothing here has to be elaborate. A modest plan, written down, beats a grand one that lives only in your head.

Finding Your Students

Recruiting sounds like sales, but it's closer to inviting. Most students who would love debate simply haven't heard of it.

- **Make a clear, friendly announcement.** One or two sentences: what it is, who can join, when you meet. Emphasize that no experience is needed and anyone may join.
- **Ask teachers and counselors.** They often know students who would flourish, including quiet ones and those looking for a place to belong.
- **Show, don't tell.** A short demonstration during lunch or an assembly, or a game played with a class, does more than a flyer.
- **Invite word of mouth.** Current students are your best advertisements. Encourage them to bring a friend.
- **Reach families too.** A letter home or a table at a school event brings in students you might otherwise miss.

- **Offer more than one way in.** Speakers, researchers, interns, timekeepers, and organizers all have a place (see Chapter 7).
- **Be open about who is welcome.** Say it clearly, and mean it.

Keeping Them

Students who join are not automatically students who stay. A few things make staying likely.

A warm first month. Most students decide in the first few weeks whether they belong. Chapter 26 is your friend.

Variety. Mix games, skill practice, and real debates. Predictable enough to feel safe, varied enough to stay interesting.

Early success. Give every student a chance to feel competent in the first few meetings.

Belonging. Make sure every student has a friend, a role, and someone who notices when they're absent.

Honest communication with families. When families understand the program, they're more likely to support attendance.

Listening. When a student drifts away, ask why, kindly, and without pressure. The answers will make your program better.

Shaping the Seasonal Arc

Most seasons follow a natural rhythm. You can use it as a skeleton and fill in the details.

Phase one: Foundation (the first few weeks). Build the room, as in Chapters 6 and 26. Teach the basic shape of an argument. Play a lot.

Phase two: Skills (the middle weeks). Introduce evidence, case-building, rebuttal, and the format you'll use. Practice in small pieces.

Phase three: Practice and performance (the late weeks). Run full practice rounds. Hold a showcase or attend a tournament. Give feedback.

Phase four: Reflection and celebration (the final weeks). Look back. Celebrate. Gather ideas for next year.

Here is a sample twelve-week outline for a grade school club. Adjust freely.

- **Weeks 1–2:** Meeting each other; games; agreements (Chapters 9 and 26).
- **Weeks 3–4:** Opinion, reason, example (Chapter 10); finding our voices (Chapter 11).
- **Weeks 5–6:** Short practice formats (Chapter 12); Star and Step feedback (Chapter 13).

- **Weeks 7–8:** Longer practice debates; first look at "someone might say" (Chapter 10).
- **Weeks 9–10:** Preparing for a showcase (Chapter 14).
- **Week 11:** The showcase.
- **Week 12:** Reflection, certificates, and a party.

And a sketch for a high school team that competes:

- **Weeks 1–3:** Foundations and format; first practice rounds.
- **Weeks 4–6:** Research, evidence, and case-building (Chapters 16 and 17).
- **Weeks 7–9:** Rebuttal, cross-examination, and full practice rounds (Chapter 18).
- **Weeks 10–12:** Tournament preparation and competition (Chapter 20).
- **Final weeks:** Reflection, awards, and planning for next year.

Scheduling Practically

- **Pick a regular time.** Predictability helps families, and helps you.
- **Check the school or community calendar** for conflicts, such as tests, holidays, and other activities.
- **Mark key dates early:** tournaments, showcases, deadlines for registration.
- **Leave slack.** Things go wrong. A season with a free week or two is a season that can bend.
- **Build in rest.** Students and coaches need breaks.

A Little Money, Honestly

Most programs run on modest budgets. List what you actually need: supplies, snacks, registration fees, transportation, certificates. Then decide where it will come from: school funds, small grants, local sponsors, family contributions, or modest fundraising. Never let cost keep a student off the team. Many programs quietly cover fees for families who need help, without drawing attention to it.

Keeping Simple Records

Records don't need to be fancy. A few simple ones can save you a great deal of trouble.

Attendance. Who came, who didn't. It helps you notice students who are drifting.

Contact information and permissions. Keep it organized and secure, in line with your school's policies.

A brief note on each student. What they enjoy, what they're working on, what you want to remember. Treat these notes as private.

A season record. What you planned, what you did, what worked, and what you'd change. A single page per season is plenty.

A simple calendar and checklist for events. Whatever you build once, you can reuse.

Ending Well

A good end to a season is more than the last tournament. Gather students for a reflection circle. Thank families and volunteers. Give each student a specific, true word of appreciation. Ask: *What should we keep? What should we change?* Then write down what they said, while it's fresh.

▶ **TRY THIS**

Draw a Season Map. On a single sheet, write the dates of your first and last meetings, then mark the big moments: the showcase, the tournament, the party. Add a few milestones along the way. Look at it and ask: *Does this feel like a story? Where will students feel proud?* Adjust until it does.

COACH'S CORNER

Picture a coach who kept a notebook of one-line reflections after every practice: Good energy. Four students quiet. Try pairs next time. *At the end of the year, she read through it and discovered a clear pattern she hadn't noticed while living it. The next season, she changed three things, and it was easily her best.*

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"Attendance is dropping."

Don't panic, and don't scold. Reach out personally to those who have stopped coming. Ask what would help. Check the schedule, the activities, and the atmosphere. Sometimes it's about conflicts, and sometimes it's about the fun draining out. Often, a small change brings people back.

SAY IT THIS WAY

"We've missed you. Is there anything that would make it easier to come?"

A season doesn't need to be grand. It needs to be thoughtful, and kind, and written down.

CHAPTER 28

Growing a Program That Lasts



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 28 VIDEO

Growing a Program That Lasts

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/bE76Vu4tX-U

A lasting program is one where students grow up in it, where older students lead younger ones, and where the whole thing doesn't collapse if one coach moves away. That kind of program isn't built in a season. It's built, a little at a time, with the future in mind.

Carrying Students Through the Years

The most meaningful programs follow students over time. A child who learns to give a reason in third grade, a debate club in middle school, and a team in high school has an experience no single year can offer.

If you coach one age group, find out who coaches the next. A friendly connection between teachers across levels makes a difference.

- **Share what works.** Swap practice ideas, topics, and stories.
- **Introduce students to the next stage.** Invite grade school students to watch middle school students; bring middle schoolers to a high school showcase.
- **Pass along helpful notes,** with care for privacy. "*She loves research and is shy about speaking*" is a gift to the next coach.
- **Aim for continuity of culture.** Use similar agreements, similar language for feedback, and shared values across levels.

Older Students as Mentors

One of the best ways to grow a program is to let students teach.

When older students help younger ones, everyone benefits. Younger students gain a friendly, admired guide. Older students deepen their own understanding, practice leadership, and find meaning in giving back. And you gain extra hands.

Ways to organize mentoring:

- **Practice buddies.** Pair an older and a younger student for games and practice.
- **Junior coaches.** Train older students to help run activities for younger groups.
- **Showcase hosts.** Invite older students to help at events.
- **Judges and timekeepers.** Older students often make warm, effective judges for younger students' practice rounds.

A few cautions. Prepare mentors. Give them clear roles, and talk about how to give feedback kindly. Make sure they aren't overloaded. Follow your school's or organization's policies about supervision, and make sure an adult is always present.

Building a Leadership Ladder

Students want to grow. Give them somewhere to go.

- **Beginner → Regular → Helper → Mentor → Captain or leader**

Each step can include a modest new responsibility and recognition. A student who has been timekeeper, then a practice partner for a new member, then a junior coach, has a story of growth to tell.

Making the Program Outlast You

It's humbling to realize that a program built around you may disappear when you leave. A lasting program has its knowledge written down and shared.

Write a simple handbook. Include your practice outline, sample letters, contact lists, calendar of recurring events, and a few lessons learned. A dozen pages is plenty.

Share responsibilities. Don't hold all the keys. Parents, colleagues, older students, and community volunteers can carry real roles.

Find a co-coach or successor early. Even a part-time partner makes the program more durable, and makes your life easier.

Keep the administration informed. A program that is known and valued by the school is far likelier to be supported after a transition.

Tell the story. Collect photos, quotes, and results (with permission). They're helpful for recruiting, funding, and remembering why the program matters.

Partners and Funding

A program tied to a single source of support is fragile. Build a few relationships.

- **School or organization.** Keep them informed and appreciative.
- **Families.** A parent group can handle logistics, snacks, and fundraising.
- **Community.** Libraries, local businesses, civic groups, and universities may offer space, speakers, or small donations.
- **Other programs.** Friendly partnerships with neighboring schools bring practice partners and shared events.
- **WDF and wider communities.** Editor: Insert a short description of how the WDF platform supports coaches in sharing resources, finding partner programs, and connecting across regions.

Knowing If It's Working

No single measure captures what a debate program does. A few simple signals help:

- **Participation.** Are students coming and returning?
- **Growth.** Are they more confident, organized, and thoughtful? (Your notes will tell you.)
- **Belonging.** Do students say they feel welcome?
- **Stories.** Collect short quotes and moments from students and families.
- **Outcomes,** such as showcase performances or competition results, held lightly beside everything else.

> ▶ **TRY THIS**
>
> Hold a Mentor Day. Invite a group of older students to visit a younger group for a single practice. Give each older student a small role: lead a game, give a Star and a Step, or share a story about their first speech. Afterward, ask both groups what they enjoyed. You'll likely find you've started a tradition.

COACH'S CORNER

Imagine a teacher who started a club with five students. Seven years later, three of those students were graduating seniors who volunteered to run a summer workshop for elementary students. The teacher stood at the back of the room, watching them teach exactly what she had once taught them, and realized the program no longer depended on her.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"I'm the only one who does everything."

Choose one task to hand off this month, and ask a specific person to take it. Offer clear instructions and thanks. Many people are willing to help when asked for something small and well defined. (Chapter 29 says more about sharing the load.)

SAY IT THIS WAY

"Could you help with just this one thing? Here's what it involves."

The measure of a good program is not how well it runs when you're there. It's how well it grows when you're not.

CHAPTER 29

Taking Care of the Coach



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 29 VIDEO

Taking Care of the Coach

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/mlVhi_U9imw

You have spent a great many pages in this book thinking about everyone else: students, families, judges, colleagues. This chapter is about you.

Coaches are generous people, and generous people sometimes give until they're empty. A coach who is exhausted, resentful, or lonely cannot offer students the steady, warm presence they need. Taking care of yourself isn't selfish. It's part of the work.

Recognizing the Strain

Burnout seldom arrives all at once. It creeps. Some signs to notice:

- Practices that once felt energizing now feel like burdens.
- Irritability with students, families, or colleagues you usually enjoy.
- Dreading emails, schedules, or logistics.
- Feeling that no one appreciates the work.
- Neglecting sleep, meals, family, or other parts of your life to keep the program running.
- A sense that you're the only one who can do things, and a quiet resentment that follows.

If some of these sound familiar, you're not failing. You're human, and you've been carrying a lot.

Setting Boundaries

Boundaries make a sustainable life possible.

Decide what you can offer, and say it clearly. How many meetings per week? Which evenings? When do you answer messages? Tell families and students, kindly and plainly.

Learn to say no, or "not this time." Every yes to something is a no to something else. Choose your yeses carefully.

Protect time away. Even a regular evening or weekend morning that belongs only to you can sustain you through a busy season.

Don't apologize for rest. Rest is part of what keeps you good at this.

Sharing the Load

Recall the many hats from Chapter 8. You don't have to wear them all.

- **Ask for help in specific ways.** "*Could you handle snacks for the showcase?*" works better than "*I need help.*"
- **Let go of perfect.** Good enough is often good enough. A simple practice beats an elaborate one you're too tired to run.
- **Share credit.** Thank the people who help, publicly and often.
- **Train your helpers,** so that they feel confident and you aren't micromanaging.
- **Let students carry some of it,** as in Chapters 25 and 28.

Finding Your Community

Coaching can be lonely, particularly if you're the only one in your school. Seek out others.

Fellow coaches. At tournaments, in neighboring schools, or online, there are people who understand what you're going through. Share stories, ask questions, and offer help.

Mentors. Look for an experienced coach whose approach you admire. Most are glad to be asked.

Friends and family. Tell the people who love you what the work involves and what you need.

Online communities. Editor: Insert description and links to the WDF coaching community and any peer-support channels.

Professional support. If stress or sadness has grown heavy, or has lasted a long time, talk with a doctor, counselor, or someone you trust. Asking for help is a strength.

Handling Difficult Moments

Some seasons include a hard parent, a conflict with a colleague, a painful loss, or a student crisis. In those moments:

- **Pause before reacting.** Take time to think, and sleep on strong feelings.
- **Seek counsel.** Ask a trusted colleague or supervisor what they would do.
- **Remember the larger picture.** One difficult moment rarely defines a season.
- **Take care of yourself afterward.** A walk, a call to a friend, an hour doing something unrelated to debate.

Remembering Why You Started

Early in this book, in Chapter 1, we suggested you write down why you were coaching, what you hoped your students would feel, and one worry. If you still have that page, read it now. It may have changed, or it may have been right all along.

Then collect a few small proofs that the work matters: a thank-you note, a photo, a student's first speech, a parent's kind remark. Keep them in a folder or jar. On hard days, they're remarkably effective.

Resting Between Seasons

Seasons end. Let them. Take a real break. Reflect on what you learned, but don't start planning the next one immediately. Many coaches find that the time away gives them back their energy, their curiosity, and their sense of why this matters.

> ▶ **TRY THIS**
>
> Make a "Coach's Care Plan." On a single page, write answers to these questions: *What is one boundary I will set this season? Who will I ask for help? Who can I talk to when things are hard? What is one thing I'll do each week just for me?* Put it somewhere you'll see it.

COACH'S CORNER

Imagine a coach who said yes to everything: extra practices, last-minute requests, weekend events. By midseason she was exhausted and short-tempered. A fellow coach asked her gently, "Who takes care of you?" She hadn't thought about it in years. She set one boundary that week, and asked a parent to run Thursday snacks. The change was small. The difference was large.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"I'm overwhelmed and thinking about quitting."

First, take a breath. Then ask: *What exactly is overwhelming me?* Often it's one or two things, such as logistics or one difficult relationship, that can be handled or shared. If it's deeper, it's okay to scale back, pause, or step away. A program that continues with fewer meetings is better than one that ends in resentment. And you matter more than the program.

SAY IT THIS WAY

"*I can't take that on this season, but I'd love to help find someone who can*," and "*Thank you for asking. I need a little time to think.*"

You cannot pour from an empty cup. Tend to yourself, and you'll have far more to give.

CHAPTER 30

Beyond the Debate Room



▶ WATCH THE CHAPTER 30 VIDEO

Beyond the Debate Room

Scan the code with your phone camera, or tap the thumbnail in the digital edition.

youtu.be/zuZ-IzdAhnc

Somewhere in the middle of a season, when you're stacking chairs after practice or driving students home from a tournament, a question may cross your mind: *Does any of this really matter?*

It does. And not mainly because of the trophies. It matters because of what your students carry out of the room.

At School

The habits of debate show up quickly in a student's ordinary school day.

Participation. Students who have practiced speaking up in a safe room often begin to contribute in class.

Writing. Learning to state a claim, give a reason, and support it with evidence is the backbone of good essays. Many students find that writing becomes easier once they've practiced arguing aloud.

Reading and research. Students learn to ask where information comes from and to read more critically.

Listening. They hear more of what teachers, classmates, and friends are actually saying.

Working in groups. Team debate teaches planning, trust, and shared responsibility.

Handling disagreement. A student who has learned that disagreeing isn't the same as fighting handles conflicts, in the hallway and online, a little more gracefully.

At Work

Young people sometimes wonder how debate will help in their future careers. The answer is: in many ways. Employers across fields value people who can think clearly, communicate persuasively, listen carefully, work in teams, and stay calm under pressure. Debate practices all of these.

Students who have been through a debate program can often describe concrete experiences: researching a topic, preparing a presentation, handling tough questions, adapting to an audience, working under a deadline. You can help them see these experiences as skills. When they apply for jobs, scholarships, or programs, encourage them to describe what they did and learned, not just that they were "on the debate team."

In Civic Life

A community needs people who can discuss hard questions without tearing each other apart. Debate is a rehearsal for that.

Students learn to:

- **Weigh evidence** before forming a view.
- **Hear opposing views** and understand their strongest forms.
- **Speak up** in meetings, in community conversations, and online.
- **Disagree respectfully,** and change their minds when the evidence calls for it.
- **Take part** in public decisions, as voters, volunteers, and neighbors.

No debate program tells students what to believe. The best ones teach them *how* to think, so that whatever they believe, they can explain it, test it, and treat others fairly while doing so.

In Friendships and Families

Some of the most important effects are quieter. A student who can say "I see it differently, and here's why" in a calm voice may find their family dinners and friendships a little more honest. A student who has learned to listen all the way through someone's sentence has a gift that people will remember.

In Who They Become

The deepest benefit is hard to measure. Over years, students who are encouraged to think and speak, and who are respected when they do, tend to come to believe that their voices matter and that other people's do too. That belief shapes how they treat themselves and others.

You will rarely see the full results. Students move on, and you may not hear what became of them. Sometimes, years later, a message arrives: *I just wanted to say thank you. I got up to speak at work today, and I thought of you.* Hold on to those. They're the harvest.

Helping Students See It

You can help students connect the dots.

- **Name the skills.** "*That was careful listening. You'll use that everywhere.*"
- **Ask where else they use them.** "*Where did you use that this week?*"
- **Invite alumni to visit.** Former students can tell current ones how debate shaped them.
- **Support next steps.** Help students find opportunities at higher levels, in other programs, or in other areas of life where their skills will be valued.
- **Keep the door open.** A student who graduates is still part of the community.

> ▶ **TRY THIS**
>
> At the end of the season, ask each student to finish this sentence on a card: "*Something I learned here that I'll use somewhere else is…*" Collect the cards, read a few aloud (with permission), and keep them. They'll tell you more than any score could.

COACH'S CORNER

Imagine a former student who returned to visit her old team, now a young professional. She told them that she'd been nervous at her first big meeting, until she remembered the breathing exercise her coach had taught her in fifth grade. The coach, at the back of the room, had no memory of teaching it. That is how it often goes.

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

"I don't see any change in my students."

Change is often slow, invisible, and delayed. Look for small signs: a student who now looks up, a question asked, a kind remark. Ask students and families what they notice. Then be patient. You are planting, and the harvest comes later.

SAY IT THIS WAY

"*Look how far you've come*," and "*You'll be using this long after you leave this room.*"

A Closing Word

We began this book with a confession: most coaches never planned to be one. We hope that, by now, you feel less like a beginner and more like a guide.

You don't have to be perfect. You have to be present, curious, patient, honest, and kind. Those qualities, repeated week after week, are what make a debate room into a place where young people grow.

Thank you for doing this work. The young people you coach may not say it often. We will, on their behalf.

Welcome to the community of coaches. We're glad you're here.

— *The World Debating Forum* (WDF)

Appendices

RESOURCES

A–F

Appendices

APPENDIX A

A Plain-Language Glossary

Debate has its own vocabulary, and formats use different words for similar things. These definitions are intentionally simple. When a tournament uses a term differently, trust its rules.

Argument. A claim supported by a reason and, usually, evidence.

Ballot. The judge's written decision and feedback for a round.

Burden. What a side must show in order to persuade the judge. Often, the side supporting a topic must show that it's true or worthwhile.

Case. The set of arguments a debater or team presents to support their position.

Claim. The main point of an argument; what you want others to believe or do.

Clash. The direct engagement between opposing arguments. Good debates have lots of it.

Constructive. A speech in which a debater presents their own arguments, as opposed to answering others'.

Cross-examination. A period in which debaters question each other. Also called cross-fire or by other names in different formats.

Definition. An explanation of what a key word in the topic means, so that both sides argue about the same thing.

Dropped argument. An argument one side raised that the other side never answered.

Evidence. Facts, statistics, expert statements, examples, and other material that support a claim.

Flow. The notes a debater or judge takes during a round, usually organized in columns by argument. Also, the verb: *to flow*.

Format. The set of rules that organizes a debate: who speaks, when, and for how long.

Impact. The importance or consequence of an argument: what happens, to whom, and how much it matters.

Judge. The person (or panel) who listens to a debate and decides.

Limited-preparation (spontaneous) debate. A debate in which students receive the topic shortly before speaking.

Motion (or resolution, or topic). The statement or question being debated.

Opponent. The person or team on the other side.

Paraphrase. To restate someone else's idea in your own words, keeping the meaning accurate.

Point of information. In some formats, a brief, polite interruption in which a debater offers a question or comment during an opponent's speech.

Prep time. Time debaters may use to prepare between speeches or before a round.

Reason (or warrant). The "because" that connects a claim to why it's worth believing.

Rebuttal. A response to an opponent's argument.

Resolution. The topic of a debate, especially in formats where it's announced in advance.

Round. A single debate.

Signposting. Telling the listener where you are in your speech: "My first point…"

Source. Where a piece of evidence came from, such as a book, article, study, or expert.

Speaker points. Scores some formats give to individual speakers for communication and style.

Tournament. An event where many teams or students debate in multiple rounds.

Weighing. Explaining why your arguments matter more than your opponent's.

APPENDIX B

Sample Practice Plans

These plans use activities from this book. Change anything. They are starting points.

Grade School Plan (about 45 minutes)

Theme: Giving a reason.

- **Welcome and breathing (5 minutes).** Greet each student by name. Do the *smell the flower, blow out the candle* breath together. (Chapter 11)
- **Warm-up (7 minutes).** Would You Rather, and Why, in pairs. (Chapter 9)
- **Skill moment (8 minutes).** Practice *opinion, reason, example* with the three-finger gesture, using a new silly topic. (Chapter 10)
- **Main activity (15 minutes).** Mini-Debate in pairs, or Team Tag in two teams. (Chapter 12)
- **Reflection (5 minutes).** Star and Step cards. (Chapter 13)
- **Closing cheer (5 minutes).**

Materials: timer, talking object, sentence-starter chart, index cards.

Middle School Plan (about 60 minutes)

Theme: Evidence and responding.

- **Welcome and check-in (5 minutes).** A quick question everyone answers in a sentence.
- **Warm-up (10 minutes).** Spectrum Line on a topic students chose. (Chapters 12 and 15)
- **Skill focus (15 minutes).** Introduce "claim, source says, so what." Give students two short sources and ask which they would trust and why. (Chapter 16)
- **Practice (20 minutes).** In small groups, each student gives a one-minute argument using one source. Partners answer with the four-step response. (Chapter 18)
- **Feedback and reflection (5 minutes).** I liked / I wonder. (Chapter 13)
- **Closing circle (5 minutes).**

Materials: two short sample articles, timer, sentence-starter chart.

High School Plan (about 90 minutes)

Theme: Case-building and rebuttal.

- **Welcome and agenda (5 minutes).** Share the goals for the session.
- **Warm-up (10 minutes).** Spontaneous debate: a light topic, two minutes to prepare, two minutes each to speak. (Chapter 4)
- **Skill workshop (20 minutes).** Build a One-Page Case Map on the day's topic. (Chapter 17)
- **Practice round (30 minutes).** Two students per side; short speeches and a brief cross-examination. Others flow the round and prepare feedback. (Chapters 17 and 18)
- **Feedback (15 minutes).** Observe, Explain, Suggest. Students offer feedback first, then the coach. (Chapter 19)
- **Reflection and planning (10 minutes).** What will we work on next? Assign research tasks.

Materials: case map templates, timers, flow paper, topic list.

APPENDIX C

Feedback Forms and a Simple, Humane Rubric

Use these tools to support growth, not to rank students. Share them with students early, so that they know what you are looking for and can use the same language with each other.

Form 1: Star and Step Card (all ages)

- **Student's name and date:** _____
- **One Star** (something done well, with a specific detail): _____
- **One Step** (one thing to try next): _____

Form 2: Peer Feedback Card (grade 3 and up)

- **I liked...** _____
- **I wonder...** _____
- **One question I'd ask the speaker:** _____

Form 3: Coach's Observation Note (for your own use; keep private)

- **Student and date:** _____
- **What they did well today:** _____
- **What they're working on:** _____
- **Something I learned about them:** _____
- **A kind thing to say next time:** _____

Form 4: Observe, Explain, Suggest (grade 8 and up)

- **I observed...** (what happened, without judgment): _____
- **The effect was...** (why it matters): _____
- **Next time, try...** (one specific action): _____

A Simple, Humane Rubric

This rubric uses language of growth, not of failure. There are four levels for each of five qualities. Most students will be at different levels in different areas, and that's expected. Use the rubric to find the next step, not to assign a grade. Younger students can use a simplified version with only the first three qualities.

The four levels are **Starting**, **Growing**, **Strong**, and **Standout.**

1. Ideas and Reasoning

- *Starting*: States an opinion, sometimes with a reason.
- *Growing*: Gives clear reasons that mostly connect to the claim.
- *Strong*: Builds organized arguments in which each reason clearly supports the claim and explains why it matters.
- *Standout*: Builds original, well-organized arguments and anticipates objections.

2. Evidence and Examples

- *Starting*: Uses personal examples or general statements.
- *Growing*: Offers relevant examples or facts, and can say where they came from.
- *Strong*: Uses credible, relevant evidence and explains why it matters.
- *Standout*: Uses a range of sources, assesses their quality, and uses them fairly and precisely.

3. Listening and Response

- *Starting*: Listens when prompted; responds with support.
- *Growing*: Responds to some of what others say.
- *Strong*: Restates others' points fairly and answers the main ideas.
- *Standout*: Responds to the strongest versions of opposing arguments, prioritizes what matters most, and handles surprises calmly.

4. Delivery and Clarity

- *Starting*: Speaks with prompting; may be quiet or hurried.
- *Growing*: Speaks clearly most of the time and is easy to follow.
- *Strong*: Speaks clearly and confidently, with good organization and pacing.
- *Standout*: Adapts to the audience and uses voice and structure to help the listener follow and remember.

5. Respect and Sportsmanship

- *Starting*: Follows basic agreements with reminders.
- *Growing*: Is generally respectful and takes turns.
- *Strong*: Treats others with consistent respect and supports teammates.
- *Standout*: Models grace in winning and losing, includes others, and helps build team culture.

How to Use the Rubric Well

- **Share it before, not after.** Students should know what you are looking for.
- **Choose one or two areas per session** to comment on.
- **Look for movement.** Notice growth from week to week.
- **Let students self-assess** before you share your view.
- **Keep it kind.** A rubric is a map, not a verdict.

APPENDIX D

Starter Topics, Sorted by Age

Use these as starting points, and invite students to suggest their own. Adjust to your community, and review any topic for sensitivity before using it (see Chapter 21). Topics are phrased so that students can argue for or against.

Grades K–3: Playful and Concrete

- Dogs make better pets than cats.
- Recess should be longer.
- Summer is better than winter.
- Children should be allowed to choose their own bedtime.
- Pizza is the best lunch.
- Every classroom should have a pet.
- Dragons would make better pets than hamsters.
- Children should have a say in how the classroom is arranged.
- It is better to read a book than to watch a movie.
- Everyone should learn to swim.
- Lunch should be outside whenever the weather allows.

Grades 4–6: Everyday Fairness

- Schools should have a uniform.
- Homework should be optional.
- Students should help choose class rules.
- Every student should learn a musical instrument.
- Zoos are good for animals.
- Kids should be allowed to have their own phones.
- Students should have a longer lunch break.

- It is better to be a good winner than a good loser.
- Schools should recycle and compost.
- Older students should help teach younger ones.
- Field trips are more valuable than classroom lessons.

Grades 7–9: Choices and Responsibilities

- School should start later in the morning.
- Phones should be allowed in class.
- Students should be graded on effort as well as results.
- Social media does more good than harm for teenagers.
- Schools should teach financial skills as a required subject.
- Sports should not receive more funding than the arts.
- Community service should be required for graduation.
- Students should be able to retake tests.
- Video games can be good for learning.
- It is acceptable to break a rule to help a friend.
- Cities should have more bike lanes, even if it means less parking.

Grades 10–12: Questions with Depth

- The right to privacy should be valued above the need for public safety.
- Governments should invest more in public transportation than in new roads.
- Voting should be mandatory.
- Standardized tests should be removed from university admissions.
- It is ethical to use animals for medical research.
- Individuals bear more responsibility than governments for protecting the environment.
- Technology companies should be responsible for the content on their platforms.
- It is more important to protect the freedom of speech than to prevent offense.
- Artificial intelligence will do more good than harm in education.
- The benefits of economic growth outweigh its environmental costs.
- A just law must be obeyed even if it seems unfair in a particular case.

A note on topic selection. The most productive topics for any age are ones where reasonable people really do disagree, and where students have enough knowledge or can gain it. Avoid topics that ask students to argue that certain groups of people are less deserving of respect, and think carefully about topics close to students' personal lives.

APPENDIX E

Games and Exercises Index

A quick guide to the activities in this book, by name and where to find them.

Warm-ups and icebreakers

- Would You Rather, and Why (Chapter 9)
- Four Corners (Chapter 9)
- Name game and opening circle (Chapter 26)
- Whisper to Roar (Chapter 11)
- Spectrum Line (Chapter 12)
- Heat Check (Chapter 21)

Building the shape of an argument

- The Great Why Chain (Chapter 9)
- Reason Relay (Chapter 9)
- The Argument Detective (Chapter 3)
- The Argument Sandwich (Chapter 10)
- What's Missing? (Chapter 10)
- One-Page Case Map (Chapter 17)

Listening and empathy

- Echo Partners (Chapter 9)
- Listening Detective (Chapter 11)
- Draw What You Heard (Chapter 11)
- The Thank-You Rule (Chapter 11)
- The Wolf's Side of the Story (Chapter 9)
- Fair Restatement (Chapter 22)

- Two-Sided Notebook (Chapter 24)

Practice formats

- Mini-Debate (Chapter 12)
- Team Tag (Chapter 12)
- Switch Sides (Chapter 12)
- The Fishbowl (Chapter 12)
- Silly Court (Chapters 12 and 14)
- Rebuttal Ping-Pong (Chapter 18)

Confidence and community

- Two-Minute Story (Chapter 11)
- Mistake Celebration (Chapter 6)
- Topic of My Choice (Chapter 7)
- Student Choice Day (Chapter 15)
- Mentor Day (Chapter 28)
- Team Charter (Chapter 25)

Research and evidence

- Source Detective (Chapter 16)

Feedback and reflection

- Star and Step (Chapter 13)
- The Three Questions (Chapter 23)
- Mock Tournament Day (Chapter 20)

For the coach

- Observation Notebook (Chapter 5)
- Coach's Care Plan (Chapter 29)
- Season Map (Chapter 27)

APPENDIX F

Recommended Resources and Communities for Coaches

A coach never has to work alone. This appendix points toward the kinds of help available. Editor: This appendix needs your specific links, contacts, and resource names. The headings below show the kinds of entries we suggest; replace the placeholders before publication.

The WDF Platform

- **Coach community and forums.** Editor: describe and link.
- **Printable resources.** Editor: practice plans, topic lists, ballots, handouts, and the "making the case for debate" summary mentioned in Chapter 8.
- **Research guides and topic briefs.** Editor: describe and link; see Chapter 16.
- **Training and workshops.** Editor: describe and link.
- **Finding partner programs and tournaments.** Editor: describe and link.

Format Rules and Tournament Information

- **Rule summaries for the formats mentioned in Chapter 4.** Editor: link to one-page summaries.
- **Regional and national leagues.** Editor: add a directory of leagues by region.
- **Judge training materials.** Editor: link to materials for volunteer judges.

Local Sources of Help

- **Your school or organization's leadership,** for space, funds, and policy guidance.
- **Librarians,** for research help and quiet rooms.
- **Colleagues in English, social studies, and the arts,** who often welcome a debate program.
- **Neighboring coaches,** for practice rounds and shared events.
- **Local universities,** where students and faculty sometimes volunteer as judges or speakers.
- **Community groups and businesses,** which may offer space, donations, or volunteers.

Reading and Learning

- Editor: Add recommended books, articles, and videos on debate, public speaking, critical thinking, and working with young people. Select titles you are comfortable endorsing.

When You Need More Than Debate Help

If a student shares something that worries you, or if you're struggling yourself, reach out to the appropriate people near you: your school's counselor or leadership, the student's family, or a trusted professional. No book can replace those relationships.

Video Library

All 30 companion videos in one place. Scan a code with your phone camera to watch.

CHAPTER 1
You Can Do This
youtu.be/u5wqjgqrvHU

CHAPTER 2
What Debate Is, and Why It Matters
youtu.be/q84YZhXfDJw

CHAPTER 3
The Anatomy of an Argument
youtu.be/BU4DuRynTV8

CHAPTER 4
Debate Formats at a Glance
youtu.be/C95F_iqD5mQ

CHAPTER 5
How Kids and Teens Think, Speak, and Learn
youtu.be/mFIVPb_DEUk

CHAPTER 6
Building a Room Where It's Safe to Be Wrong
youtu.be/Wgthp1t92Eg

CHAPTER 7
Every Debater Belongs
youtu.be/DK1ICJUA0nM

CHAPTER 8
Partnering with Parents, Schools, and Communities
youtu.be/eQ08gq1uY28

CHAPTER 9
Starting with Play
youtu.be/HMP501VCuec

CHAPTER 10
Opinion, Reason, Example
youtu.be/PjMkiHK92×8

CHAPTER 11
Finding Their Voices
youtu.be/IyjKzJBZX7E

CHAPTER 12
Short Formats, Big Smiles
youtu.be/1RhdeWFr0f0

CHAPTER 13
Feedback That Encourages
youtu.be/ORCh2WjPgGQ

CHAPTER 14
Showcases and Friendly Tournaments
youtu.be/z9QC_nmvkEQ

CHAPTER 15
The Middle School Years
youtu.be/7U0Sop3_dKw

CHAPTER 16
From Opinion to Evidence
youtu.be/OazbBZRfKtM

CHAPTER 17
Building a Case
youtu.be/Sk3NRPFMG7I

CHAPTER 18
Rebuttal and Cross-Examination
youtu.be/QFmEnlvqjHQ

CHAPTER 19
Honest, Specific, Kind Feedback
youtu.be/gHd4tM_9wzE

CHAPTER 20
Competition Day
youtu.be/BkII6QtDv2g

CHAPTER 21
Hard Topics and Heated Moments
youtu.be/YwdYquNNmNE

CHAPTER 22
Arguing Honestly
youtu.be/NzweE7_yzIc

CHAPTER 23
Winning, Losing, and Everything Between
youtu.be/_MqHnaXhkXQ

CHAPTER 24
Arguing the Other Side
youtu.be/NrvivFv3AE0

CHAPTER 25
Sportsmanship and the Culture of the Team
youtu.be/ncbBfwhxaRo

CHAPTER 26
Your First Week of Practice
youtu.be/KwVLs6sAqSo

CHAPTER 27
Planning a Season
youtu.be/3E__Ay_jiJc

CHAPTER 28
Growing a Program That Lasts
youtu.be/bE76Vu4tX-U

CHAPTER 29
Taking Care of the Coach
youtu.be/mlVhi_U9imw

CHAPTER 30
Beyond the Debate Room
youtu.be/zuZ-IzdAhnc



GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL DEBATE COACHING

FOR GRADES K–12

You don't need to have been a champion debater to coach one. This practical, warm guide walks new and experienced coaches through every stage — from playful first games with young children, to evidence, case-building and rebuttal with high schoolers, to running a program that lasts. Inside are ready-to-use practice plans, feedback forms, starter topics and dozens of activities.

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