

AN INTRODUCTION TO Public Forum Debate

Public Forum Debate at a Glance



Event Description

Public Forum Debate (PF) involves opposing teams of two, debating a topic concerning a current event. Proceeding a coin toss, the winners choose which side to debate (PRO or CON) or which speaker position they prefer (1st or 2nd), and the other team receives the remaining option. Students present cases, engage in rebuttal and refutation, and also participate in a “crossfire” (similar to a cross-examination) with the opportunity to question the opposing team. Often, community members are recruited to judge this event.

Considerations for Public Forum Debate

As a team event, students who compete in Public Forum need to be able to work well with a partner. Balanced teams, both in terms of preparation before debates and contributions within a debate, helps provide a competitive advantage during tournaments. PF looks at current event topics. Students who do Public Forum must be prepared to debate in front of judges without any formal debate training. Being able to persuade a range of judges is a central component to this event. Additionally, PF is focused upon debating varying resolutions that change frequently, which exposes students to a variety of topics during a singular competitive season.


Traits of Successful PF Debaters

When considering what event you should choose, or in which direction to point a student when selecting an event, below are some general traits of successful PF debaters to keep in mind:

- Thinks logically
- Organized in both presentation and thought
- Simplifies concepts
- Engaging personality that is persuasive to a variety of people
- Big-picture thinker
- Professional

List of Past PF Topics

- Resolved: NATO should strengthen its relationship with Ukraine in order to deter further Russian aggression.
- Resolved: Single-gender classrooms would improve the quality of education in American public schools.
- Resolved: Immigration reform should include a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States.
- Resolved: The benefits of domestic surveillance by the NSA outweigh the harms.
- Resolved: The continuation of current U.S. anti-drug policies in Latin America will do more harm than good.
- Resolved: On balance, the rise of China is beneficial to the interests of the United States.
- Resolved: Congress should renew the Federal Assault Weapons Ban.
- Resolved: The benefits of post-9/11 security measures outweigh the harms to personal freedom.

Learn More! The National Speech & Debate Association is the leading provider of competitive and educational resources to aid students and coaches as they explore our competitive events. For **Public Forum Debate**, we provide a number of helpful resources—including live and recorded webinars designed to introduce foundational and advanced concepts in PF; access to PF final round videos; a PF textbook; a starter file for beginning debaters; research assistance; and much more! Take advantage of the amazing benefits of being a member by using our resources to help advance yourself in competitive speech and debate activities. Visit www.speechanddebate.org for more information. 

Find Your Voice

Public Forum played a large role in who I am today. It taught me to be persuasive. At its core, the event's structure and audience forced me to shape and mold my thoughts into concise, simple, yet elegant arguments."

— **Danny Rego, Association Alum**

COMPETITION EVENTS GUIDE

Public Forum Debate



Basic Understandings

Public Forum Debate (PF) is a two-on-two event where teams argue against each other on a specified resolution. Therefore, it is imperative that when students begin PF, they know the resolution being debated. If you visit www.speechanddebate.org/topics, you will see the topics, which are assigned by month of competition. . It is important to note that not all tournaments use the topic suggested due to the timing of their tournament. Therefore, be sure to check the tournament invitation for complete information.

Once a debater knows the resolution, they should begin brainstorming potential arguments on the topic. An argument's basic structure is referred to as claim, warrant, and impact (more details below). A debater will also construct their positions, referred to as cases (more details below). Finally, they should think through potential arguments by their opponent and brainstorm responses. As the round progresses, a team should also offer reasons why they should win the round to the judge.



Research

After students do an initial brainstorm session, they should conduct research. Evidence can come from anywhere—newspapers, journal articles, studies, books, primary documents, etc. When gathering research, a student should ask four questions:

1. Is the source reputable? Sources should have a good reputation for 'getting it right'—newswires such as the AP and Reuters tend to be less credible than newspapers.
2. Is the source verifiable? This refers to the ability to verify the data and claims made by the source. If a source is based on a personal interview or some other insider knowledge, that generally cannot be verified through independent means.
3. Is the source authoritative? Different sources are expert at different fields. The Office of Budget and Management is an authority on budget policy on the US, but may not be the ideal source for a resolution about foreign policy in the Middle East.
4. Is the source recent? While not every source must be up-to-the-minute, generally, a more recent source is better.

Structural Components

One team advocates for the resolution, known as the PRO, and one team advocates against the resolution, known as the CON. Before the debate begins, the teams conduct a coin flip. The winner of the flip chooses either the side of the debate OR the speaking order. The team losing the

flip makes the other choice. For example, Jonesville High School wins the coin flip and chooses CON. Smithtown High School, who lost the flip, chooses the speaking order. If they choose 2nd, Jonesville would speak 1st on CON and Smithville will speak 2nd on PRO. Note that unlike other forms of debate, the CON may speak first. The structure of the round, and corresponding speaker responsibilities, follow:

Speech	Time Limit	Responsibility of Debater
Team A Speaker 1 - Constructive	4 min	Present the team's case
Team B Speaker 1 - Constructive	4 min	Present the team's case
Crossfire	3 min	Speaker 1 from Team A & B alternate asking and answering questions
Team A Speaker 2 - Rebuttal	4 min	Refute the opposing side's arguments
Team B Speaker 2 - Rebuttal	4 min	Refute the opposing side's arguments
Crossfire	3 min	Speaker 2 from Team A & B alternate asking and answering questions
Team A Speaker 1 - Summary	3 min	Begin crystallizing the main issues in the round
Team B Speaker 1 - Summary	3 min	Begin crystallizing the main issues in the round
Grand Crossfire	3 min	All four debaters involved in a crossfire at once
Team A Speaker 2 - Final Focus	2 min	Explain reasons that you win the round
Team B Speaker 2 - Final Focus	2 min	Explain reasons that you win the round

**Each team is entitled to three minutes of prep time during the round.*

Organizing

Argumentation

First, a debater must clearly establish a claim. This is generally a declarative statement establishing the point they are setting out to justify. Second, a debater must clearly establish why their argument is valid. This is known

as the warrant for an argument. Debaters need to go beyond asserting their claims and back them up with analysis. The warrant can come in many forms, but is necessary for the development of the argument. Debaters may use logic or research to back up their claims. It is important to note that having an author make an assertion about a topic is not on its own a warrant. Third, a debater must provide an impact for their argument. This means the debater establishes why the argument is significant in the round.



Casing

After students have brainstormed arguments, it is time to construct cases. While there is no rule requiring a specific structure, there is a traditional approach to constructing a case. Often, a case starts with a well thought out thesis statement as an introductory lead-in to the position. Next, the case would define key terms. Following this introduction the debater would offer contentions, or main arguments.

Refutations

But, PF is more than just cases! After presenting cases, students engage in refuting each other's arguments. Students commonly refute cases by denying the validity of the argument. Additional strategies include, but are not limited to, justifying the reverse of the argument, showing the opponent's arguments do not carry as much weight as their arguments, or taking out the link between the opponent's argument and the priority they establish in the round. Students can pre-write their answers to arguments they expect their opponents to make. These are commonly known as "blocks."

Flowing

It is important for debaters to learn how to keep track of arguments in the round. Typically debaters "flow" the debate round—making note of the arguments presented

and refuted in the round. This note-taking approach requires students to abbreviate terms, phrases, and ideas so that they can get as much of the debate notated as possible. Here are some tips:

- Two sheets of paper. One page will be for anything said about the affirmative, the other for anything said about the negative, regardless of which debater is saying it. Each speech in the round will receive its own column on these pages.
- At least one pen, but we recommend two, in different colors.
- If the opponent is speaking, write (don't try to determine what's important at the outset—just write as much as you can)
- Orient both pieces of paper vertically, like a book. Note that columns will be narrow, which will increase the need for accurate/efficient abbreviations.



Practicing

It is a great idea to do practice rounds before going to your first tournament. At first, it may seem you do not have enough to say to fill up the speech times. However, that will change with practice. The first round could be a stop and go round where a coach stops you when there's a missed opportunity or confusion about what to do during the speech. During these rounds, you may re-give speeches until you or the coach are satisfied with the speech. Additionally, students should practice delivering prepared speeches focusing on emphasis, eye contact, and fluidity.

Performance Tips

When at your first tournament it is important to keep in mind that it gets easier with more practice. The goal is not about where you begin, but where you end. Improving from round to round, and tournament to tournament,

is the true mark of success. Focus not only on what you could enhance, but also on what you did well. Take feedback from judges as opportunities to improve. If they provide oral feedback, take notes on what they share to review with your coach. Finally, do not fixate on the wins and losses—it won't lead to greater success!

Resources

Our Public Forum Debate “Teacher in a Box” lessons are designed for the novice coach and students and include links to webinars, handouts, and extended materials. Get started at www.speechanddebate.org/teacher-in-a-box-pf-unit-overview-novice.

Member students and coaches at NSDA schools can access these materials and more at www.speechanddebate.org/resources. Use the filter function on the left hand side of the page to find resources specific to Public Forum Debate. 