Debate 101:
10 Steps to Successful Debating
Step 1: Analyze the type of proposition you are debating

- Claims are the starting point of argument.
- Different Types of Claims entail different obligations and require different types of support.
- Compare “You should believe X” to “We should do X” to “X should be the general policy”
Identify the potentially open stases

• Fact: X is Y, X was Y, X will be Y.
• Definition: X falls in category Y; X is understood to mean Y
• Causation: X causes Y; X stems from Y
• Value: X is Good, X is more valuable than Y. Normally includes an ethical dimension.
• Policy: We should or should not do X.
Step 2: Define Relevant Terms

• Provide definitions of key terms if there is risk of misunderstanding.
• For policy claims, you can operationally define terms with a specific proposal.
• Be careful in your use of persuasive definitions. Normally Pro side (or “Affirmative”) has right to define, but Con (or “Negative”) can challenge if definitions are unfair.
More about definition

Aristotelian definition:
An X is a class name with these attributes—e.g., a bed is furniture used for sleeping

Persuasive definition:
A non-neutral X=Y relationship embedded in a concept phrase—e.g. “tax relief,” “crony capitalism,” “trickle-down economics”
Step 3: Organize & Number

• Debate is an analytical process. It is persuasion through reasoning.

• Your responsibility is to advance clear, supported arguments to support your side. Numbering/outlining is key.

ARGUMENTATION SCHEMES and TOULMIN can help here
Step 4: Go with the Flow

- “Flowing” is debate terminology for taking notes of debate interaction.
- Divide your note pad into 4 columns:
  - Prop ➔ Opp ➔ Prop ➔ Opp
- Flowing is just a way of tracking how arguments “flow” in the debate: What is said (or not said) in response to what.
Debate Flow

- Allows your audience to track the interaction between the debaters.
- Allows you to note which of your arguments have been answered, which have been “dropped.”
- Also useful as a predictive map of which arguments your opponents might use and in which order
Sample Flow (partial)
Step 5: Know Your Speaker Duties

- 4 minutes Prop side presentation
- 4 minutes Opp side presentation
- 4 minutes Prop side's further arguments + rebuttal
- 4 minutes Opp side's further arguments + rebuttal
- Each presenter can be questioned twice for 15 seconds each
- audience vote
Initial presentations
Order your arguments in a hierarchy—which are your best available means of persuasion?

How much time do you want to allot to each?

Which critical questions are your opponents likely to ask?
Rebuttal Speeches

- 4 minutes Pro side's rebuttal
- 4 minutes Con side's rebuttal

Argumentatively, important both to extend your original arguments & reply/rebut those of your opponents. Thus, need to anticipate opponents’ arguments.
Step 6: *Construct Your Case*

- A “case” is simply your set of arguments pro or contra the proposition / topic.
- Should be organized into numbered points; each point should be supported by reasoning and evidence.
Forms of Reasoning

- Expert Opinion
- Position to Know
- Analogy
- Sign
- Positive consequences
- Negative consequences
- Correlation to cause
- Verbal classification
Evidence

• Quality of evidence is key: Whether quoting expert opinion, or data provided by researchers, be sure to explain why your source is credible.

• Resolving an evidential dispute is a valuable skill: Explain why your source is superior to your opponent’s.
Step 7: *Rebut* your Opponent

- Rebuttal speeches require double duty: You need to defend your case but also reply to your opponents.
- Various ways to reply, but the two most common are to *Refute* their point as false; or *Admit* their point but claim it doesn’t support their overall case.
Step 8: Provide Criteria

• By “criteria,” we mean a way to resolve the issue. A heuristic for argument analysis & resolution.
Policy Case Approaches

- Two primary approaches:
  - Problem → Solution
    Show a *need* that your policy meets.
  - Comparative Advantages:
    Show how your policy offers a better situation than we have without it.
Contra / Negative Approaches

• Policy is not really Needed.
• Policy does not really provide the advantages or meet the needs claimed.
• Policy would cause disadvantages that would outweigh any good the policy might provide.
Step 9: Recognize the Role of Values

- All policy propositions involve underlying values.
- There are many ethical and value-oriented theories & norms. The challenge is getting on the same page.
- The key is to identify your ethical framework and be ready to defend it.
Value v. Value

1) One value maximizes another agreed-upon value; i.e., one value is a key to another (Economic justice facilitates peace).

2) One value is a prerequisite for the other; i.e., X is a necessary condition for Y.

3) One value is more important than the other, due to magnitude, frequency, or precedent.
Step 10: See Debate as a Means to Truth

• Since the ancient Greeks started to formalize the process of philosophical discussion known as *dialegesthai*, we have understood dialogue & debate as a *cooperative* exercise in seeking the truth.

• Give it your best shot, but be prepared to let your mind be changed!
Legal Analogy

- Both sides in legal disputes must provide full disclosure of the arguments & evidence they will provide. That is because the goal is Truth.
- Similarly, full disclosure should be your goal as well. See your counterparts as collaborators, not “the enemy.”