

# Guide to Public Forum Debate

Public Forum Debate (PFD) is a team event that advocates or rejects a position posed by the monthly resolution topic (announced online at [www.nflonline.org](http://www.nflonline.org)). The clash of ideas must be communicated in a manner persuasive to the non-specialist or “citizen judge”, i.e. a member of the American jury. The debate should:

- ❖ Display solid logic, lucid reasoning, and depth of analysis
- ❖ Utilize evidence without being driven by it
- ❖ Present a clash of ideas by countering/refuting arguments of the opposing team (rebuttal)
- ❖ Communicate ideas with clarity, organization, eloquence, and professional decorum



**The Topic** ~ Topics are worded as **resolutions**, meaning they advocate *solving* a problem by establishing a *position*. Teams must understand the meaning of terminology in a consistent manner so debates have a *clash* of ideas. If the topic were “Resolved: Free trade benefits all nations,” it would be vital to understand the concept of *free trade*. An expert definition from an economics or legal dictionary or encyclopedia would be preferable to a standard dictionary. If the topic, “Resolved: NATO countries should act together on international matters,” the more common terms ‘act’ and ‘together’ could be appropriately defined by a standard dictionary. Given the limited time of a round, debate should not center on obscure claims of minutia.

## Case Development & Evidence



A team must develop both a pro and con case, persuasively supported by evidence and reasoning. Given the short nature of a Public Forum round, cases should center on a *few quality* arguments. A team, however, should research several arguments on both sides of the issue, so it can *adapt* its case to the opposing team’s claims as necessary. Having arguments in direct contradiction with each other will enhance **clash** in rebuttals. Organization of speeches through effective communication and clear outlines is important so both judges and the opposing team can follow each of the arguments and their supporting evidence. Effective persuasion requires credible, unbiased, quality supporting evidence, which may include a mix of facts, statistics, expert quotations, studies, polls; but it may also be real-life examples, anecdotes, analogies, and personal experience. Since topics are based on current events, research should be accessible through periodicals, Web search engines and think tanks. Teams should not overwhelm their case with evidence; rather, they should *select* the *best* evidence to represent their claims.

**The Coin Flip** ~ The round starts with a **coin toss**; the winning team selects **either**:

- ❖ The **side** (pro or con) they will argue
- ❖ The speaker **order** (begin the debate or give the last speech).

The team that loses the toss will then decide their preference from the option not selected by the winner (i.e., *if the winning team decides to speak last, then the losing team may decide which side they will argue*). The debate, therefore may



begin with the con side, arguing against the topic. Teams might consider: Is one side of the topic more acceptable to citizen judges? On which side is the team stronger? On which side of the topic are the opponents stronger? Is the first speaker position critical to “sell” the case by making a good first impression? Is the final focus speech critical for the last word to the judge(s)? Are the opponents so effective in either the first or last speaker position that our team needs to select speaker position rather than side? The first team sits to the judge’s left.

## Speeches and Time Limits

Speaker 1 (Team A, 1st speaker) ..... 4 min.  
Speaker 2 (Team B, 1st speaker) ..... 4 min.

**Crossfire** (between speakers 1 & 2)..... 3 min.

Speaker 3 (Team A, 2nd speaker) ..... 4 min.  
Speaker 4 (Team B, 2nd speaker) ..... 4 min.

**Crossfire** (between speakers 3 & 4)..... 3 min.

Speaker 1 Summary..... 2 min.  
Speaker 2 Summary..... 2 min.

**Grand Crossfire** (all speakers) ..... 3 min.

Speaker 3 Final Focus..... 2 min.  
Speaker 4 Final Focus..... 2 min.

*Each team may use up to two minutes of prep time.*

**First Pro Speech** ~ This speech **constructs** arguments advocating the resolution’s worthiness. The key analysis will be to present major reasons why there is a problem. An underlying concept will always be the risk of change versus the risk of not changing. This speech should have a brief introduction to frame the team’s case for the judge. If a definition is important to understanding the case, it should be presented from the most appropriate source. A few reasons for adopting the topic should be presented with accompanying evidence. Each reason should be an independent reason to vote for the resolution, and should explain why it is pertinent. The speech should conclude with a summary of the arguments covered.

**First Con Speech** ~ This speech **constructs** arguments showing disadvantages of the resolution and why it should not be adopted. If the pro speech has the advantage of a changing future, the con speech has a *track record* of experience (status quo) and why change is ill-advised. The rest of the speech elements will be the same as the pro speech.

**Strategies for the Second Team** ~ If the team feels that the opponent's case is based on a faulty or unfair interpretation of the resolution, they should provide counter definitions and convincingly explain why their perspective is more appropriate. Whichever side speaks second may also choose to drop a reason from the prepared speech and spend time instead refuting claims presented by the other team. This strategy should be employed when one of the arguments *directly clashes* with the other team's or when the team believes one of the opponent's arguments is based on a false definition or assumption.

### Third & Fourth Constructive Speeches

Both of these debaters have the primary burden of refuting the other team's arguments by analyzing and explaining flaws in the opponent's position. The debater should identify the opposition's key arguments and attack their legitimacy by: turning the analysis to the other side; presenting evidence that destroys or reduces the opposing position; presenting alternate causes that are not accounted for by the opposition argument; exposing argument inconsistencies between the speakers or between the opponents and their statements during crossfire. To best accomplish refutation, both members of a team should have a consistent approach and a unified view of what is important and less important. An argument format could be an introduction that links the team's second speech to the first speech, followed by an overview of the issue, which is frequently the opponent's argument, followed by reasons/evidence why the opponent is wrong, followed by what this argument clash now means for your side in the debate. In addition, some time in either of these speeches should be allocated to rebuilding the original case. It is important to have clarity that is seldom attained by an intricate outline. Speeches should conclude with a summary.

**Summary Speeches** ~ These are complicated speeches because each debater has to find a way to explain issues in the light of all that has happened so far – in just two minutes – without speaking too rapidly. New evidence, but not new *arguments* may be presented, except responses (refutation). This means that a limited number of issues can be addressed. For example, perhaps develop one to two issues from the debater's side on the resolution and one from the opponent's side of the resolution. The speech should have a brief overview. On each key argument, try to add a short original quotation, anecdote, or fact. Wrap up each argument by stressing its importance in arriving at a fair decision.



**The Final Focus** ~ This frames, with clarity, why your team has won the debate. Again, no new arguments may be presented, however, new *evidence* may be introduced to support an argument made earlier in the debate. Before the final focus, ask, "If I were judging this

round, what would I be voting on?" Strategies may include:

- ❖ Choose the most important argument you are winning, and summarize the analysis and evidence that make it so important.
- ❖ Turn a major argument from your opponent into the winning analysis and evidence of one of your important arguments; this technique **clinches** two arguments.
- ❖ Answer the *most important* argument you may be losing by summarizing the analysis and evidence that you believe takes out the opponent's argument.
- ❖ Choose an argument that you believe the community judge will most likely vote on.
- ❖ Expose a major inconsistency made by your opponent—two arguments that contradict each other—at least one of which the opponent is focusing on to win the debate.

### Art of Argumentation

The *quantity* of arguments is less important than the *quality* of arguments, just as the quantity of evidence is less important than the quality of evidence. Thus we come to three important components of an argument: **claim**, **evidence**, and **warrant**. A claim is a major argument made on either side of the resolution. On the resolution, "Resolved that NATO countries should have acted together in Iraq," a claim could be that animosities would be reduced because one nation would not bear the brunt of the responsibility for the invasion. To prove this to be true, a debate must provide evidence, proving that the claim is valid. The debater chooses at least one type of evidence that will support the claim even when challenged. In the above example, much credible evidence exists that resistance is high because the United States for the most part acted alone. Perhaps the most crucial component of argumentation is the **warrant**. Warrants *connect* the claim and its support, sometime obviously, sometime subtly. Warrants emerge from the total sum of our experiences and personal observations. Thus it is entirely possible that the debater and the judge have a different set of experiences. The warrant for the claim used in the NATO example should connect the judge to the thesis, perhaps by making anecdotal comments about how everyone is much better satisfied when cooperation exists, whether among people or nations. On the other hand, the opposing team can counter that forcing nations to cooperate with each other when that is not their wish alienates allies and ruins alliances. Turn the evidence against the team and make the logical warrant that such a NATO policy for Iraq would have destroyed NATO, would have kept us operating in Iraq by ourselves, and would have destroyed the unity for future NATO missions. Warrants provide believable reasons why a claim and evidence are true. That is why evidence without analysis can result in an assertion without substance and an argument lost. Arguments and evidence without warrants are seldom persuasive.



**Crossfire** ~ Questioning periods give debate *interactivity* and a change to build *clash*. In crossfire, both debaters have equal access to the floor, but the first question must be asked to the debater who just finished speaking by a debater from the other team. After the initial question and answer, either debater may question or answer. A debater who attempts to dominate or be rude to his opponent will lose points. Good questions are brief and good answers must meet the question. In the first two crossfires, only the corresponding speakers may participate, and they stand next to each other.



**Grand Crossfire** ~ Seated, all debaters interact with one another. The first question is asked to the team that just ended its summary by the other team. After the initial question and answer, any debater may question or answer, and *all should participate*. The same guidelines for rudeness and stalling apply to the grand crossfire. Resist rushing questions or answers, or trying to do too much in crossfire; desperation is not persuasive.



**Prep Time** ~ Each team has two minutes of prep time. For very practical reasons, a team should not use prep time until their summary speech or final focus speech. Being prepared on the arguments is the best

way to avoid using prep time until it is vital to select the key arguments and issues.

**Delivery** ~ Effective delivery is critical to impact the arguments for a citizen judge. Practice delivery in front of ordinary people: teachers, parents, relatives, friends, non-debate classmates. Heed their advice. If they tell you to slow down, slow down; if they tell you to quit repeating yourself, start your sentences with the subject and avoid compound complex sentences; if they tell you to enunciate more clearly, practice with a pencil in your mouth; if they tell you to look up, make sure you remember everything about the person to whom you are talking; if they tell you to speak with variety, practice emphasizing key words, especially action verbs; if they tell you to speak louder, practice with cotton in your ears. In other words, do everything before a debate to cultivate a good delivery.

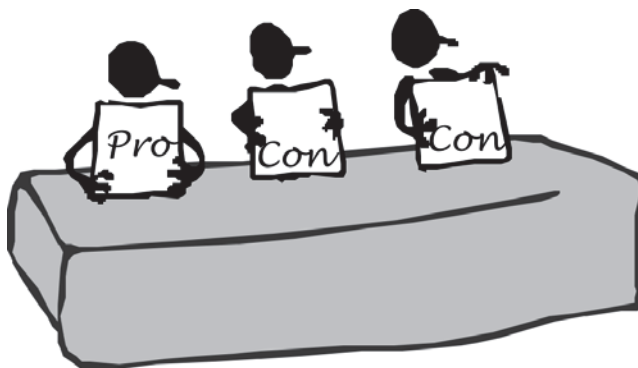
**Working Knowledge** ~ The more a debater knows about a topic, both arguments and evidence, both pro and con, the more one will be able to practice delivery and hence become truly skilled in the communication of arguments, evidence and analysis.

**Evaluation & Judging** ~ The judge is the chairperson of the round (facilitating the coin flip and giving time signals if requested), and may halt any crossfire lacking civility. S/he may not *interact* in the crossfire.

Judges evaluate teams on the quality of the arguments actually made, not on their own personal beliefs, and not on issues they think a particular side *should have covered*. Judges should assess the bearing of each argument on the truth or falsehood of the assigned resolution. The pro should prove that the resolution is true, and the con should prove that the resolution is not true. When deciding the round, judges should ask, “If I had no prior beliefs about this resolution, would the round as a whole have made me more likely to believe the resolution was true or not true?” Teams should strive to provide a straightforward perspective on the resolution; judges should discount unfair, obscure interpretations that only serve to confuse the opposing team. Plans (formalized, comprehensive proposals for implementation), counterplans and kritiks (off-topic arguments) are not allowed. Generalized, practical solutions should support a position of advocacy.

Quality, well-explained arguments should trump a mere quantity thereof. Debaters should use quoted evidence to support their claims, and well-chosen, relevant evidence may strengthen – *but not replace* – arguments.

Clear communication is a major consideration. Judges weigh arguments only to the extent that they are clearly explained, and they will discount arguments that are too fast, too garbled, or too jargon-laden to be understood by an intelligent high school student or a well-informed citizen. A team should not be penalized for failing to understand his or her opponent’s unclear arguments.



In short, Public Forum Debate stresses that speakers must appeal to the widest possible audience through sound reasoning, succinct organization, credible evidence, and clear delivery. Points provide a mechanism for evaluating the relative “quality of debating.”

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