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Defending Free Speech Since 1815

Setting up a Secondary School Debating Society (from scratch!)

This is a basic guide to help you launch an entirely new debating society suitable for secondary school students. This information is entirely based on the experiences of Cambridge students who have participated or launched a debating society in their respective secondary schools. This is advisory and you are free to adapt or change according to what suits your school.

Key things to think about:

1) Who is this society for?

- Secondary schools can have numerous debating societies. They are often separated according to year groups. For example, it is recommended you run separate sessions for Year 7-10 and Year 11-Sixth Formers.
- This is because the content and examples used will need to be bearable and relevant to those specific age ranges. The latter group would have to deal with more difficult motions that will require a wider breadth of knowledge or skill set.
- Also, competitions are run according to age: the *Cambridge International Competition for Young Debaters (ICYD)* is held for students Year 10 and younger. Though you can compete in the *Cambridge Schools Competition* from the age of 13, the recommended participation age is 15-19. Therefore it makes sense to prepare for these competitions separately.
- In reflection of this you may decide to launch two separate debating societies or you may decide to focus on just one group.

2) Organising the sessions

- It is recommended that your debating society/club runs *weekly* sessions, though you may wish to run more.
- These can be run after school or at lunchtimes. Lunchtime clubs are likely to get larger turnouts but after school clubs offer more flexibility with time and the chance to cover more content. You can also mix and match! One Cambridge student said in their secondary school they ran weekly lunchtime sessions but as competitions reached closer they held after school sessions to better prepare.
- The first step is therefore to allocate a time in the week for debating club i.e. Wednesday lunchtime or Thursday after school.
- Secondly, you will need to decide on rooms. It is best to hold the sessions in the same room every week.

3) Lesson Plans

- Using our resources, a single staff member responsible for debating may wish to create lesson plans to deliver to students in a classroom setting.



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- Our Introduction to BP Debating resource offers a breakdown of a British Parliamentary debate include the different strategies and techniques.
- It is recommended that in each debating session you cover *one* aspect of debating. For example, in the first weekly session you may wish to focus on **speaker roles**: what is the role of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, Deputies, Members of Government/Opposition and Whips?
In the second week you may want to focus on **speech structure**: beginning your speech with a remark about the motion then introduction 2-4 points or points of clash (if you are a summary speaker).
In the third week you could focus on **rebuttal**: how do you effectively respond to another speakers arguments?
In the fourth week you could focus on **point of information**: including how to deliver a good one and how to respond. etc.
- The idea is that you spent a third of the session covering theory and then students will apply what they have learned in a debate of their own. Depending on what was covered that week the teacher/mentor judging the debate will judge according to how well the theory for that week is applied.
- You can also spend sessions covering basic public speaking skills such as vocal projection and confidence.
- Once older students (i.e. sixth formers) become confident with the format and theory they can assist in the running of workshops for younger students. Students respond better when they are taught by other students and it is also provides wonderful experience.

**Refer to the Introductory Guide to Debating and The Art of Public Speaking resources.*

4) **Games**

- There are an endless number of warm up games that students can play at the start of debating training sessions. They are a good way to develop key argumentative and debating skills whilst also maintaining enthusiasm when the theory can sometimes become a bit heavy.
- This website has a range of example games that teachers/students may lead at the start of the session: <https://debate.uvm.edu/dcpdf/Training%20Games.pdf>

5) **Showcase debates**

- Some secondary schools run lunchtime debates open to all school students (even those who are not members of the club) who are welcomed to watch as a part of the audience. This may be in a large classroom which has capacity for an audience or a hall.
- Depending on time available during lunch you can adapt the debates



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e.g. have 3v3 debates instead of a BP debate; this is the format used for Cambridge showcase debates. They include an introduction speaker, second speaker and summary speaker. Speeches are 5 minutes. The students are told the motion days in advance and thus produce high quality, entertaining speeches. When the debate is concluded the audience can vote on the side they were convinced by (by raising hands) rather than a judge. These debates are most effective when run by students who set the motion and chair during the debate. Of course, staff supervision is necessary.

- Such debates need to be promoted, through posters which can be put around the school informing students of the debate motion, time and place where the debate will be held.
- This is effective in increasing student turnout and mobilising interest in debating.

6) **Student Leadership**

- Especially for debating clubs for Year 11+ it's important to give the students some authority when it comes to leading sessions and setting motions.
- Some schools appoint a Debating President who is responsible for working with the staff member responsible for debating in organising sessions, setting motions and promoting the society across the school.
- Promotion is key! Going into assemblies, announcements in form time or notice boards are excellent ways to spread the word.

7) **Competitions**

- Enter your school into competitions as soon as possible – such as ICYD and Cambridge Schools! This will give students something to work towards and will encourage interest and excitement.
- Competition participation makes students better debaters. The feedback given at major competitions is of exceedingly high quality and students often learn from other schools.
- They are also a great way to make new friends and build connections with other schools.
- More information about competitions can be found on the website: <https://cambridgedebating.com>
- There are numerous other national schools competitions which can be entered including Oxford Schools, Durham Schools, Kings College London, UCL, Imperial etc. The English Speaking Union also runs many competitions.



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8) Motions

- The motion is the most important element of the debate.
- In order to optimise student engagement it is best to work on a range of different motion types and styles. Comedy or novelty motions are very popular amongst students, especially during showcase debates.
- Students should also be encouraged to decide on their own motions for some weeks, especially for showcase debates.
- For BP style debates it is best that the staff member sets these (due to the strict 15 minute preparation time).

*See the motion list resource for motion examples.

In becoming familiar with BP debating it's a good idea to make use of all the fantastic resources on YouTube which provide an endless number of exemplar debates and tips. They are fun to watch and are very high quality! Students are encouraged to watch these debates to see what the standard at University competitions are like. It is important to note that this is the standard at *university competitions*; secondary students are not expected to debate at this level but the format and style is the same.

This channel provides excellent competition support and tips from world champion debaters.

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC1Cdkqn2WrTxLaLfmo_YxUA?fbclid=IwAR3g7ofwCqpDS5D6xnFU2GsOoYDOLjSSlaF4UkTRkNZzRPRQ9UPOTRIjY7c

Exemplar videos:

This House Believes that the world's poor would be justified in pursuing complete Marxist revolution

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ys0Sgicnjz4&fbclid=IwAR1Fh1VQrO9uyilMh7fIKH3qsEIJJtsllQL-l6zGwW116PTn2VcSb3f1DI>

This House Supports Affirmative Action for Male Educators

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XL0zJA7g358>

This House would ban all procedures to alter one's racial appearance

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZmwpvTerxM>

This House believes that the Media Should Show the Full Horrors of War

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6YgDUqHuLgM>

This House would apportion votes according to performance on a current affairs test.



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http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vzj_su8st8l&feature=youtu.be

This House opposes Organised Religion

<http://www.ustream.tv/recorded/11797401>

This House believes that prominent civil society activists should choose not to run for elected office.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KOItg6aNR6E>

This House would only imprison individuals that pose a direct and continuing threat to society.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mkOIGCSmdZo>

This House supports aggressive academic streaming in schools.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sn5BMbr7ivs>

This House would Ban all Forms of Consumer Advertising

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKBs_M80-4Q&feature=youtu.be

This House believes that Universities should never ban research or teaching that may have sexist or racist implications.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oY3KjVpcp-E>

This House Believes That countries with booming populations should issue each individual a single tradable permit to have a child.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arLAW4htmVU>

This House would restrict media coverage of school shootings.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpoYMyjlosA>

This house would introduce a 100% inheritance tax.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G91wCg7d7P4>

If there are any further queries or if you require any clarification on anything mentioned in this brief guide please email debating@cus.org.