



Public Forum Debate: An Overview

Public Forum Debate (PFD) is a team event that advocates or rejects a position posed by the monthly resolution topic (announced online at www.wdca.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

FORMAT & TIME LIMITS ~ 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. **The first team should sit to the judge's left.**

- 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 Summary2 min.
- Speaker 2 Summary2 min.
- Grand Crossfire** (all speakers)3 min.
- Speaker 3 Final Focus1 min.
- Speaker 4 Final Focus1 min.

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

During "**crossfire**," the two previous speakers stand, asking and answering questions in a polite, but argumentative exchange. Unlike traditional cross-examination, both speakers may question each other, however, the first question of the crossfire period is asked to the speaker who just finished.

Summary speeches are rebuttals that extend earlier arguments made or answer opposing refutations, and may incorporate new evidence, but not new arguments.

In the **grand crossfire**, all four debaters may remain seated, asking and answering questions. The first question is asked by the team that had the first summary to the team which had the last summary. After that, any debater may question or answer.

The **final focus** is a compelling restatement of why the judge should vote pro or con. Given the short period, the team must decide what arguments weigh most importantly on the decision. No new arguments are accepted in the final focus speeches.

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. Team points provide a mechanism for evaluating the relative "quality of debating" by each side.