

Heckling

1. When to Heckle

A good heckle is a witty or pointed comment which either relieves the seriousness of the debate or underlines a weakness of fact or reasoning in the opposing case. Never heckle unless the comment you make achieves one of these purposes.

A heckle must be short and it should usually be funny. It is not easy to give examples - a witty heckle depends greatly upon the context. What is funny in one debate is frequently not in another.

Heckling must be infrequent, or else the heckler seems vicious or vindictive. As a rule of thumb, there should be fewer than ten heckles in a debate. Unless the previous heckles have brought the house down, don't be the tenth heckler.

2. How to Handle Heckling

The most effective way to deal with heckling is to prevent it. The heckler depends on a pause in your remarks to get his comments in; if you don't pause, he can't comment. He

also depends upon an appropriate place to interrupt. If the debate is very serious, any interruption may seem inapt. Therefore, if the House starts to get out of hand, speed up your speech slightly, raise your voice a little, and become more serious and grave. Don't give opponents a chance to heckle you.

Unless you have a response to a heckle which is certain to be immensely more humorous than the heckle itself, ignore it: a heckle is more likely to fall flat if it is ignored. If you can respond in kind, however ("Next week I'll teach my friend to read" - "That gives you seven days to learn!"), do so. If you are going to respond, pause until the laughter has died down so that your response will be heard. Forestall a reply from the heckler by moving on briskly with your speech after the second laughter has started to die down.

If the heckle has made a serious point, and if you have time to deal with it, respond immediately, if doing so does not unduly interrupt the point you were making at the time of the heckle. If heckling is excessive, the Speaker should intervene. A debater should not solicit the Speaker's assistance, however.