

POINTS OF INFORMATION

Points of information were borrowed from British debating. However, in a couple of respects they have taken on a life of their own in the World Championships, and have to be treated as a phenomenon new to British and non-British judges alike.

A point of information is offered in the course of a speech by a member of the opposing team. The speaker may either accept the point or decline it. If accepted, the opponent may make a short point or ask a short question that deals with some issue in the debate (preferably one just made by the speaker). It is, if you like, a formal interjection.

5.1 DEBATING IS MORE THAN A SPEECH

Points of information bring about a major change in the role of speakers in a debate. In this style each speaker must take part in the debate from beginning to end, not just during their own speech. A first speaker for the government continues to play an active role in the debate even when the third speaker for the opposition is speaking. Equally, the third speaker for the opposition must play an active role in the debate when the first speaker for the government is speaking.

The speakers play this role by offering points of information. Even if the points are not accepted, they must still demonstrate that they are involved in the debate by at least offering. A speaker who takes no part in the debate other than by making a speech should lose marks for content and strategy - content for failing to take advantage of opportunities, strategy for failing to understand the role of a speaker under this style.

Equally, speakers must ensure that they accept at least some points of information during their speech. In an 8 minute speech, taking at least 2 would be expected (depending, of course, on how many are offered). A speaker who fails to accept any points of information must lose marks for content (failing to allow the other side to make points, thus reducing the amount of direct clash between the two teams) and particularly strategy (for not understanding the role of the speakers in this style - or, to put it another way, for cowardice'). Of course, a speaker who takes too many will almost certainly lose control of the speech and thus lose

marks for style and probably also for strategy (poor speech structure) and content as well.

5.2 The etiquette of points of information

A point of information is offered by standing and saying "point of information" or something similar. The speaker on the floor is not obliged to accept every point. She or he may -

- (i) ask the interrupter to sit down
- (ii) finish the sentence and then accept the point, or
- (iii) accept the point then and there.

More than one member of the opposing team may rise simultaneously. The speaker on the floor may decline all or some, and may choose which one to take. The others then sit down.

Opposing speakers must sometimes tread a fine line between the legitimate offering of points of information on the one hand, and barracking on the other. The fact that points must be offered makes the style more aggressive and more prone to interruptions. However, continuous offering by more than one member of a team really amounts to excessive interruption and is barracking. This should incur penalties in style for the team members involved.

As a rough guide, in one debate in the 1994 Australian Schools Championships one team offered no less than 63 points of information in the 3 speeches of the opposing team. This was around 4 per minute, at times from all 3 members of the team. There could not be much doubt that this was barracking.

It is impossible to put a figure on how many should be offered, because national practices vary somewhat. In some places no speaker would offer more than 3 points of information to an opposing speaker during her or his speech (or a team total of 9 offered to that speaker). In other places the figure would be somewhat higher, especially if the debate is conducted with some aggression and passion. But at some point it crosses the line and ceases to be legitimate. Hopefully, adjudicators will find this a problem only in rare cases.

The point of information may be in the form of a question to the person making a speech, or it may be a remark addressed through the person chairing the debate. Some teams tend to use the

latter format, while most teams tend to ask a question. Let it be clear that either format is perfectly acceptable.

The point of information must be brief. 10 to 15 seconds is the norm, and over that the interrupter should be told to sit down by the speaker. As well, when the person making the speech understands the point, she or he can tell the interrupter to sit down - the speaker does not have to let the point get right through to the end in all cases. Always remember that the speaker who is making the speech has complete control of points of information - when to accept them, whether to accept them, and how long they should go on for.

Which, of course, puts a premium on clear simple points. In one debate the interrupter began by saying "I may be particularly dense and paused, whereupon the speaker said "Yes you are" and continued with his speech. This was a waste of a good opportunity, all because the interrupter chose to indulge in pompous oratory rather than a crisp clear point.

5.3 Marking points of information

It is relatively easy to mark the *responses* to points of information, because each response is incorporated into the speech, and that is where it gets marked.

The problems come in marking the *offering* of points of information, because speakers will offer points other than during their own speech. at a time when the judge is making notes about another speaker altogether.

To begin with there is a practical problem. Judges must have some system of recording points of information from the beginning of the debate even for speakers who will not speak until the end of the debate. In other words, during the first speaker for the government a judge must be able to record something about the offering of points by the third speaker of the opposition. even though that speaker will not make a speech for nearly an hour.

A simple solution has been devised in Australia by Annette Whiley. Each judge has a separate sheet of paper. divided into 6 boxes (one line down the middle, three across the page). Each

box represents the offering of points by a speaker. During the first speaker for the government, the three boxes on the right hand side will be used to record the offering of points by the three opposition speakers. A simple tallymark shows one was offered. If one was accepted, a brief note about it can be included in the box. At the end of the debate this allows the judge to see what sort of contribution was being made by each speaker in offering points of information.

At the 1994 National Schools Championships in Australia we experimented with a separate category worth 5 marks for the offering of points of information. On the whole I don't think this worked very well. So we seem to be back with marking the offering of points within each speaker's speech marks.

This should not be a problem except in an unusual situation where a speaker does a poor speech but offers superb points of information (or vice versa). In that case the mark will not reflect the speech alone, because points of information forced the speech mark up (or down, as the case may be).

A summary of how to mark points of information is as follows

1. The primary component of the speaker's marks is the speaker's speech
2. That mark can increase by up to a couple of marks if the speaker offered superb points of information during the rest of the debate
3. That mark can decrease by up to a couple of marks if the speaker -
 - (i) offered no points of information (or almost none) during the rest of the debate
 - (ii) offered bad points of information during the rest of the debate
 - (iii) failed to accept points of information during her or his own speech.

Note that just because the response to a point of information was good, it doesn't mean that the point was not a good one. Don't judge the worth of the point on the response. After all, if a motion is strongly arguable on both sides, then the major points on each side should have good counter-arguments.

An excerpt from materials on Worlds Style Debate prepared by Christopher Erskine (Australia) with Rosemary Dixon and Andrew Stockley (New Zealand), Elizabeth Virgo (Bermuda) and David Pritchard (Wales) © 1996