

Excerpted from

Some Elements Of Debate

Persuasion

A. Generally

Everyone has personal likes and dislikes. Your aim in a debate is to persuade an audience and this requires that you ask yourself “What approach will be most persuasive *for this audience?*” This entails two questions: “Which of the available arguments are most persuasive?” and “What is the most persuasive way to present those arguments?” To take an obvious example, if you are complaining of waste in the civil service, using the example of your own teachers (“who work only five hours a day, eight months of the year”) is not going to persuade many teachers in the audience and will probably alienate them. They do not consider themselves civil servants and they do not think (rightly or wrongly) that they work only five hours a day, eight months a year. The same teachers might be more easily convinced by an argument that complains that the Ministry of Education has one bureaucrat for every four teachers - and your suggestion that axing the bureaucrats and adding more teachers would provide better quality education, save dollars and eliminate waste.

You try to convince the opposition as well as the audience - and the arguments that the opposition finds most persuasive they will find most difficult to rebut. In attacking the quality of education today, don't point to them as examples of the bad system (they won't believe that) - rather flatter them and point out that they are exceptions and ask how many of the students at their school have the ability they have demonstrated. This is good manners; it is also good debate. Similarly, if you can paint yourself and your partner(s) as examples of where the system has failed - that accords with what the opposition wants to believe anyway.

B. Language

One key ingredient in a persuasive speech is the language used. The English language is rich with synonyms. Choose the one that most advances your case. If you are defending government payments to the public, speak of “social security” and “family support programmes” - not “welfare” and “unemployment insurance”. Your team's plan is a “case”, the opposition's a “theory” or a “scheme”. You live in a “mixed economy”; they are products of the “welfare state”.

Similarly, in analysing the resolution and defining it, be conscious of the interpretation you can use which will be the most persuasive to the opposition.

C. Your Style and Theirs

Few debaters give much attention to the combination the judges see: the combined effect of the two (or three) affirmative speakers and the combined effect of the two (or three) negative speakers. It is elemental that your argument and your partner's (or partners') interlock, not overlap. But his (her or their) style(s) should do so also. If you are the voice of reason, let him (or her or them) be the voice(s) of passion, morality, or idealism.

“Have people on your team that you can work with but who are different from you in the way they argue, talk, or reason. Remember, debating is a team effort. If the members of one team all talk, look, and reason alike, you might as well have one person giving all the speeches and let the rest of the team sit in the audience to watch. If you are the slow, patient, methodical type who writes out every word of a fine, closely reasoned argument, have a partner who never uses notes and rips into issues with concentrated, aimed fire. If you have a flashy wit that can shred an enemy proposition down to the essential absurdity it is, have a tall, dry companion who can stand aloof from petty bickerings and pronounce statements with an Olympian air of disdain and discernment.

Remember that if Oliver and Hardy had both been fat or both been thin, no one would ever have paid five cents to watch their movies.”

McKenzie, *Debating Tips*, page 1

It is correspondingly important to divide the points your team will cover logically and in a way that furthers your strategy. Those points which are to be factually presented should be given to someone who excels at this, while those which call for examples should be given to someone who tells good stories.

But this obvious injunction applies as well to the *presentation* of your case. If the opposition is flamboyant, excited or loud, try to be restrained, calm and quiet. If they are calm, bring life to the debate. Help the audience to see differences between you and the opposition in style as well as in content.

Similarly, do not overlook the advantages of your own organization. If your team has three arguments, and the opposition has replied to each, deal with your points when re-establishing them in *your* order of preference. Use your organization and force the opposition to use yours too. Keep the debate organized on your terms.

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