

# The Judge is ALWAYS Right.

Debate is a unique activity. It has no absolute way to tell who wins and who loses. In soccer, the team with the most goals wins. In track, the fastest competitor wins. In gymnastics, the performers complete a required set of moves. Compared to these activities, debate is completely unpredictable and arbitrary. Add to this the fact that judges might not be trained, they are not necessarily former competitors, and they need no prior experience to render a decision.

## “I should have won that round”

The nature of judges in debate leads to many complaints from parents and students alike. As coaches, we may often hear complaints that a round was “obviously” won by the X team, but the judge was too inexperienced to see it. Or perhaps the fault lies in the fact that the judge “clearly” did not understand the arguments well enough. Sometimes the claim is that the judge is biased. Such complaints are natural and occur at almost every debate tournament at some point or another. Many well-meaning students (and adults) propose that judges should be required to take a class before judging. Others suggest that a certification process should be administered. Unfortunately, this attitude stems from a misunderstanding of the nature of speech and debate.

## Debate is Communication

Debate is communication, and as such, is completely arbitrary. Even those who dedicate their lives to the study of

communication will often disagree on the criteria for a good speech or argument. Communication differs from culture to culture, person to person. Should one use more evidence or more logic? Speak quickly or slowly? Use humor or avoid it at all costs? Neither one nor the other is right or wrong, but every judge will have their own preference. Thus, speech and debate is an activity (one might say the only activity) which compels participants to cater to their audience. In speech and debate, winning is not about having the perfectly structured argument or the textbook execution of a Topicality argument. Instead, it is about being able to effectively communicate your ideas to your audience.

An economist who wishes to educate his friends about the business cycle does well to avoid technical terms and use everyday analogies instead. His goal is not to present the perfect explanation -- his goal is to provide information that is understandable and persuasive for his immediate audience. The same principle applies to a campaigning politician. The politician does not win votes by focusing on himself. Rather, he gains the respect and support of voters by addressing issues that the voters find relevant -- and addressing them in such a way that the voters are convinced of his ability to provide excellent governance.

It is through this lens that we gain a new perspective on judges and the responsibilities of competitors. The judge is always right, because the judge is evaluating the information as it was presented to him/her. It is the competitors' responsibility to communicate effectively to the judge--to present arguments that are both understandable and convincing. When debaters lose a round, they should not blame the judge, but rather their inability to reach that judge. If the judge does not understand an argument, the debaters are at fault for not explaining it well enough. If the

debaters win, it is because they connected with the judge on a level that he/she could understand and agree with.

## Effectively Reaching Your Audience

Speech and debate trains us to adapt to our audience. If our judge is a former debater, we can feel free to use words like “Topicality”, “Inherency”, and “Fiat Power”. If, however, our judge is a member of the community or a new parent, we should adjust our style to avoid technical debate jargon. Similarly, we may think of a fantastic argument but spend too little time explaining it -- or perhaps we aren't speaking clearly or loudly enough for the judge to catch every detail. In these situations, is it any wonder that our students have “won” in their minds but have not won the judges ballot?

The best way for students to learn how to communicate to their audience is by reading their ballots. A judge's ballot will reveal a lot about why they decided the way they did. Students can analyze these ballots and search them for ideas on how to improve their speaking and/or argumentation methods.

Of course, we often cannot tell much about our judge's background or knowledge when the debate round starts. How do we communicate effectively to them when we don't know their preferences? The best option is to always assume (unless you know for certain) that your judge has no prior debate experience or knowledge. As the round progresses, students can watch the judge and learn from their non-verbal communication: are they taking a lot of notes or none at all? Do they look confused, or are they nodding their head at each argument? These are important factors to consider! Debaters should understand that the judge is always -- with no exception -- the most important person in the round.

## Preparation for the Future

The greatest benefit to all of this is how it will train our students for the future. When our students graduate, they will be faced with a plethora of circumstances where they will need to be effective communicators. From their first interview, to sales, to business meetings, they will need the ability to focus on reaching their audience: their future employer, client, or co-workers. In each of those cases, the speaker is not the center of attention -- the audience is, and the speaker is to concentrate his or her efforts on communicating the most effectively to the audience. Teaching, being in the courtroom, debating evolution with your biology teacher, witnessing to a stranger or friend -- each and every one of these scenarios requires an ability to adapt to the audience. We will never be speaking to an audience that is full of perfect listeners or is unbiased. We have to constantly communicate to people from all walks of life, beliefs, and persuasions. Focusing our efforts on improving our own skills -- rather than demanding that someone else recognize them -- is the first key to preparing ourselves and our students for the future. Only then will we be successful.