



BRITISH PARLIAMENTARY DEBATING

(FOR BEGINNERS)

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Table of Contents

What is British Parliamentary debating?	3
What do I get out of this?.....	3
How does it work?	4
How do I win?	7
Opening Government.....	8
Opening Opposition	9
Closing Government and Closing Opposition	10
Analysis	11
Comparatives.....	13
Structuring a Speech through Analysis.....	14
Rebuttal	15
Structuring Rebuttal	16
Framing.....	16
Prep Time	17
How do I judge a debate?	19
What if they say things I know are wrong?	21
How do I know if they've proven something?.....	22
What do motions looks like?	23
Why does it work this way?.....	25
Why such a short prep time?.....	25
Why are there no points for style?	26
Why does nobody use facts?	26

What is British Parliamentary debating?

British Parliamentary debating is a game/hobby/sport (delete as appropriate) that asks four teams of two people to argue about a topic which they have had fifteen minutes to prepare for, in front of one or more judges who will decide who has won.

Fundamentally, the difference between BP and many other kinds of debating is in the kinds of speeches given. When you think of debates, you might think of dramatic speeches given in illustrious chambers, filled with high-minded rhetoric and formality. There *is* some of that in BP, but at the core of the game is the idea that the team that wins is the one that presents the best logical analysis as to why the motion (the topic being debated) should be supported or defeated. This means that whilst there's a lot of room for style and flair and rhetoric, that ultimately the importance of saying pretty words is secondary (or should be secondary) to your ability to make coherent, detailed, deep and nuanced arguments for a particular position.

Listening to your first few BP speeches you might think, as I did, that it seems a deeply odd exercise. People are talking incredibly quickly about a topic that you're barely familiar with, often ending every sentence with the word "right?" in a manner that's incredibly jarring, and everyone is nodding as though they understand what's going on. Not only that, but you're then told that they had (and you will have) only fifteen minutes to prepare speeches of five to seven minutes in length. How can you ever be good at this? It honestly seems like an insurmountable task. The answer is that you won't be – not immediately. Getting good at debating takes an extraordinary amount of time, practice, and concerted effort. Most of all it takes humility: the ability to take blunt criticism on board and reform the way you speak and listen and write and argue in order to improve. You will lose. A lot. In fact, you'll probably never win debates more often than not – statistically, most people don't. But if you stick at it, and you're willing to put the work in, no matter who you are you can become a talented and skilful debater whom others are scared to come up against.

The first step on that road is to understand how BP works: the rules of the game, the metrics on which it's judged, and how analysis works. Inculcating that understanding is the purpose of this guide.

[What do I get out of this?](#)

Debating isn't a game with a lot of money attached to it. You won't get many prizes for winning, and most of your friends will probably think you're a bit weird for doing it (although they might also think you must be quite clever, which is also not necessarily true of debaters). There's a lot of work to put in to get good, and you'll spend a lot of time wondering why you bother at all. There will be tournaments where you spend long nights sleeping in bad accommodation after an even longer day of arguing against strangers in anonymous seminar rooms, being judged by people you don't know and given calls you're not happy with before eating food that's as far from nutritionally complete as can be before you're literally consuming pebbles.

But you can get a huge amount out of it. A lot of people start because they're scared of public speaking and they want to get better at it. It can help with that. There's nothing quite like it for reducing your anxieties about being put on the spot in front of a crowd. The ability to analyse arguments, probe them for weak points, point out inconsistencies, and string together logical analysis very quickly is one that will serve you well in nearly any kind of life or career. You'll likely become more confident, more articulate, and more knowledgeable about the world in general. You'll also become part of a community full of people who are wonderful, clever, occasionally infuriating, but inquisitive and well-intentioned and usually a lot of fun (especially if you ever go to Ireland). If you get good enough, you can end up on funded trips to far-flung places to speak and judge people from all around the world, and it can even become a source of income if you get to the point where you think you want to teach others how to debate.

Fundamentally, debating is a hobby that can enrich your life in all kinds of ways. You don't have to do it – and if you do it, you don't have to do it seriously – but if you do, you'll more than likely see the benefits.

How does it work?

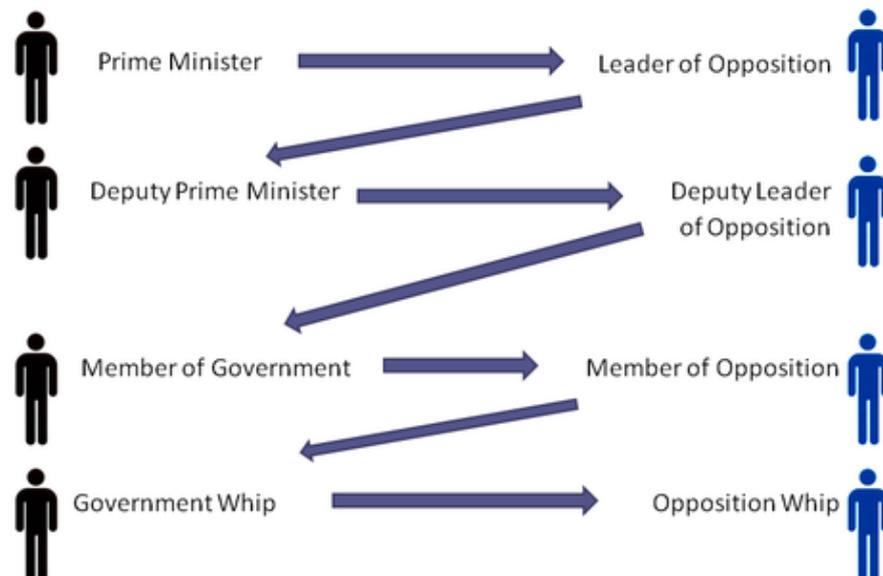
BP derives a lot of its rules and formalisms from the traditions of the British Parliament (quelle surprise). The basics are these:

1. You have a motion to be debated, in the format "This House ...", e.g. "This House would ban zoos" or "This House believes that university education should be free". This will often be abbreviated as "THW" or "THBT".

- a. The motion can be on anything, from law and justice, to politics, to ethics or economics or art. There are no limits on what can be set, but some topics will come up more often than others.
2. There are two sides: Proposition (or Government) and Opposition. The Proposition side speaks in support of the motion, arguing that it *should* be passed; the Opposition team (as you would expect) speaks against the motion, arguing that it *should not* be passed.
 - a. There is not one, but two teams on each side. You have Opening Government, Opening Opposition, Closing Government, and Closing Opposition.
 - b. Each team has two speakers.
3. The team that wins is the one that presents the most compelling argument for their side: that the motion should either be passed or defeated.
4. All teams are randomly assigned their positions prior to the debate, and they have fifteen minutes once the motion is revealed to prepare their cases. This means that you may well end up defending something you don't believe in or have very little idea about – this is normal.
 - a. No digital devices are allowed in preparation (except dictionaries for speakers who do not have English as their first language), and access to the internet is prohibited. Paper resources (colloquially known as “casefiles”) are allowed.
 - b. You prep with your *partner*, not with all of the other speakers on your side. You have to beat the other team on your side of the bench too. From your perspective, they are just as much an opponent as anyone else in the room.
5. Each speaker has either five or seven minutes to speak, depending on the format of the debate. When they stand to speak, everyone in the room will either clap or bang the table (don't worry, you'll get used to it).
 - a. The first and last minutes of their speech are called “protected time”. During this time, no Points of Information (POIs) can be offered. Between these times, speakers from other teams can stand to offer POIs. These are short questions or statements of no more than 15 seconds that challenge the speaker.
 - b. Speakers do not have to take any POIs, but are strongly advised to take at least one in their speech. A lot of the point of BP is in “engagement” – trying to make your material “clash” with the other teams’ – and taking and dealing with POIs demonstrates this.

6. Speeches alternate between sides, like this:

Roles of Speakers



7. As you can see, each speaker has a name: the first speaker in Opening Government (OG) is called the Prime Minister (PM); the second speaker is the Deputy Prime Minister (DPM). In Opening Opposition (OO), the first speaker is the Leader of Opposition (LO); the second speaker is the Deputy Leader of Opposition (DLO). In Closing Government, the first speaker is the Member of Government (MG) and second speaker is the Government Whip (GW). In Closing Opposition you have the Member of Opposition (MO) and Opposition Whip (OW).
8. The debate has one or more judges. These are people who are also debaters, who have the job of listening to the entire debate and deciding who has won, who has come second, who was third, and who came fourth (last).
 - a. The judges usually have fifteen minutes once the debate is finished to come to a decision.
 - b. They decide the positions of the teams by ranking them against each other, bringing each team's material into interaction with other teams' and deciding whose was stronger in each instance. This means they weigh up OG's material against OO, CG and CO.
 - c. In addition, they also assign each speaker within a team a "speaker score", known as "speaks". These range from 50-100, and are based on a scale you can find here:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0Bxt4aS5nKC9iSkJIY196N29hYXM/view>

9. One judge (usually the most senior) is designated as the “Chair”. They have the job of chairing the debate, introducing each speaker and keeping order if necessary. They also direct discussion in the adjudication, and have casting vote if a vote is required between two teams and there is a tie on the panel. Once the result (known as the “call”) is decided, the chair will tell the teams (who are let back into the room) the call, and give a comparative justification for the call that was agreed on.
10. **These next two points are about competitions, and so they might not make sense until you’ve attended (or are about to attend) one.**

In tournaments with more than one round, teams will rotate through different positions, usually ending up with OG, OO, CG and CO once each (and one extra in a 5 round tournament). After the first round, teams are “power-paired” – teams which won the first room will be paired with other teams who also won their room, teams which came second will be paired with other seconds, and so on. This applies throughout the tournament until the end of the last of the “in-rounds” (the rounds where all teams compete).

- a. Most rounds are done with what’s called “Open Adjudication”. This is where teams are called back into the room after the judges have deliberated and informed of the call. However, the last one or two rounds at a standard tournament (and the last 3 at major international tournaments) are often “Closed Adjudication”, where teams are not informed of the result until after the break (see below). This is often done in the interests of time, but it’s also supposed to build excitement and suspense.
11. After the in-rounds, there’s the “Break”. This is a point where the top-ranked teams in the tournament will “break” to the “out-rounds”. Usually this will be either a Grand Final (4 teams only), Semi-Finals (8 teams), or Quarter-Finals (16 teams). In the latter two cases, two teams from each of the rooms will advance to the next out-round. In the case of Grand Finals, only one team can win.

How do I win?

Now that you know the absolute basics of a BP debating tournament, you're ready to learn how to argue and how to win.

At its most simple, winning a BP debate involves giving **the most persuasive case for your side of the motion**. That might mean, on proposition, showing the judges that there are significant beneficial consequences of passing the motion, or that there is some kind of moral reason why it *must* be passed. On opposition, it might mean showing that passing the motion is illegitimate, or that there would be negative consequences that accrue from it. Given that all motions are supposed to be both balanced (there are equally strong arguments on both sides) and deep (there are a large number of potential arguments on each side), this should be equally possible no matter the position you find yourself in.

In reality, it's obviously not quite as simple as just standing up and listing some good or bad consequences that might accrue from the motion being passed or defeated. In part this is because other teams will be trying to do the same thing (and you'll need to "rebut" them). However, there is an additional complication brought by the fact that each debate has four teams, and you need to beat *all* of them. This means that each team has a slightly different job.

Opening Government

OG is the position that every new debater dreads receiving, because you have only 15 minutes before one of your team has to stand up and give a speech. There are a number of reasons why OG actually isn't "that bad", and indeed might be a better position to occupy than other places on the table, but for now we'll just deal with the main roles OG has to fulfil.

In OG, you have the ability (and indeed the duty) to **define the terms of the motion**. That means that, for example, if you're defending "THW ban zoos", that you can say that you are talking specifically about parks that have as one of their primary roles being a tourist attraction and public engagement, and that you are not talking about, say, wildlife sanctuaries or nature reserves.

In addition, you often have a lot of latitude in giving a **mechanism** by which you will do the policy. That might mean saying "we will shut down all existing zoos, moving all of their animals to wildlife reserves that are not open to the public. We will prohibit the opening of new zoos and will punish with fines or imprisonment any attempts to do so." Different motions can call for much

more complicated mechanisms – say, for example, if you’re defending an intervention in a foreign country – but the basic premise remains the same.

Ideally you should give a mechanism and definition which is **not debate breaking** – that means that you should set something up which creates a debate, rather than something that makes the debate obviously one-sided. (If you *do* create a debate which is so narrow as to be almost impossible to oppose, you’ve done a “squirrel”, and will likely be penalised by the judges for this).

Opening Opposition

This position on the table has the duty to directly respond to the claims made by OG. That means that you have to engage not just with your idea of what the motion *might* be, but specifically with the case that is presented by the OG team. If they give a definition or mechanism that you didn’t expect but which is reasonable, then you’re going to have to live with it.

What you *can* do in OO is to give some idea of what you would do *instead* of the motion. That might mean defending the status quo (which you should give a characterisation of – what does it look like?) or it might mean defending some plausible alternative to the motion (which has to be mutually exclusive with actually *doing* the motion). So for example, if the motion is “THW ban private schools”, you could defend not banning them, but removing the charitable status of private schools that do not contribute significantly to other less advantaged schools. This allows you to not have to take on *all* of the bad things about the world as it stands (because motions are usually set with a problem in mind that they want to resolve), but to still have a good debate and take on a defensible position.

If you think that the definition given by the Prime Minister is unfair to the point of not being debatable, you should challenge it. The first way to do this is to offer a Point of Clarification (POC) after the first minute of the PM speech in which you attempt to point this out and propose an alternative. The second way is to explain why, in the LO speech, the PM’s definition or mechanism is unreasonable (or non-existent) and then suggest an alternative (with a reason as to why that’s a plausible or reasonable alternative) which you will then argue with. This “definitional challenge” should be used incredibly sparingly, because it will make the debate quite messy and the judges will not thank you for it if it wasn’t necessary.

Closing Government and Closing Opposition

This is where BP gets a little tricky. It's fairly intuitive that the Opening Government and Opposition teams would get to define the motion and set out arguments for and against passing it. Where BP differs from other debating formats is in bringing in two extra teams, known as the "back half".

The job of CG and CO is to "**extend**". That means that you have to bring in a new substantive contribution to the debate that is unique to your team. This could be in the form of new constructive material, a reframing of the debate, or rebuttal. What's important is that it has to be distinct from the arguments that have already been made in opening half. That doesn't mean that you can't use the framework they've set up, or that if they've mentioned something in passing that you're prohibited from extending on it and deepening the analysis. What it does mean is that you have to be careful to show why your ideas are not derivatives of those we heard half an hour ago, and *also* to show why those ideas are the most important things in the debate. This is why the MG and MO speakers are often known as the "extension" speakers.

Extensions are often confusing as a concept to new debaters, so let's try and clarify by example. Say you're CO on the motion "This House would ban zoos". OO has talked a lot about the value of zoos as an educational resource, as well as the way that they can be helpful in keeping endangered species alive and in conditions where they're able to reproduce. In extension, you might then talk about the economic benefits of zoos in terms of allowing people to have a direct link with the natural world which gives them some emotional investment in the creatures that they're told are at risk, making them more amenable to donating money to conservation organisations. This could then be impacted into a case that talks about the ways in which this money can be used to carry out the mission of conservation, and why without that money (which would be lost when zoos were banned) we would be less capable of caring for the planet as a whole. This is related to, but distinct from, the material brought in opening half, and would constitute an extension.

The second speaker in each closing/back half team is called the "**whip**" or "**sum**" speaker. They, again, have a special job. They are the only speakers in the debate who cannot bring in new material: that means that if they come up with new lines of analysis which they say in their speech, the judges should not credit them. Instead, their job is to "sum" the debate. This is a little like giving

an adjudication of what happened in the debate, but it will be from the perspective of their side, and specifically the bottom half team of their side. That means it's an incredibly *biased* adjudication: you want to emphasise the contributions made by your partner, and show why they beat everything else said in the debate. You can obviously bring your ideas into clash with those of the teams across the table from you – and we'll talk about how to do that when we cover Rebuttal later – but it also means you have to show why your contributions are distinct from and more important than those given by your own opening team. This is a tricky art to master, and good whip speakers are highly appreciated for the job that they do (though that's not to say that extension speakers are seen as inferior – it's just that the function they perform is a little different).

To go back to our example of CO in “THW ban zoos” above, we can see how a whip speech might work here. If the Proposition teams talked a lot about animal rights and welfare, and the way that zoos keep animals unnecessarily caged up in a way that is unnatural and harmful, then you can bring the extension from your team into clash with that material by showing that it's legitimate for a few of these animals to suffer (to the extent that they do suffer, which you can contest) if it means that you can conserve entire species elsewhere. Similarly, you can then show how your material is the most important in the debate by arguing that even if OO's analysis about the conservational value of zoos themselves were to be defeated, the economic benefits to conservationists worldwide still stand. That allows you to show effectively why your material withstood the tests thrown at it by the other teams in the debate, and hence why you should win over each of them.

Analysis

With the different roles of each of the teams out of the way, it's time to get into the meat of what you'll be trying to do in your speeches. One of the most frustrating pieces of feedback you'll get from judges in BP will be “this needed more analysis” or “you needed to analyse this better”. The question a new debater will obviously have in their head is “what on earth do they mean?”, which they'll likely be thinking whilst nodding knowingly and attempting to convince the judge they have some clue what they're talking about. Decoding this cryptic feedback is important to being able to improve, so we'll go through what it means.

You've likely heard of the PEE system from your time in school. The basic premise is that any good argument has three components. There's a point – what you're trying to get across. Then there's an explanation – why is that point true? And finally there's an example, or evidence – can you show an instance in which it has been true?¹

This is the basic structure of an argument in debating, too. Let's work through an example, on "THW abolish the death penalty" (a classic debate, though one that you'll likely rarely see because it's been done to death (heh)).

Point: the death penalty is illegitimate because it doesn't allow for historic injustices to be rectified.

Explanation: in many instances, past and present, people have been convicted of crimes that they did not commit. They have often been exonerated at a later date and allowed to go free. A fundamental principle of a justice system should be that we do not punish people unjustly, and to the extent that it is possible that we do so, we should be able to rectify it as best as possible. When someone is sentence to death, they cannot be revived – if they have been wrongfully convicted, they can never be exonerated.

Example: DNA evidence and the development of forensic techniques has resulted in a very large number of convictions being overturned in the recent past. Given that there has been no slowing of developments in forensic technology, and the justice system is often still flawed in structural ways that make people suffer wrongful convictions, it would be reasonable to suppose that this argument obtains in the real world.

You can see that the basic point requires a lot of elaboration in order for it to be made convincing. In addition, you can see that the example doesn't need to be grounded in sources or case studies or scientific research; instead, giving some evidence of the relevance of the argument in the real world is enough to constitute exemplification in most instances. BP debating doesn't tend to rely overly on referencing or citing empirical evidence, for a number of reasons that are a little beyond the scope of this section.

The fundamental thing to remember about analysis in BP is that **everything is contestable**. What this means is that it's possible not only to contest the facts or points brought by one team, but also that you can contest the ground on

¹ You might notice that this differs a little from the model you were taught in school, which was likely Point/Evidence/Explain. The reason this diverges is because exemplification in debates comes second to a logical explanation of the truth of your point, whereas in e.g. English Literature or History you're usually drawing your argument *from* a source.

which the debate is fought, or the underlying premise of an argument. Ideally, then, you want to be able to ground your analysis in premises that everyone can agree on – or no reasonable person would disagree with – so that your arguments are as solid as possible.

This effectively amounts to constantly asking yourself the question, “why?”. When you’re putting together an argument like the one above, after each phrase or sentence, you need to ask yourself that question, and then answer it for yourself. Not only this, you need to ask two different things: first, **why is this true?** Second, **why is this important?** We’ll come back to the relevance of the second question when we talk about judging metrics. Ideally, you want to be able to get down to some kind of bedrock that is either very hard to contest, or at least would be extremely time-consuming to argue against.

Comparatives

When you’re having an argument with someone in real life, there’s often little structure to it. You might spend different amounts of time talking, or interrupt each other, or have no fixed position that you’re trying to argue for. Not only does debating differ in formalising the argumentative process, but it also makes you take a binary position: you either defend one world, or you defend another.

This means that a lot of analysis in debating is structured around the idea of **comparatives**. When you give an argument about a policy, it’s often not enough to prove that a policy does something good or bad; rather, you have to prove that it is *better* or *worse* than the alternative. In many situations it might be the case that every single state of affairs is bad. If you’re trying an intervention in the Israel/Palestine problem, then there is absolutely no way that you’re going to solve the problem itself, and the likelihood is that whatever you do you are likely to cost lives. The way to then defend this would be to say that *not* doing the intervention is likely to be worse. This is a simple comparative: deaths on one side of the house (to use the bluntest possible metric) can be traded off against deaths on the other side.

In practical terms, the upshot of this is that when you give analysis in debates, you need to be comparative. That means structuring an argument in the format “Now, Action, Then”:

Now – This is what the world looks like right now

Action – This is the change we are making in the world

Then – This is what the world looks like when that change is made

Applying this simple formula to your analysis, building on the PEE format outlined above, you can very quickly turn an assertion into a nuanced argument.

Structuring a Speech through Analysis

Since we've now anatomised an individual argument, we can do the same to the speech as a whole. One of the mistakes a lot of people make when they're new to debating is thinking of debates as a list of points "for" and "against" something: they consider their speeches as a listicle more than anything else. Instead, what you want to aim for is called a "case". That means that you're presenting one overarching reason why you think something is good or bad, or should or shouldn't be done, and then all of the other parts of your speeches are dedicated to proving that thing.

This means that you can imagine the structure of your speech like a tree: the trunk is the overlying argument you're trying to get across. It's probably a core idea and it might be quite hard to contest it on its own, but it's also fairly useless without leaves and branches. The branches are the individual lines of analysis you're bringing in to give life to that trunk – they're substantiating it and they're making it more than just a telegraph pole. Finally, the leaves are the examples you're using: by pinning your case to things that happen in the real world, you're making it relevant – you're giving life to the tree.

Your speech, then, might sound something like a decent essay looks: you have an introduction in which you give a line or two of framing and introduce the main argument you're going to bring; thereafter, you outline the points you're going to analyse which substantiate that argument, and then you go on to actually deliver those points.

Generally a speech will have between one and three points of substantive material, as well as rebuttal (which might be integrated into that substantive material, or might be free-standing – we'll come back to this).

Rebuttal

Now that we've got the hang of the idea of analysis, we're going to look at rebuttal. In essence, rebuttal is about telling the other teams that they're wrong, and that you're right. The problem is that quite often speakers will settle for rebuttal that is "non-comparative" – that is, it explains why something is bad or wrong, without explaining why the reverse might be true or why the world is *better* on their side. So, we're going to quickly go through the anatomy of effective rebuttal that takes down the arguments of the other teams whilst bolstering your own position.

In the same way that we can imagine analysis as a tree, we can imagine rebuttal as an axe directed at that tree. If you swing your axe at the leaves – the examples – and chop them off, then you've done a little bit of damage to the tree and some people in the park might come and ask you what on earth you think you're doing, but you probably haven't made much of an impact on the tree as a whole. If you take off one of the branches – the analyses that explain the truth of the arguments - then you've done something a little more substantive, especially if there are very few branches on the tree. But if you chop down the tree at the trunk – taking out the core idea behind the argument - then there's no way that it can grow new leaves or branches, and it's very quickly an ex-tree.

In practical terms, this means that you should target your rebuttal. Nearly all arguments will either have their central premise articulated – say, "death is bad and we get less of it" – or it will be an underlying premise left unspoken. Attacking these premises is often the most difficult thing to do, but it's also the most fruitful if you get it right, because it allows you to knock down the argument as a whole, rather than giving a response that's **mitigatory**. Rebuttal to ideas is better than rebuttal to analysis, is better than rebuttal to examples.

You're unlikely to be able to take down every argument completely in every instance. That means that in the most realistic scenario, you've left them with some portion of their material standing. If that's all you do, then the judges need to weigh that up against your own, positive contributions, and decide whose material is more persuasive.

A better idea, then, is to make sure that you turn the argument around completely. This means that when you explain, say, that their policy is unlikely to prevent the deaths that they say it does, you should then add an extra line

of analysis that shows why it is in fact likely to cause *more* deaths (and then give reasons as to why that might be).

Structuring Rebuttal

The conventional way of structuring rebuttal into your speech is to put it at the beginning, after your headlines. You might start your speech by outlining the points you're going to make, and then moving on to **extraneous rebuttal**. You might structure this by saying "Proposition said this [argument that Proposition made]. Our response is [PEE-formatted response that deals with the core of the argument]".

Alternatively, you can **interweave** your rebuttal. This is where you make your substantive points clash directly with those of your opponents, and ideally flag those clashes up as you go along. You still need to explain why what you're saying is either more true or more important than what the other team said, but it can save time or make your speech more fluent to not have to add in extraneous parts at the start.

It's extremely tempting to make your opponents' arguments look worse than they actually are. This is called a "strawman", and it's generally considered bad practice. Not only is it a little intellectually dishonest, but unless you're very good at it then it's likely to get noticed by the judges. If you're attacking a strawman of an opponent's argument, then your rebuttal is less likely to be effective because it won't deal with the core of the argument. Moreover, you leave yourself open to a speaker coming up after you and rebuilding the argument in a stronger way which you *haven't* dealt with, overcoming your attempt at rebuttal.

A better strategy is to ensure that you take your opponents' claims at their best. This means that if they haven't made an argument particularly well, you should still try and pretend that they did and deal with *that* version of the argument.

Framing

The credence given to arguments in debates isn't solely determined by their analytical strength. I could give an incredibly well-reasoned and compelling argument for preferring pineapple on pizza, but it wouldn't do me much good in a debate about the regulation of private military contractors.

As such, the ability of an argument to win a debate is a function of two things: its **strength** – how well it's made, its internal consistency, the examples used to illustrate it, the understanding and pre-empting of potential counterarguments, etc – and its **relevance** – how much of a bearing it has upon the debate.

As mentioned previously, **in debates everything is contestable**. This means that arguments are as relevant as they're made to be. There is an extent to which an argument's relevance might be intuitive insofar as it seems to be close to or far away from the motion, but in nearly all instances it's possible to make it seem more or less relevant.

This is where **framing** comes in. Framing is simply the art of making the debate about a particular thing. If you lose every other argument, but the argument you win is the one that is seen to be the sole important thing in the debate, then you're likely to win the debate as a whole.

Framing is a reasonably complicated business that takes a lot of time to master, but it's worth understanding that it exists and that it's important when you're just starting out in debating.

Prep Time

The first time you're given a motion and told to go away and prepare for fifteen minutes before you have to speak for five or seven minutes, it can be incredibly daunting. You might never have spoken in front of an audience before, let alone doing so on a topic you're unfamiliar with, with only pens and paper and a partner (who's likely every bit as inexperienced as you) for aid.

Prep time, though, is a gift that should be used wisely. In some debating formats, there is no prep time: the Proposition team comes in with a case prepared, and the Opposition only find out what it is when they start talking. BP gives you bags of time by comparison.

It's tempting to spend all of prep time talking or writing speeches, but a lot of debaters find it much more useful to spend some of the time in silent thought, some of the time talking and taking notes, and the rest of the time writing their speeches.

Whilst every debate is different, there are some general questions you can ask yourself in prep time in order to give yourself a head-start on your speeches.

1. Why are we having this debate? Here you should try to understand why this motion has been set, and what the problem might be that it's trying to explore or resolve. This then allows you to get a grasp on the main arguments.
2. Who is affected by this? Identifying the key actors in the debate is important in allowing you to target your arguments.
 - a. "Who do we care about?" is a good supplementary question here.
3. Where does this take place? It might be that a debate is specifically place-set, in which case you need to think about the dynamics of that place. If it's not, then you need to think about how it might play out in different areas.
4. If it's a policy debate, why this policy? There are often numerous different ways to try to solve a controversial issue, and a motion only really gives you one of them. If you're in Government, you need to think about what unique benefits this policy might bring. If you're in Opposition, try to think about alternatives that might be less damaging, or unique harms that this policy might bring that others wouldn't.
5. How does this debate work? If it's a policy debate, then you need to think about how it might actually take place. If it's a "believes" debate (or an **analysis motion**) then it's a good idea to consider the definitions of the words in the motion and make sure that there's no ambiguity in your understanding.
6. If you're in closing half, what might your opening already have covered? It's important to identify the most accessible arguments and then try to think deeper and broader in order to come up with something that's unlikely to have been taken in top half.

Prepping is, as with all parts of debating, a complex and multifaceted skill to master, and there are a lot of tips and tricks you'll learn along the way that are beyond the scope of this beginners' guide. One of the most important things to remember, though, is that it's also quite personal. Every debater preps differently, and every partnership will have a different dynamic. The only way to find out how you prep best, and who you prep best with, is to do lots of debating with lots of different partners.

How do I judge a debate?

One of the many quirks of BP debating is that all those who speak are also expected to be able to judge. This might initially seem odd, but speaking and judging are two separate but interrelated skillsets that complement each other extremely well. By judging, not only do you get the opportunity to watch a debate from a detached perspective and often learn new things, but you also gain a number of vital skills in being able to understand how arguments weigh up against each other, how to put your views across in a succinct manner, and how to avoid the common mistakes that debaters make when giving their speeches and constructing cases.

The skill of judging is in being able to accurately weigh what was *actually said* by one team in a round against what was *actually said* by another team. Inexperienced judges will often read their own biases and preconceptions into what teams said, reading into the meanings of their words and filling in analysis for them when it's not there. Similarly, they're likely to fill in rebuttal, saying that they "just don't really buy it" when they don't like an argument, even if it's not knocked down within the context of the debate.

Judging, like speaking, needs to be done **comparatively**. This means that when you are judging a debate, you are always trying to consider not just the arguments that a team made, but how they stack up against the arguments made by other teams. This involves keeping track of what different teams have said so that you can have an accurate and informed discussion after the debate. It also involves trying to weigh up who is winning against whom as the debate is going on and keeping track of this in your mind.

One way of keeping track of this is to keep a couple of pages of notes. Split one page into eight, and one or two more pages into four each. On the first page, write the title of each speaker in one eighth of the page. This will be the page on which you write the *main arguments* brought by each team. It's worth waiting until you've got fuller notes down to write these – you can do so between speeches. It might also be worth drawing arrows between arguments from each speaker to those made by others when those arguments interact. On the other pages, you'll write more detailed notes. When you first start debating, it's quite difficult to know what to write down because you're unlikely to know what's relevant to the debate and what's not, or which arguments are well-made and which are more assertive. This is fine and normal. It will take you a while to get to the point where you can filter out the

drop from the good analysis, but the only way to develop that far is to practise. You can do things to help yourself like writing rebuttal in a different colour and POIs in another, or putting ticks next to arguments that seem relevant or well-made, or writing notes to yourself in brackets with questions you might want to ask after the debate or points you think might need to be discussed. Essentially, do what helps you to be able to best analyse and weigh up the debate.

Once the debate is done, it's likely that the chair in the room will ask you for an "initial call". What this means is that they want you to rank the teams from first to fourth. In order to do that, you need to weigh each team against all of the others. So OG needs to be compared to OO, CG and CO, etc. Be careful to make sure that you don't just take one thing from a team's case and use it to justify the whole of your call. Usually, you'll need to think about different things to judge different comparatives.

For example, the OG/OO comparative is likely to involve looking at the substantive material brought by each team, combined with their rebuttal: who brought the most compelling case? Whose characterisation of the debate was more convincing? Try to make sure you're appealing to the arguments they've made rather than the way in which they've made them. The OG/CG comparison needs to look at the substantive contribution each of the teams made towards swaying you towards the Proposition bench. That means you need to see what distinct material CG brought that OG didn't, and weigh up how important it was within the debate as well as how well-analysed it was. The OG/CO clash is known as the "long diagonal", and is often quite hard to adjudicate because these teams never directly speak to each other. Here it's worth checking whether either of them gave POIs to each other and how they responded. It's also worth seeing what was left standing from the OG case by the time CO got up, and whether any of it was important and/or got taken down by them. Then do the standard weighing up of the constructive material brought by CO and that brought by OG, taking account of the fact that some of CO's material might not be distinct from that of their opening team and therefore shouldn't count in their favour.

This might sound deeply complicated, and in some senses it is. But at its core the idea is quite basic: all you need to do in judging is decide which team, when weighed against another team, gave the most persuasive case for their side.

Your chair is there to direct the discussion, so try to make sure that you don't talk over them (or anyone else). If they ask you for your opinion (and they should at least once), try to keep it reasonably brief and give a justification which is comparative. Don't be afraid to ask questions if you need to. The whole point of being on a panel of judges together is that you collaborate to come to a consensus decision, and being unsure is totally fine.

If you *can't* come to a consensus, you might need to vote. Don't be afraid to vote against the direction your chair wants the call to go, but at the same time do bear in mind that they are likely to be experienced and have reasons for their call. If you outvote the chair, you'll need to have one or more of the wings be prepared to give the oral adjudication justifying that part of the call.

What if they say things I know are wrong?

There will come a time – and if you're a STEM student that time will be “every single science debate” – when people will stand up in front of the room and tell lies. They will tell them flagrantly, and boldly, and without a hint of self-awareness. They might not even be aware that they're lies, in which case they're technically bullshitting. You, as a judge, will be sitting there thinking “this is all wrong. Wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong.” And the moment the teams leave the room you'll want to scream, and you'll want that scream to continue all the way through the adjudication until they come back into the room so you can make that one long continuous scream into their lying faces.

Unfortunately, as a wise man once said, there's not much justice in the world. Whilst you are completely free to use all of that specialist knowledge you've gained from doing worthwhile activities with your time to tell everyone how wrong they are at the social (if you don't like making friends) or on the internet (if you don't like people), you can't do it in the adjudication.

The standard used in BP to adjudicate whether factual knowledge can be used by judges is that of the “average reasonable voter”, or the “informed global citizen”, depending on who you ask and who's running the tournament. The meaning of this is incredibly imprecise, but it essentially means that you shouldn't fill in analysis or rebuttal for speakers when it's clear to *you* (but not everyone else) that something incorrect has been said and it hasn't been pointed out in the debate. The reason we have this standard is essentially to ensure consistent judging between rooms and debates.

How do I know if they've proven something?

The above discussion about people being incorrect then leads into the question, “how do we know when stuff is correct?” The answer, once again, is imprecise. It's sometimes difficult to know whether something that's said in a debate “stands” – that is, whether as judges you should count it, and how strongly you should weigh it against other material. It's often tempting, if you're a soft-hearted liberal like most debaters, to immediately dismiss (say) conservative arguments because you “just don't buy it” or it “didn't really get proven”.

This is bad judging practice and you shouldn't do it. If you do it, you should feel bad, and then stop doing it. Things are proven in debates to different degrees, based on the analysis backing them up. If something is simply asserted and then goes unchallenged throughout the debate, it's still “proven”. That doesn't mean that it has to hold any weight: if you're crediting a team for an assertion as a reason to give them a higher position in the debate, then you're probably at an odd place in your adjudication. However, it doesn't mean that it's *untrue*, or that you should discount it off the bat.

If something is said and then gets challenged, then you need to figure out to what extent the challenge actually undercuts what was said. If the initial argument was well analysed, it's going to take some really good analysis to get rid of it. That might mean that the response is lengthy and detailed, though it might also be that it points out a fundamental error in the premise of the analysis.

Finally, things in debates are true to the extent that they're proven to be true (or disproven/contested), and they're important to the extent that they're proven to be important. If something is a bit subject of contention throughout the debate, it's been made important by a lot of the teams. Conversely, if something is said and then ignored and never impacted or made important by anyone (especially if it wasn't well-analysed in the first instance), then it's less likely to be the piece of analysis that carries the debate. That doesn't mean that you should ignore analysis just because other teams do, especially if the team making an argument shows why it's important, but it does mean that arguments aren't important just because you intuitively believe them to be – they can be made so.

What do motions look like?

Other than involving the words “This House” in them at some point, there are no real rules for what motions have to look like in BP. However, there are a number of different conventional formats that you should be familiar with. Each entails slightly different kinds of debate and slightly different burdens on speakers.

This House Would (THW) – this is a **policy** motion. In these kinds of motions, the Proposition are arguing for passing a specific policy (usually to resolve a particular problem). In this kind of motion, the OG team generally has a lot of latitude in deciding *how* to do the policy – how it’s **meched**. This involves talking about who is doing the policy (usually the state), where it is happening (often place-limited to e.g. Western Liberal Democracies, though this is by no means set in stone), and how it’s going to be done, whether there are any (legitimate) exceptions to the policy, etc.

It’s common for Opposition teams in this format to offer Points of Clarification in order to make sure that the mechanism and definitions that the OG team are defending are clear. CG is bound by the mechanism that OG brings (in nearly all circumstances). In this kind of motion, Opening Opposition can decide what their alternative is and defend that, so long as it would not take up an unreasonable amount more resources to do than the Government policy.

This House Believes (THB) – this is an **analysis** motion. In this kind of motion, you generally don’t need to provide a mechanism. In this kind of motion you’re arguing for the truth or falsity of a particular statement. For example, a common Schools-level motion is “THB that single-sex schools are good for education”. In this motion, it’s Government’s burden to show why single-sex schools (as reasonably defined by them) are good (on whatever metric) for education (for some definition of education). Conversely, it’s Opposition’s burden to show the opposite: that single-sex schools are not good for education. Definitions are still important, but the motion doesn’t require a specific actor to be kept in mind.

One important caveat to this is in motions which being “This House believes that [x actor] *should* [do y]”, e.g. THBT the West should Militarily Intervene in Syria. This is phrased as an analysis motion, but for all intents and purposes it’s a policy motion and should be treated as one.

This House Regrets (THR) – **regrets** motions are, on face, a little tricky, but they’re nothing to be too afraid of. They essentially ask the Proposition teams to give an account of the bad things about a certain event or trend, and then to suggest what the **counterfactual** might have been, i.e. what the world would have looked like if the event hadn’t happened. For example, the motion “THR the rise of hook-up culture” asks Prop teams to give an account of what is wrong with a culture that normalises and glorifies casual sex without emotional commitment, and also to explain *why the world would have been better* had that culture not become a norm. Opposition teams, then, have to explain why the culture is beneficial and why the alternative would have been worse.

You can imagine regrets motions, in some ways, as reverse policy motions. In a policy motion, the Government says what the world looks like now, why it’s bad, and why what they’re doing will change it in a way that’s good. In regrets motions, they say why the status quo is good, and why if a change *had not occurred*, the world would be a worse place.

This House Supports/Opposes (THS/THO) – these motions used to be quite rare, but they’ve become more commonplace in recent years. What they mean tends to be quite contextually dependent, but broadly:

THS motions tend to give you a concept or policy (e.g. “hook-up culture” or “the Iran nuclear deal”) and ask the Government teams to explain why that concept, or its proliferation, might be a good thing. Conversely, they ask the Opposition teams to prove that it is a bad thing. This seems very simple, and it generally is.

THO motions are something like a “regrets” motion, set in the present tense. They give you a potential development or trend, and ask the Government teams to explain why that trend is bad or should be condemned, and the Opposition teams to explain either (a) why it should be supported or (b) why opposing it is not necessarily a good idea in and of itself.

This House, as X – actor motions often trip up debaters, even experienced ones. They differ from all other motions in one key respect: they ask you to consider the world from one specific point of view. In a policy/analysis/regrets debate, there is no single actor’s interest which is inherently the most important. You can appeal to some overarching conception of the good, and

win. That means that e.g. in politics debates it's often not sufficient to say that a policy will get a party you like into power or stop a party you dislike from gaining power; instead, it tends to be more effective to say why a policy will make the political *system* or a *society* better.

In an actor debate, you have to consider the interests of the actor you've been assigned. So for example, in the debate "TH supports the Iran nuclear deal", you can take the position of anybody you like: you might think about the economic and geopolitical stability of the region, for example. If instead you get the motion "TH, as Israel, supports the Iran nuclear deal", you have to specifically consider *Israel's* interests. This obviously entails attempting to identify those interests, and a lot of the contention in an actor debate is likely to be over what specifically those interests are.

Why does it work this way?

At this point you might be thinking that this seems like a load of nonsense. Fifteen minutes to prepare? That seems unreasonably harsh; surely you can't get good speeches out of that. Why are there no points for style? How come really boring speakers can still win? Why is everyone talking so quickly? How come nobody ever uses facts and people lie so much?

These are all valid questions, and honestly you'll find that a lot of people who devote serious amounts of time to debating will have quite long arguments over some of them. There are, however, reasons why debating is the way it currently is.

Why such a short prep time?

The short preparation time in BP separates it from "long-prep" formats which allow you anywhere up to a period of weeks or months to prepare for a debate. There are a few reasons this is useful. First, it means that debates don't get dominated by who has the most exhaustive set of arguments prepared. This tends to privilege teams and institutions who have a lot of resources to plough into constructing cases. In some American circuits where long prep is the norm, it's become common to hire graduate students to do the research and build cases for teams, as well as to scope out other teams' cases and try to find ways to beat them.

Second, it means that there's at least some room for rhetorical flair. In prepared debates, speakers often go through their points so quickly that they're forced to give over a copy of their speech to judges in advance. For a taste of this, you can watch an American Policy debate².

Third, it means that speakers have to be flexible. If you only know a motion fifteen minutes before you have to debate it, then you're usually forced to come up with logical argumentation from first principles. With practice, you'll find that you can argue about pretty much any motion if you're given fifteen minutes to prepare.

Why are there no points for style?

BP is judged on the metric of the "most persuasive" analysis. Whilst officially half of the credence given to teams' arguments is meant to come from the style they speak with, you will rarely if ever find judges who will reference the style of speakers as a decisive factor (or indeed any factor) in their adjudication. This is a contentious issue in BP debating, but one of the primary reasons motivating a shift towards judging metrics that privilege analytical rigour is the desire not to devalue the contributions of people who don't conform to our conceptions of "stylish" speakers, because those conceptions often come from positions which are discriminatory in some way.

Of course, "style" is a fairly nebulous term, and there is arguably a lot of credit given to teams' style in debates. If you consider the ability of a speaker to make the most persuasive argument in the shortest amount of time, their choice of words and the way in which they say those words is necessarily going to affect how well those arguments are perceived as having been made. You'll often find that the speakers who are ranked the highest also happen to be quite nice to listen to, so there's nothing about BP which excludes stylish speakers from doing well, or discourages speakers from being stylish. The only thing that BP *doesn't* do is privilege style over substance: if you're making rhetorically high-minded speeches which have no analytical weight to them, then you're going to have a Bad Time.

Why does nobody use facts?

One thing you'll likely notice in BP is that nobody pays all that much attention if you're trying to cite your sources, or if you bring up statistics as a means of

² You can find an example here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISB-byH8VTI&t=5451s>

making an argument stick. To begin with this might seem frustrating, especially when you go into a round and lose to a team who seem to know far less than you just because they lied convincingly and got away with it. That feeling doesn't necessarily go away with time, but the alternative to the system we currently have would be less fair. If judges were able to fact-check debaters, or bring in their own knowledge, then it would complicate the process and make it incredibly difficult to ensure consistent judging given the diversity of educational backgrounds present in the community. If debaters could access the internet prior to debates, it would break the whole game. What this means is that the "reasonable average voter" heuristic used to judge the accessibility of facts in debating, and the "no electronic devices" rule are the best of a bad bunch in terms of balancing all of the problems.