

# Debating Well

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A Guide to Debate on APDA

# An Overview of Debate on the American Parliamentary Debate Association

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This document is nothing more than one particular opinion about how to debate well on APDA. The best way to learn how to debate well is to debate frequently, reflect on your rounds, and gradually find the rhetorical style that fits you most aptly.

The defining feature of the American Parliamentary style is accessibility. If the rules seem complex or obtuse, remember that they are an attempt to approximate as closely as possible a fair, conversational argument between friends. The best debate rounds on APDA are just that: the brightest college students in the nation having a conversational argument about pressing issues, moral quandaries, or just clever ideas.

## A Brief Overview of a Debate Round

On APDA all rounds involve two teams, each of two members. One team speaks first and proposes a case as the Government (Gov) team; their opponents are called the Opposition (Opp) team. Gov's two speakers are the Prime Minister (PM) and the Member of Government (MG); Opp's two speakers are the Leader of the Opposition (LO) and the Member of the Opposition (MO).

The PM and the LO each give two speeches, one constructive and one rebuttal, per round. The MG and the MO each give one constructive speech per round. Constructive speeches usually go through the list of arguments presented by both sides (the "flow") and offer responses. Rebuttal speeches are used to summarize and frame the round.

The speaking order and times are as follows:

Prime Minister's Constructive	PMC	7 min.
Leader of the Opposition's Constructive	LOC	8 min.

Member of the Government	MG	8 min.
Member of the Opposition	MO	8 min.
Leader of the Opposition's Rebuttal	LOR	4 min.
Prime Minister's Rebuttal	PMR	5 min.

Most teams on APDA tend to have one partner be the PM on Gov and the MO on Opp and the other partner be the MG on Gov and the LO on Opp, which keeps the speaking time equal.

Each position carries a personality stereotype: the PM/MO is generally the more rhetorical, big picture-oriented speaker while the LO/MG is the more analytical, detail-oriented speaker. Of course this stereotype is not true for many individual cases. Some teams instead divide the positions so that one person is the PM/LO or "double leader" and the other is the MG/MO or "double member."

## An Average Tournament

At each tournament before every round all present debaters come together in one room called the General Assembly (GA). The tournament staff then either reads or posts a list of which team will debate (or, in APDA parlance, "is hitting") which team, who will judge the round, and where the round will take place.

A normal tournament consists of five "in-rounds," or rounds in which all teams participate. Usually each team will be Gov and Opp two or three times each, although in some rare cases a fourth Opp or Gov is possible.

After the in-rounds usually the top eight teams will make the break to out-rounds, normally starting with quarterfinals (at a few large tournaments there is a break to octafinals). Teams with a 5-0 record always make the break; teams with a 4-1 record generally do; and, teams with a 3-2 or worse record generally do not.

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At some tournaments the top few novice teams (usually with 3-2 or 2-3 records) who do not make the varsity break will make novice outrounds, normally starting with novice semi-finals.

## Judging

APDA rounds are decided based on which team argued their side of the case more persuasively, independently of whether or not in some objective sense that position is preferable. Even though they generally do not know about the case before the start of the round, Opposition teams win 60% of rounds and 80% of outrounds.

The primary reason for this disparity is that the Gov has a burden to present a fair, accessible case and convince the judge that despite its flaws, it is better than Opp's advocacy – usually the status quo.

Judges must write out a “reason for decision” (RFD) – a short explanation of why the winning side prevailed. In addition to deciding who wins each round, the judge will also rank each debater in the round in terms of their performance with the 1 going to the most impressive and the 4 to the least. Lastly, each debater is given speaker points, or “speaks,” to measure the performance against a more objective scale. Most tournaments use a scale similar to this:

27 or higher	excellent; a few given out per tournament
26.5	very good varsity speech
26	good varsity speech
25.5	solid varsity, strong novice speech
25	average varsity, solid novice speech
24.5	average novice

24	beginning novice
23.5	unimpressive
23 or lower	seriously flawed

Speaker points and ranks are supposed to measure overall debating performance and contribution to winning the round, but in practice most judges count rhetorical ability and fluency more than making smart arguments or strategy choices. It is best to focus on making persuasive arguments to win rounds at first; getting high speaker points will come naturally later.

## Points of Information, Clarification, and Order

A normal APDA round will include several breaks for questions and, sometimes, rules complaints. Points of information are generally questions or short statements designed to refute, render irrelevant, or mock the speaker's argument. They can be asked anytime other than during rebuttal speeches or the first and last minute of any speech. The speaker always has the choice to accept or wave down points of information.

During most speeches, the opposing team will rise for questions about three to five times and will be accepted about two times. Accepting less than one or two questions is frowned upon; accepting more than two questions is generally bad strategy. Following an odd relic of practice in the British Parliament, APDA debaters will often put one hand to their head (as though holding a wig) and stretch one arm out to the side to ask a question. If this sounds awkward, rest assured that simply rising will usually suffice.

Points of clarification are questions asked to better comprehend the case that Gov is proposing. They usually occur about 45 seconds

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into the round, right after Gov has finished explaining the case. Gov should always accept points of clarification unless Opp is using them in an abusive way to stall time or smuggle in arguments.

Recently Gov teams have adopted the practice of stopping time after case statement and asking Opp if they have questions (POC's). This is in contrast to POL's, for which time is rarely, if ever stopped.

Points of order are used to complain to the judge that the other team is either violating the time limit of its speech or making new arguments in a rebuttal. At most tournaments it is standard practice to allow a 30 second grace period after time has run out on each speech. After a minute over the time limit, points of order are acceptable, but it is generally not good strategy to use them unless a speech is more than two minutes over.

All new arguments are prohibited in LOR, and new arguments are prohibited in PMR except for responses to new arguments made in the MO. When someone rises on a point of order, time stops and the riser is automatically given the chance to speak to the judge; the speaker then can respond to the charge. Judges will either rule the argument new ("point well taken"), not new ("point not well taken"), or review the issue after the round ("point under consideration").

In the rules of parliamentary debate, there exists a fourth type of point – the point of personal privilege – that is rarely if ever used. One rises on a point of personal privilege to contest a statement made by the current speaker that is extremely offensive on a personal level. As a novice, the right approach is to avoid them entirely.

# The Speeches of an American Parliamentary Debate Association Debate Round

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Each speech in a debate round on APDA has its own goals and rules. This section attempts to summarize one way of giving each speech, but is by no means an authoritative set of rules that must be followed.

## Prime Minister's Constructive (PMC)

All a PMC must do is present a case statement, briefly explain any facts necessary for discussing the case, and then offer a few arguments supporting the case statement. PMCs should not be read like prepared speeches, but the PM should have a bullet-point style outline to structure the speech. Strong PMCs are usually the result of strong cases.

Other than the quality of the case, a PMC will excel if it has solid organization. At a basic level, this means clearly delineating arguments and reminding the judge where the speech is on the flow, which APDA calls "signposting." It is acceptable to signpost explicitly, saying, for example "the second argument we offer" or "the third point we want to talk about," etc. This can be taken too far; referring to "Subpoint B under point 2" is too much.

Uninspired PMCs will often read like a list of arguments. To avoid this, the PM should, immediately following case statement and any explanation of facts, offer an organizing structure. Here are two examples that may help:

**Example 1.** "We propose that noncitizen residents with children in the local public school district should be able to vote in local school board elections. We think the government ought to allow them the vote because they deserve as a right and because it is sound public policy. If we can prove either the rights issue or the policy issue, we should win this round."

**Example 2.** "Our side of the House believes that the United States should send troops to Darfur. This plan provides benefits to the people of Darfur, to the region's neighbors in Sudan and the Middle East, and to our own fellow citizens back home. We will discuss all three of these parties and what they stand to gain from intervention, starting first with the people of Darfur."

It is also important to watch time closely. Experienced debaters often find that they feel the least amount of time pressure in PMC compared to other speeches, leaving out arguments at the end can be a serious error since new constructive arguments are not accepted in MG. For this reason it is standard practice to start PMC with the case's strongest argument.

## Leader of the Opposition's Constructive (LOC)

The LOC is widely considered the most difficult speech to give, mostly because during PMC the LO must listen to and write responses to each of the PM's arguments while coming up with independent arguments against the case. A good LOC has three parts:

First, the LOC should start with an Opp Philosophy, a broad statement of why the case should be rejected. Here are three examples:

**Example 1.** "The government's plan is ultimately too idealistic: it ignores the perverse incentives that this law would create and in practice it would undermine the goals it purports to achieve."

**Example 2.** "This side of the house believes that persons can never be mere means to an end; because Gov would sacrifice individuals for the whim of the state, we oppose the moral position that underlies their case."

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**Example 3.** “We agree that human rights must play a role in our foreign policy, but not at the expense of our national interest. We here on side Opp will defend a more nuanced position combining realism with respect for international law.”

Explaining opposition philosophy should take no longer than a minute.

The second step is to offer a few independent arguments against the case. These arguments are called “independent” because they are not mere responses to Gov arguments offered in PMC. If no arguments come to mind immediately (but the case seems fair), asking yourself these questions about the case will help. Why do we not have this policy/hold this belief in the status quo? How would people react to this change and what impact would their reactions have? Is there a better way to achieve the goals Gov’s plan is designed to meet?

After giving all of the independent arguments—usually about 4-5 minutes into the speech, the LO then “moves caseside” and responds to the PMC’s arguments point-by-point; this is the third and final part of the LOC. Again it is important to signpost clearly; tell the judge exactly which of Gov’s arguments you are addressing.

If pressed for time, try to focus on Gov’s most persuasive arguments. Some APDA debaters will repeat some of their independent arguments as responses to Gov points, often by asking the judge to “cross-apply” their earlier analysis. This is better than wasting time reiterating the same arguments, but it usually indicates that the “independent” arguments were not so independent after all.

It is better to have only two arguments off-case (that is, independent arguments offered

before moving caseside) and many smart responses rather than giving five arguments off-case and repeating them ad nauseam as responses.

## Member of Government (MG) & Member of Opposition (MO)

Standard member speeches follow the flow carefully: the first four minutes are spent on Opp’s arguments, and the back four minutes are spent on case. Many member speeches start with an overview (or more rarely, multiple “overviews”)—an observation about how the round is progressing or how the opposing side is making a mistake and why that favors the speaker’s side.

A brief, clever overview can be powerful, but all too often overviews try to do too much. Putting all of a speech’s best arguments in the first two minutes and then saying “cross-apply this” and “remember that” for the next six kills momentum.

A strong MG will, above all, not come off as purely defensive. The MG should go after Opposition aggressively, attacking their position rather than just reformulating Gov’s. If LOC only dealt with fringe cases, point out that Opp has not challenged the basic assumptions of the case. If Opp position seems vague and shifting, ask the judge to demand Opp take an actual stand on the issue. If Opp made a timing error and did not cover much of case, note the Gov arguments that they “dropped.”

Do not, however, fundamentally change Gov’s position in MG; this is called a “case shift” and is considered illegal.

The MO has more flexibility in terms of organization. Since it is the last constructive speech, it is not necessary to cover every argument on the flow. Some experienced de-

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Debaters choose not to follow the flow at all and instead create a new structure of their own. If you choose this route, make sure you clearly articulate the structure you choose to employ in the first minute of the speech.

Novice debaters will almost always do better following the flow until they are comfortable with the style. It is acceptable to add one or two new Opp arguments in MO, but labeling them as “new” arguments is a controversial strategy. A safer and smoother tack is to fit new material in along with points and responses that the LO made. Most importantly, avoid contradicting or “knifing” the LO.

## Leader of the Opposition’s Rebuttal (LOR) & Prime Minister’s Rebuttal (PMR)

Rebuttal speeches are explanations to the judge of why the speaker’s side has won the round. Most APDA debaters organize rebuttals around three “points of crystallization,” important issues in the round where the speaker and the speaker’s partner have won convincingly. Often points of crystallization will be posed as questions which the speaker answers sequentially.

The points of crystallization method can be used effectively, but it can become a tired crutch easily. A more effective way to organize rebuttals is to return to the structure offered in the first minute of PMC and LOC and demonstrate how your side has lived up to the promises made in those speeches.

No new arguments may be made in LOR, and only responses to new MO arguments may be made in PMR. PMRs should not attempt to respond to everything the MO said; only engage new arguments that may be consequential for the round. These new responses can either be made in the first minute of PMR or inte-

grated into the overall structure of the speech. Either way it is important to label these arguments as responses to new MO points.

There are two pitfalls frequently made in rebuttals. One is to act as if nothing occurred in the member speeches and repeat PMC or LOC. A strong rebuttal will integrate content from the member speeches and note any important drops that the member on the opposing side made.

The other pitfall is to focus exclusively on arguments your side seems to be winning. It is important to attack any points that the other side claims to be winning; ignoring them makes it much easier for the judge to use the other side’s summary of the round as an RFD.

Try this exercise: if, after you walk out of the round, you can say to yourself, the only way they can win is if X, then make sure you address X prominently in your rebuttal and explain why it cannot be a decisive issue in the round.

# Cases in the American Parliamentary Debate Association

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Good cases make good debates. Sometimes even good debaters. This section covers the rules for cases on APDA and some good strategies.

## Tight and Snug Cases

A tight case is a case that is extremely difficult to oppose successfully, and, because of this, cannot be run on APDA. A classic example of a tight case is: “jurors should be allowed to take notes.” While there are some ostensible reasons why jurors should not be allowed to take notes, it is extremely unlikely that those reasons could persuade a judge.

Some cases, such as “decriminalize marijuana” or “legalize gay marriage,” while controversial in larger society, are considered “APDA-tight” because most mainstream college students (or at least the type that tend to judge debate rounds) find these propositions obviously correct.

Cases that are very difficult—but not extremely difficult—to oppose successfully are often called “snug.” One archetypal snug case is: “Repeal the constitutional provision mandating that the US President must be a natural born citizen.”

Snug cases are not technically illegal, but judges universally dislike them. As these examples show, the line between tight and snug is blurry. Each tournament is required to publish a “tight call policy” in its tab policies. Usually one of two tight call policies is chosen.

The first policy is to make tightness the only voting issue in the round. If this is the policy, Opp is required to call the case tight at the beginning of LOC and then give reasons for why the case is tight and show why any possible arguments against the case are weak. In subsequent speeches Gov must demonstrate

that its case is not tight and basically argue against its own case as Opp generally would. Under this policy, after PMC the round will sound as though Gov and Opp had switched sides.

The second policy tells Opp to make a brief statement in LOC as to why Opp believes the case is tight and then Opp opposes the case as best they can. Gov may briefly respond to the tight call in MG, but otherwise debates as if no tight call has been made. Usually but not always when a tournament chooses the second policy, tightness is one voting issue, but not the only voting issue.

Tight calls are often analogized to using nuclear weapons: extreme measures to be used only when no other option is available. Rounds about tightness are generally boring and result in low speaks. Teams rarely run unambiguously tight cases, but snug cases are sadly common.

Generally the best strategy for dealing with cases that you think, but are not sure, may be tight or snug is to note at the beginning of LOC that Gov has given you an abusive burden. Next, explain why the burden is abusive, for example:

**Example 1.** “Most of the arguments against this case are based on religious views we should not have to defend”

**Example 2.** “Were it not for some undesirable fact about our current political reality, society would do what Gov proposes already.”

Then, “Having said that, we would prefer not to make this around about tightness, so we will oppose the case as best we can, given this abusive burden.” After this, oppose the case as normal.

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## Status Quo and Spec Cases

There are two other types of illegal cases on APDA: status quo cases and specific knowledge or “spec” cases. A case is status quo if the policy it proposes is already in place in the relevant jurisdiction, domain, etc. “Welfare benefits should be tied to finding employment, education, and job training” is a status quo case.

If you want to run a case that is status quo but contentious, such as “only the five permanent members of the UN Security Council should have a veto,” it is best to run it as an opp-choice case (see below).

Spec cases are cases that require too much technical knowledge for a normal, well-informed college student to oppose. One of the more commonly accepted definitions of spec on APDA is the “New York Times standard”: if someone who reads the main section of The New York Times everyday would not have the knowledge necessary to oppose the case successfully, the case is spec.

In practice whole cases are rarely spec, but sometimes MGs will make spec responses to LOC arguments. Simply calling an argument spec and explaining why it is spec is usually enough to convince the judge not to consider the spec argument.

## Opp-Choice Cases

In an opp-choice case Gov poses a question and offers Opp two or more choices of which side to defend. The choice is offered at the beginning of PMC. Time is stopped while the LO and the MO discuss which side to choose and ask clarifying questions. “Is jury nullification morally justified?” is a classic opp-choice case. “Should we be theists, agnostics, or

atheists?” is an example of an opp-choice case with more than two sides. In such a case, after Opp chooses one side, Gov will pick one of the remaining sides, and the third side will fall out of the round. The question for debate then becomes which of the two sides is better.

Opp-choice cases can lead to fair and open debate; at a minimum they usually avoid the possibility of a tight call. They do not, however, prevent a “spec” call.

Due to the strong Opp bias on APDA, though, opp-choice cases sometimes have sneaky dual meanings that emerge once Opp picks a side. To avoid this possibility, it is important to clarify the terms of the case statement and the burdens each side carries before choosing.

## Time-Space Cases

Time-space cases put the judge in the position of some person or other being, often historical, and recommend that she/he/it take a certain action. If the situation is historical, Gov must argue that the person in question do the opposite of what was actually done in the past. “You are President Truman; don’t drop the bomb” for example.

In time-space cases, facts that occurred after the choice was made are not fair game; making arguments using these facts is called “breaking time-space” and is not allowed. So, for example, the argument “the Soviet Union collapsed due to internal economic problems, so dropping the bomb on Japan was not a needed to deter Soviet aggression” is not permitted in the example case.

In practice time-space cases are often problematic. Time-space rounds can easily devolve into questions of how much certain

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psychological facts about the actor should be decisive.

Imagine the case “You are Hitler; don’t invade Russia.” In PMC Gov might point out the logistical difficulties of invading Russia and other reasons why a rational person in Hitler’s situation would not support an invasion. Then in LOC Opp might argue: “But you are Hitler! You are irrational!” In MG Gov might respond “You are irrational, but not irrational in that way.” This can continue for the rest of the round.

Of course, in a purely logical sense Opp is correct: whatever the historical figure did, she thought she had good reason to do, regardless of what a rational person would have done. One way to get around this difficulty is to change the agent of action, such as “Knowing only what we knew then, from an objective perspective it was a bad decision for the US Government to drop the bomb on Japan in WWII.” Many experienced debaters, frustrated with these difficulties, try to avoid time-space cases altogether.

## Counterexamples

A counterexample is a plan Opp proposes that will better solve the problem Gov’s case attempts to solve. If Opp is running a counterexample, they must say so explicitly at the beginning of LOC.

The current standard for what makes a counterexample legitimate on APDA is mutual exclusivity with Gov’s plan. In other words, a valid counterexample cannot be implemented simultaneously with Gov’s case. This standard runs into theoretical difficulties and has recently become controversial. Other proposed standards such as “competitiveness” and “the round is still interesting” have not gained much traction in the community due to a general dislike of discussing debate theory.

MGs facing counterexamples should try to offer independent reasons to reject the counterexample, rather than just buttressing Gov’s case.

If any of Opp’s arguments seem to undermine their own counterexample, point out any inconsistencies. The same applies to dealing with “alternatives” arguments: give specific reasons for why the alternatives are bad in themselves and note if and how they conflict with the overall Opp philosophy.

## Links

Most tournaments on APDA are “loose link,” which means that in each round the Government team is responsible for providing a case to debate. A few tournaments are “tight link,” which means that the tournament organizers will provide one or a few resolution(s) before the round, and the Gov team will pick one of the resolutions and run a case defending the position the resolution upholds.

For example, if the resolution were “This House Believes that the Market Does Not Solve,” then “The US Government should eliminate the use of private military contractors” would be a legitimate or “resolutional” case. Some tournaments have a special form of tight link called “straight link,” which means that the resolutions offered are to be run as cases verbatim. Running an irresolutional case is usually an automatic loss. If Opp believes Gov’s case is irresolutional, Opp should argue that it is in LOC.

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