

How to Judge a High School Debate Round

- There's nothing to be afraid of. Remember that your decision is your opinion, and it can't be wrong. Ultimately, the winner of the round should be the team you personally find most persuasive. No matter how you vote, two debaters will think that you are wrong.
- Be attentive. So long as you are trying to understand what they say, it is up to them to communicate effectively. Make sure that you record as many arguments as you can on your flow - it will help you remember what was said when it comes time to make your decision.
- Feel free to express your preferences or experience level **BEFORE** the round. If you are uncomfortable with speed or are unfamiliar with lots of debate jargon, say so. It is a competitor's job to adapt to their audience.
- You will need to time the round. Bring a timer, stopwatch, or digital wristwatch if you can. If not, either ask to borrow a timer from one of the debaters in your round, or, as a last resort, use the wall clock in your classroom.
- Speaker points are for style. Even though there is theoretically a scale of 1-30 only the top of the scale is ever used. **Speaker points should fall between 25 and 30.** A debater who completes her/his speeches should receive no less than 25 speaker points. Additionally, for our purposes a 30 does NOT necessarily mean a perfect speech. Thirties should be given to debaters for an exceptional performance.
- Make your decision based on the arguments and evidence, not on style. Try to set aside your personal biases and focus exclusively on the evidence and arguments presented in the round, just as you would in a jury trial. The credo of our activity is that "Everything is debatable" and we are teaching our students to pursue all ideas, even radical ones. Keep in mind that you are deciding who debated better, not who is right in an absolute sense.
- Make your decision in two steps. First decide who won and lost each point, and don't worry about the importance of each point. Second, ask yourself this question: "Based on the points each side won, is the affirmative plan a good idea?"
- Some issues will be called "voting issues". Topicality is one such issue. **IF** the debaters explain to you why a given argument is more important than any other argument, you can vote on that issue and not consider anything else.
- After the debate, please give the students oral feedback so they can work to improve their skills in the next round. Try to tell each student 2 things they did well and 1 thing they can improve on. Please consider carefully the way that you phrase your comments – students will remember the things you say forever. Although we strongly encourage comments, please **do not disclose your decision after the round.**
- If someone strikes you as being rude or out of line, it is best to tell them after the round so that they'll stop before their next debate. Try to focus on their behavior, not their character.
- On the ballot, be sure that you have indicated a winner, filled out speaker points, and if you give more speaker points to the losing team, indicate that you did so intentionally in the ballot. Include comments, which should reinforce and expand upon what you told the students after the round. The ballot should also include a reason for decision. A good rule of thumb is to have at least personal 2 comments per speaker, and at least 1 comment on each of the major issues in the round.