



## PRESENTING A DEBATE TOPIC

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This handout will focus on delivering a topic and defending one set of arguments against an opponent in a formal debate. These ideas are divided into three key skills with examples for applying them.

### Skill 1: The Overview

The most important part of delivering a persuasive presentation is the ability to lay out key points without delving immediately into detail. This skill is essential because in order to compete in a debate successfully, students need to be able to react to their opponents' points as quickly as they present their own.

Thinking on this “big picture” level makes it easier to be flexible over the course of the debate. It is a challenge to present just the takeaway initially, but it will make it easier to control details later on in the debate.

For example, suppose you're giving a set of arguments in defense of higher taxes on cigarettes in the context of health issues. The bottom line is that you believe this intervention will help protect human health in the U.S. One possible sequence of ideas you could pitch in order to come to this conclusion—

1. Cigarettes and tobacco products contain many harmful chemicals that can cause problems after prolonged use
2. Government is in a position to tax behaviors that are harmful to society as a whole (like smoking)
3. The role of government is to protect health, physical safety and well-being of citizens.
4. Taxes on a behavior mean fewer people can afford to do it
  - a. Talk about types of taxes
  - b. Targeted at companies or consumers? Or both? Etc.--> get into mechanics of the tax
5. **Federal and state governments should tax smoking at a higher rate in order to discourage smoking, a harmful behavior that causes health problems across the board for a society.** — This is the main point; even though the specific data used in the presentation will be important, this is your bottom line.

### Skill 2: Adaptability/Reaction to Opponent

Your opponent wants to win the debate by persuading the audience that they are correct, or that they can outthink you.

Identify and point out weaknesses in their presentation (maybe a detail seems inconsistent with the rest or a claim not backed by sufficient evidence) while defending your own argument. You can use a counter-argument to disrupt their presentation—many debates have time built in for these responses.

One of the easiest ways to throw off an opponent can be calling them out on details that require interpretation. Try to show the audience that they are not as sure of their information as they seem.

Sample debate topic→ Deploying of U.S. soldiers in Africa to combat Ebola

- You are trying to defend the deployment
- Opponent argues it would lead to a **needless waste of life**
  - o Attack this point—soldiers made the choice to put lives at risk when enlisting **and** Ebola is notoriously hard to spread when people understand transmission—maybe use CDC or NIH data to prove the latter
- You can unpack their point (in bold) on different levels: emotional, factual (is it actually true?), etc. If you can use a source to show that they are wrong, their entire presentation seems a little less credible.

### **Skill 3: Engagement with Audience**

Focus on your presence and body language when in front of the audience, but also try to gauge theirs. If your presentation is well delivered some people may be nodding or will appear otherwise engaged. Here are a few ideas for winning over an audience:

- Be charismatic; smile when appropriate. You want to seem confident, but not hyper.
- If you sense that the audience is lost over a point, clarify it.
- Watch your posture; try to stand up straight without slouching.

The links below provide more details on all three skills.

### **Additional Resources:**

Berkun, Scott. “How to Pitch an Idea.” *Scott Berkun web page* (February 2005): Web. 29 September 2014.

Grote, Jason. “Watching the Watchers: Gauging Audience Response.” *National Performing Arts Convention blog*. Web. 29 September 2014.

Community Tool Box. “Organizing for Effective Advocacy, Section II.” *University of Kansas*. Web. 29 September 2014.