

## Excerpted from

# Some Elements Of Debate

### Delivery

Each debater has an individual speaking style. It is in this area that general comments are least useful. There are at least four elements that combine to affect the presentation of your remarks; your delivery should be critically assessed in respect of the language you use, your use of your voice and body, and the personality you project.

#### A. Language

The language you use should be clear and simple. You are speaking for an audience that cannot re-read the portions of your argument that it does not understand.

“Combine abstract notions with concrete examples. Your audience will not follow you if you always speak in First Principles and do not get into actual cases. Likewise, they will become restless if you always talk in specifics and do not take the long view from time to time on central issues.” (McKenzie, *Debating Tips*, page 2.)

Your language should be concrete. Use single words, not long expressions. Use short words when they are available. Vary your language, but aim for simplicity. Oratory requires the right word, not the long word.

Ensure that your speech is grammatically sound. Each sentence must be correct and each word must be used correctly. “Continually” does not mean “continuously”; “enormity” means “immense wickedness”; it does not mean “large”. The careful speaker should refer to H. W. Fowler’s *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (Oxford University Press) or some similar work when a question of usage arises.

#### B. Voice

The second element of your delivery is your voice.

The single most important requirement, of course, is that you be heard. If your audience cannot hear you, they will not be persuaded by you. Your voice has two other chief functions - it must sustain the audience’s interest (often through variety) and it must be easily understood. You must not only be loud enough; your articulation and enunciation must be clear.

Beyond these obvious comments, much remains. Your voice takes on variety when you change the rate at which you speak or the tone, volume or inflexion of your voice. A pregnant pause or a rhetorical question can serve to punctuate your speech.

Your voice is your single most important performing instrument. Use it well. There is no substitute for practise. You need not rehearse a particular speech *ad nauseum* - reading anything aloud with appropriate emphasis will accomplish your purpose. But rehearse you must, unless you are fortunate enough to have a voice which is naturally clear, audible and interesting.

#### C. Body

Your body is also an important debating instrument. A few rules of thumb, although subject to exceptions, may be stated:

Stand erect. It is all right to appear at ease and relaxed, but never slouch. Similarly, never stoop to use a

microphone - adjust it so you can use it standing upright. You may rest your notes or both hands on a table, chair or podium if you can do so without bending over. If you cannot do so, then change the height of the table, chair or podium, or don't use it. Do not put your hands into your pockets.

Gesture naturally and without exaggeration. You may wish to make a hand or arm gesture to emphasize a point - or use your entire body. If most of your speech is delivered from behind a podium, it may be helpful to emphasize a point by moving forward, becoming closer and more confident to your audience. However, you should not cross the floor or otherwise appear to menace your opponents.

You should generally avoid repeated movements. A routine gesture (or swaying, or walking back and forth) distracts the audience. Likewise you should try to avoid nervous mannerisms, such as repeatedly clicking your pen or playing with a paper clip.

Look your audience in the eye. Walter Cronkite was a superb newscaster - few of us are as convincing reading a script as he was, looking up only occasionally. A speech in which the debater is always engaging the audience - by gesture, or eye contact - is a winning and persuasive speech. Far better that you maintain eye contact, even if you have to stop and find your next point periodically, than that you read your remarks without interruption or glancing up.

Try to interpret your judges' reactions. One of the benefits of eye contact is that you can often gauge how well your audience understands the point you are making and whether they are favourably disposed to you. If your audience appears to be confused, explain at greater length; if you think they have grasped your point, move on to your next argument. If they seem set against you, try another tack. The most persuasive speaker is he who best reads his audience.

Smile when it is appropriate to do so. Smiling and taking a deep breath before you begin speaking can often reassure your audience as well as relax yourself.

#### **D. Personality**

Every debater by the combination of his language, voice and body conveys a message to his audience about his personality. If he is good, he will seem warm, enthusiastic, but not biased. He will be comfortable, but not arrogant; gracious, but not condescending. He will be concerned, occasionally troubled, always collected and sometimes agitated. He will be a person speaking normally to an audience he respects.

Consider what personality you display. Your debate is more than a written argument; it is a persuasive exchange.

#### **E. Courtesy**

A debater can never be too courteous. Although debating has always been characterized by witty personal jibes, such comments if pointed are out of place in competitive debate. Debaters who are on the receiving end of such comments frequently think they are intended in earnest. Judges will penalize debaters for such remarks. Debaters who utter them look petty and mean spirited.

There is no harm in levity, however. To make it clear that the remarks are only in fun, lampoon yourself and your partner(s), if you wish. ("The Opposition may have been well served by a public school education, Mr. Speaker, but the system has also produced unfortunates such as my partner, who can barely write his own name.")

You should never argue with the judges or the moderator, especially if they are clearly wrong. You may know far more about debating than these officials - but telling them so is unlikely to convince them. Bite your tongue and say nothing at the time, reporting the matter to the tournament co-ordinator later if it is serious enough. You should not publicly complain about judging: this is in poor taste and demonstrates bad sportsmanship. Debate judges are volunteers who usually do their best to be impartial and to render a fair and objective decision. Accord them and other officials the respect that they deserve.

You should normally introduce yourself to the other team before the debate and congratulate them afterwards. It is a common practice for debaters to walk over to their opponents' table and shake hands with them at the conclusion of the contest.

While they are speaking, pay attention to your partners. If you spend your time looking out the window, several other spectators probably will follow suit. On the other hand, if you keep looking at him or her, it will be harder for other observers to let their attention wander. If you wish to stare out the window, wait until your opponents are speaking. Remember, however, that the judges may conclude that you are not paying attention to the debate and penalize you. It is wiser to appear to be attentive and involved right to the end of the debate by carefully observing and taking notes of your opponents' remarks, and you should always be alert to the possibility of heckling, raising points or complaining about rule violations by your opponents (depending on the style of debate). For advice on such skills for the specific styles of debating, you should refer to publications on Academic, Cross-Examination and Parliamentary style debating.

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