

Excerpted from Some Elements Of Debate

Organization

A reader who does not understand an argument in writing has the opportunity to re-read it until he does. Your listener does not have that chance. He either understands your point or he does not. That makes it essential that your argument be clear and well organized. Your listener should be able to answer the following questions after your speech:

- a. What was your central thesis?
- b. On what points do you and the opposition disagree?
- c. What did you present in support of your view?
- d. Did you answer all opposition arguments?

It is therefore essential that your remarks be organized in the following four respects:

- a. Your team's proof must be logically divided among the team members.
- b. Each argument you make must be identified and it must be made clear where it fits in the debate.
- c. Each opposition argument must be identified and separately answered.
- d. You must summarize the result of the foregoing, both within each speech and as a team.

A. Introduction

Although good organization is essential if your arguments are to be understood and sound convincing, it is no substitute for content. The introduction and conclusion should therefore be as brief as possible. The first speaker must introduce his team's arguments (maximum: 30% of his speech); the last speaker must conclude for the team.

In presenting your introduction, you should aim to win favourable attention, unify the audience's thoughts, and set the tone for the debate. The introduction should always make provision for the following parts:

- a. a definition of terms;
- b. a statement of the origin and history of the case;
- c. a statement of irrelevant matter;
- d. a statement of admitted or waived matter;
- e. a statement of the issues; and
- f. a division of the issues amongst team members.

Clemens, *Classroom Debates*

Your introduction should be tailored to your debate. You might consider including some of the following in your introduction:

- a. Asking (dramatically) a question or series of questions that arouse an interest in your topic;
- b. Telling a short anecdote that demonstrates your case in simple emotional terms;
- c. Making a historical, personal or timely reference. The historical reference adds authority; the personal and timely references add sincerity and an appreciation in the audience that you are genuine. For example, "In 1867, such and such happened ..." or "I read in the paper this morning ...";
- d. Quoting something relevant to your debate;
- e. Using an analogy or theme that continues through the debate until the conclusion. This can be effective and unify the speech.

D.S.A.B.C., *AGuide to the
Elements of Debate*, page 1

A sample might look like this:

"Last week's newspaper contained the headline 'John Hinckley Acquitted of the Attempted Assassination of President Reagan'. This travesty of the criminal law has focused attention on the need for the Insanity Defence to be abolished."

By this we mean that the accused in a criminal trial no longer have the right to be acquitted because he was insane at the time of the alleged offence. [Definition by paraphrase.] The key term is "Insanity Defence" by which we mean the defence given by section 16 of the *Criminal Code*, which provides for an acquittal in certain circumstances. [Definition of particular terms.]

Society is no longer accepting - if it ever did - that an accused should be spared from criminal punishment merely because he convinces a psychiatrist he is crazy. [Essence of the government case.] Even Edward Mortimer, the seventh person to make an attempt on the life of Queen Victoria, said from his insane asylum (when hearing of the thirteenth attempt on her life), 'it is a pity they did not hang me, for then our dear Queen would not have to fear attempts on her life.' [Example.]

I make perfectly clear that we are not discussing fitness to stand trial, or the appropriate treatment for the insane on their release - but only whether people who commit crimes while insane should be held responsible on grounds similar to those which face the rest of society. [A statement of irrelevant matter.]

We admit that the basis of the defence is the principle that only those responsible for their acts should be punished. We suggest, Mr. Speaker, that there is good reason to depart from this general principle here. [Admitted matter, limiting of the issue.]

The issue's in today's debate are:

1. The seriousness of the abuse of the defence;
2. The need for a flexible approach to remedy these abuses;
3. The government plan to commit such people and provide appropriate treatment for all who suffer from insanity or serious psychological

disorder while in prison. [Organization of the argument.]

I shall deal with the first two issues while my partner will deal with the third.”

[Division of the issues among team members.]

(Speaking time elapsed: about two minutes.)

B. Development of Your Argument

In organizing the body of your argument, you must reduce your points to snappy headlines for easy reference. In the above example, you might summarize the issues as “Abuse, Flexibility and Treatment”. Similarly, in developing your argument, make it obvious which heading you are discussing and whether the argument you are making is in response to a particular opposition argument.

At page 2 in *A Guide to the Elements of Debate*, the Debate and Speech Association of British Columbia offers the following tips on developing your debate speech [re-lettered]:

- a. Make certain that your points are relevant to the resolution;
- b. Support your argument with examples: “History is clear; ...”
- c. Rely on quotation as an effective, persuasive means of documenting your point;
- d. Use statistics when they are available. (But do not bore the audience through overuse, and do not use questionable sources.) Give your source;
- e. Prefer to make a few, well supported points rather than a plethora of unsupported assertions. Do not exaggerate a weak point;
- f. Use rhetorical questions;
- g. Add humour to your debate (remembering that your purpose is to persuade, not to entertain);
- h. Reinforce, but do not repeat, your partner’s arguments;
- i. Describe your points vividly and concretely. Be concise;
- j. Explain exactly what you are trying to say; (assume that the audience is intelligent but ignorant of your subject;)
- k. Express yourself simply (never a fault unless it interrupts coherence).

C. Order of Arguments

It is good strategy to choose an effective order for your arguments, rather than simply presenting them in the order they occur to you. If each builds on the preceding argument, choose the most basic argument and work from there. If each argument is independent, start and finish with a strong argument. The order of your arguments must depend on the speech you are making. At least settle on a deliberate reason for the order you adopt.

To enable your audience to understand better the argument you pose, make it clear when you move from one point to the next. Leave points distinctly and announce your next argument or wrap up a point by suggesting it leads to your next argument.

D. Summary

There is an important difference between a summary and a conclusion. A debate should have both. A

summary reviews the important arguments and the answers that were made to them and identifies which opposition arguments were answered and which were not; a conclusion is an inference drawn from the summary. Your summary should be short - if your speech is well organized, it may not always be necessary, although a conclusion must always be present. In the example already given, the summary might look like this:

“Mr. Speaker, society has lost faith in the criminal justice system in part because of the abuse of the Insanity Defence. What is needed is a flexible response that recognizes that human beings with human problems do not fit the neat compartments of the *Criminal Code's* Insanity Defence. This means that those who are tried but found insane at the time of the commission of the offence should be convicted, but the treatment adjusted to correspond with each person's needs. The only opposition challenge to this was, as I've already shown, that this is different from the general principles of the criminal law and that the abuse of the Insanity Defence is trivial. Society does not think that the abuse is trivial and this is a unique problem which will not suffer from an original solution.”

E. Conclusion

Your conclusion is a one paragraph burst that by quotation or other appropriate turn of phrase leaves your audience on your side. It is logically an ending to the argument. Conclude strongly and leave a positive impression with your audience. Many debaters like to use a quotation and, in appropriate circumstances, something similar to “I expect that you too, Mr. Speaker, have come to the inescapable conclusion that this resolution should be defeated.” Some merely say “Thank you.” Whatever tack you take, you should not merely fade away, slowly inching towards your chair and only stop speaking completely as you seat yourself. Instead conclude powerfully, pause, and sit down purposefully. Try to use your full speaking time but do *not* run overtime.

Brian Casey
January 1983
Revised October 1984

Revised by
John Filliter in
December 2002