

Debate Format & Moderator Guide

2026-05-06 · cheerful mango Haubentaucher

Each session debate follows the same three-phase structure. The format is designed to produce genuine argument, not consensus, but the productive collision of well-prepared positions, which also do not necessarily need to reflect your own. This guide is for both the moderator and debaters.

Phase	Duration	Activity
1: Primer	5 min	Introduction and Opening Question
2: Surrounded	35 min	Surrounded debate with dynamic chair exchange
3: Wrap-up	10 min	Key takeaways and session debrief

The Surrounded Format

The debate is contested by two teams: the **Proposition team** (arguing for a motion) and the **Opposition team** (arguing against it). Each team has **3 to 4 members**. Two chairs are placed facing each other at the centre of the room. One member from each team (the current speaker) occupies the centre chair at all times. The rest of their team sits in a semi-arc *directly behind* their speaker, facing the opposing pair. The “surrounded” geometry is thus two opposing benches facing each other across the two centre chairs.

The debate is conversational, not a sequence of speeches. Speakers address each other directly. There is no pre-set speaking order after the opening; the exchange follows the argument.

Chair Exchange Protocol

Two mechanisms move speakers in and out of the chairs.

Voluntary Pass

CORE RULES FOR DEBATERS

- **Stay in role.** You have been assigned a position; argue it, even if you disagree personally. The purpose is to stress-test positions, not to locate the comfortable middle. Thus, you may want to prepare for both sides of the argument in advance.
- **Handshake, then speak.** Every chair entry begins with a handshake. The ritual is not optional. It signals that the argument is about ideas, not the person.
- **Attack the argument, not the speaker.** Challenge the reasoning; do not make it personal.
- **Cite the text or case.** If you reference the assigned text or the session stimulus, name it and state what it shows. Vague gestures at “the story” are not arguments.
- **Concede precisely, then pivot.** If the opponent has made a point you cannot rebut, say so clearly and explain why your position survives it. A clean concession with a pivot is a stronger move than evasion.
- **Recognise quality across the line.** Knock your knuckles on the chair when the opposing or your speaker earns it. A debate that acknowledges good arguments is a better debate.
- **Use the pass.** Stepping down voluntarily when you are out of arguments is better than stalling. It gives your team a fresh voice. It is not a defeat.
- **Red-flag sparingly.** A red flag is a public vote of no-confidence in your current speaker. Reserve it for when the argument is being lost, not when you disagree with the phrasing. Remember: a red-flagged speaker may not return until every other team member has held the chair.
- **Team: confer quietly.** Members not in the chair may confer quietly with each other but may not coach their speaker audibly. Take notes; prepare to take the chair.

A speaker may tag themselves out at any point by saying “*I pass.*” No team vote is required. The next available team member takes the chair. The outgoing and incoming speakers **shake hands** at the chair. *No handshake with the opponent*; this is a team substitution, not a challenge. A voluntary pass does *not* count against the rotation requirement: the passing speaker may return as soon as a teammate is willing to swap back.

Red Flag (forced replacement)

A team may replace their current speaker after a **minimum seat time of 60 seconds**. To red-flag:

1. A simple majority of the team members *not in the chair* raise a visible signal simultaneously (a card, a raised hand; agree on the signal before the session starts).
2. The moderator confirms the majority and calls the exchange.
3. The outgoing and incoming speakers **shake hands** at the chair. The incoming speaker then **shakes hands with the opponent** before speaking.
4. **Rotation rule:** a red-flagged speaker may not return to the chair until every other team member has held it at least once. Full rotation restores eligibility.

Debate Quality Mechanisms

Two additional mechanisms are available to all participants. They are not used to change the chair; they are used to regulate the *quality* of the exchange, keep it constructive, and make intellectual honesty visible.

Knocking (cross-team acknowledgment)

When members of either team believe a speaker (including the opponent) has made an exceptionally strong argument, they acknowledge it by **knocking their knuckles on the armrest or seat of their chair**. The knock is the academic equivalent of applause: brief, audible, unmistakable.

1. Any number of participants may knock spontaneously; no majority is required. The knock is individual, not coordinated.
2. The moderator notes the moment but does not interrupt play. Knocking is logged informally as a marker of quality.

3. Play continues immediately. No chair change occurs. Knocking carries no mechanical penalty or reward; it is a public, embodied signal of respect for a well-made point.

Purpose: Builds a shared culture of recognising good argument. The physical gesture is harder to fake than raising a card and creates an immediate, visceral signal that something important was said.

Point of Concession (speaker-initiated)

A speaker in the chair may formally acknowledge that the opponent has made a point they cannot fully rebut. This is not a sign of weakness; it is the highest-quality move in academic debate.

1. The speaker raises an open hand (or a white card) and says: “*I concede: [state the opponent’s point clearly and precisely].*” Vague concessions are not valid.
2. The speaker must then pivot: “*... my position survives because [explanation].*” A concession without a pivot is a capitulation and results in a speaker swap; the pivot is mandatory.
3. The moderator logs the concession and announces it briefly: “*Concession noted.*”
4. The conceding speaker is **protected from a red flag for 30 seconds** after the concession. This makes intellectual honesty safe to demonstrate.
5. The opponent *may not repeat or pile on the conceded point* for the remainder of that speaking turn. The concession closes that line of argument; the debate must move forward.

Purpose: Makes weaknesses transparent rather than papered over. Rewards calibrated, honest reasoning. Keeps the debate from cycling on already-settled sub-questions.

Moderator Opening Script

This is a guide, not a script to read verbatim. Adapt it to the room.

1. Convene:

The motion before us today is: [read the motion]. I am the moderator. I will manage chair exchanges, log concessions, and keep time. Please take your team seats.

2. Assign teams and initial chairs:

Team assignments are as follows (if possible done randomly): [read names and roles]. The Proposition team is [names]; the Opposition

team is [names]. The Proposition side opens with [Speaker A]; the Opposition side opens with [Speaker B]. Take two minutes now to review your opening position and agree on your red-flag signal.

3. Read the stimulus and open:

Before we begin, I will read the session stimulus. [Read the stimulus from the Session Stimulus section.]

[Speaker A] and [Speaker B]: please take the chairs, face each other, and shake hands. There are no opening statements; begin directly. The debate is open.

Moderator Closing Script

The exchange is closed. I will now summarise the main fault lines. [Give a two-sentence neutral summary, noting any concessions that shifted the ground of the argument.] I hand over to the instructor for the wrap-up.