



MAKING A CASE FOR DEBATE

How to fine-tune your argument and sell your point.

By Christine Clapp, DTM

It happened at my first debate tournament when I was a freshman at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon. To demonstrate speaking proficiency for my undergraduate major — rhetoric and media studies — I was required to participate in two intercollegiate debate tournaments. However, I had struggled with public speaking since the days of elementary school book reports, so luckily there was no requirement to win any of the debates.

During that first tournament, my partner and I were randomly assigned to debate one of the best teams in our

I finished graduate school and started my career as a press assistant to a U.S. senator, I became a Toastmaster. While I have now been a member much longer than I was a college debater, many of the practices I developed through debate inform and improve the speaking I do as a Toastmaster today.

Lessons from Debate

1. Have a position and support it. In high school and college debate, each team is assigned a position: They will argue either for or against a selected topic. Depending on the particular

testimony or examples — and explain your rationale. Otherwise, you are simply stating an assertion.

2. Anticipate counterarguments.

In addition to supporting positions with evidence, debate teaches you to anticipate counterarguments, says Piatt. “Not everybody is going to agree with what I say, so I better be prepared for that,” he notes. “I don’t want to be caught off guard, so I think ahead to some of the possible objections and how I can respond.”

In the context of prepared Toastmasters speeches, when speakers don’t typically debate issues or take questions, presenters should identify key objections to their position and address each one directly during their speech.

3. Motivate yourself with competition.

“People don’t want to work at public speaking because it is scary and time-consuming,” says Charity Staudenraus, my junior-year debate partner, who now teaches science at North Marion Middle School near Portland, Oregon. “But doing debate makes it easier — the excitement of competition makes you want to get better and better.”

Toastmasters also can use competition as a motivational force — whether it is in striving to become the best speaker at a club meeting or participating in a contest at the club level or beyond.

“Many of the practices I developed through debate inform and improve the speaking I do as a Toastmaster today.”

region. Our opponents were poised and professional as they crafted a cogent argument off the cuff.

I felt humiliated as the team soundly but graciously defeated us. But then it happened. Like so many people who are or become Toastmasters, I experienced it — that “aha” moment when I resolved to tackle my fear of public speaking and become a confident communicator. I wanted to debate with the best of them. And I did — after that first semester when, I admit, my record was 0 and 12.

I spent the rest of my college career competing at local, regional and national debate tournaments. After

form of debate, the topic may be announced well in advance or revealed just 20 minutes before the debate begins. Either way, debaters must take a clear position and support it.

Barry Piatt, DTM and District 36 Governor, is a former high school and college debater. In debate, he says, it is not enough to make a point — it is “the importance of having evidence to back it up.”

That same principle applies to Toastmasters. Whether you are a prepared speaker or a Table Topics respondent, provide support — in the form of facts, statistics, expert

4. Command the lectern. One of the lessons I learned by participating in debate is that your speech begins *before* you say a word. “If you walk in and look confident, you have already started winning the round,” says Elliot Olson, who debates for Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. This isn’t unique to debate.

“When you take the lectern, walk up there like you own it,” adds Piatt, who regularly participates in demonstration debates hosted by a citizenship education organization

ers receive feedback. And the ability to thrive under pressure and handle the unexpected certainly can be honed by responding during Table Topics or by serving as Toastmaster of the Day.

6. Act on feedback. Lessons I learned from debate didn’t stop at the end of rounds. Being judged and responding to feedback increased my self-awareness. After all, the person sitting in the back of the room during the round declares one team the winner and the other a loser. In many

the other team on a win. Contrasting debate with prevailing political discourse in the United States, Piatt concludes, “Debate is an exercise in civility, not bombast and belligerence. At the end, we shake hands and can still be friends, even if we disagree.”

In addition to providing an environment for developing communication and leadership skills, effective Toastmasters clubs foster community and camaraderie among members. This requires members to practice

“Debate is an exercise in civility, not bombast and belligerence. At the end, we shake hands and can still be friends, even if we disagree.”



for youth. “You are in charge. You aren’t going to be effective if you look hesitant.”

5. Shine under scrutiny. Debate is inherently adversarial. Most forms of debate allow opponents to ask questions during speeches when new arguments are presented, or immediately following them.

“When your opposition is questioning your argument, you need to be able to maintain cool when your argument is scrutinized or challenged,” observes my sophomore-year debate partner, Bjørn Stillion Southard, now a lecturer in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Georgia. “It’s nice to know how to deal with that scrutiny in a productive way.”

The Toastmasters program also offers opportunities to learn how to handle scrutiny when prepared speak-

types of debate, judges also rate individual speakers and provide a reason for their decisions.

Olson contends that judges provide a reality check: “You may have intended to make an argument, but did you actually make it? Getting feedback from the judge makes you aware of how you truly are speaking and presenting yourself.”

Debaters who want to increase their rankings will study and act on feedback provided by judges. Toastmasters also should take advantage of feedback provided through oral evaluations at club meetings and through comments written in their manuals.

7. Practice civility. After a contentious round, most debaters shake hands with their opponents, acknowledge strengths in the opposition’s case and even congratulate

civility and keep an open mind when listening to speeches and evaluations.

Get Involved

Perhaps you are having your own “aha” moment and want to improve your speaking skills by getting involved in debate. Here’s how to participate:

Contact local high school and college debate programs. Ask if they need lay judges to adjudicate practice rounds or even tournaments. Many programs are short on staff and welcome outside help.

Host a demonstration debate at a district conference. Such exhibitions can inspire club leaders to hold debates and will provide an example of the debate format.

In May 2009, I participated in a debate at the District 36 Spring Conference in Maryland. The resolution: Local governments should use traffic

enforcement cameras — speed cameras, red light cameras and parking cameras — to better enforce traffic and parking laws. The topic worked because there is a strong case to be made on both sides of the issue. It is a current event relevant to the daily lives of participants, and arguments on either side don't overtly align with any political party or agenda.

Mary Ann Guerra, DTM and Past District 36 Governor, says the debate process played a key role in helping her club resolve an important issue. When the club considered changing its name, the members debated the matter and subsequently voted to keep the same name (Tally Ho Toastmasters).

"I think debating is a fair way to resolve differences," she says. "Had we not debated, I think we

may have lost some club members, which would have been disastrous. I highly recommend that every Toastmaster participate in a debate at least once."

Debating can provide an open, fair and productive way for clubs to make certain decisions — and improve the speaking abilities of members at the same time. Toastmasters offers a Debate Handbook (Item 104) with sample formats and judging tips to guide your club's efforts.

Debate "is a fun and easy sport to learn," says my former college coach, Robert Trapp, director of the Willamette University Debate Union since 1989. "Any educated person can participate."

Participants gain confidence and polish, notes Trapp. But for him,

debate serves a larger purpose: "Debate is a primary citizenship skill. All people in open society are not debaters, but debate teaches skills to be a citizen — how to listen and think outside lines of authority."

All the more reason for Toastmasters — even reluctant ones — to try debate. **T**

Christine Clapp, DTM, president of *Spoken with Authority*, develops the voice of experts who want to broaden their impact. She also lectures in the Department of Communication at The George Washington University, in Washington, D.C. Follow her on Twitter @ChristineClapp.

Will 2012 be Your Year to GET PAID TO SPEAK?

Get Darren's **proven step-by-step system** to get your **first check!**

**Don't take Darren's word for it!
Ask anybody who owns the system:**



"The single **best business decision** that I have made...!"

~ Heather Racano, Winnipeg, MB



"Darren's system **saved me years...**"

~ Michael Davis, CFP



"**Worth every dime** & moment I spent with Darren's system..."

~ Robert Freel, Menifee, CA



Darren will bend over backwards to help you Get Paid to Speak!



Go Now To:

www.GetPaidToSpeakByNextWeek.com