

*Speak up  
Scotland*

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# Debating During Lockdown

A guide for teachers

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*compiled by*

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# Introduction

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The national lockdown as a result of COVID-19 presents particular difficulties to teachers, who are required to maintain lessons while they and their pupils are at home. Extra-curricular activities are especially difficult to run during this period.

As part of our Speak up Scotland programme the English-Speaking Union Scotland wants to ensure that schools are able to keep debating. Now, more than ever, we need young people to be thinking critically, speaking persuasively and engaging constructively.

This document contains a series of materials, exercises, online worksheets and videos you can use to run debating while in lockdown. Everything in this document can be run from home, with minimal resources other than a phone or computer, and is aimed at both experienced teachers and those completely new to debating.

The Speak up Scotland programme will also be maintaining a dedicated "Lockdown Debating" page on our website- check there for updated materials, videos and blog posts.

# Debating Overview

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There are many different formats of debating but, generally speaking, they involve opposing sides (the *proposition* and the *opposition*) presenting speeches debating the merits of a particular topic (the *motion*)- which always starts with "This House". Examples of motions include:

*This house would ban zoos*

*This house regrets the war on drugs*

*This house believes that social media has done more harm than good*

Speakers in a debate must present both their own arguments (*substantive matter*) as well as responses to arguments from the other team (*rebuttal*). Different formats of debating may require some speakers to prioritise rebuttal over substantive matter, or mandate that certain speakers devote their speech to summarising what has come before. These obligations are known as *speaker roles*.

Debaters are generally judged on their style, content and strategy. This guide is split into these three categories.

## Focus of lockdown debating

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Due to lockdown's particular limitation on in-person access and the potential difficulties in hosting live debates via video-call, this guide will focus on the elements of debating not involving real-time engagement. We'll be looking at areas such as understanding arguments, building a strong team case and developing confident speaking style on your own.

# Style

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"Style" refers to the way you speak in a debate. It includes things like tone of voice, volume, speed, hand gestures and eye-contact.

The best debaters deliver speeches in a way that is compelling to listen to. This makes them sound more believable and elevates the content of their speech, making it more persuasive to an audience.

Some questions to consider when thinking about style are:

*Am I delivering this speech in a way that makes the audience take my side? Am I being clear and understandable? Am I creating a sense of urgency and stakes?*

## Exercise: Mirror Debating

Get your pupils to choose something that is currently irritating or angering them. This can be as serious (people losing jobs as a result of coronavirus) or playful (having to share a bathroom with a sibling) as they like. Pupils must write a one-minute speech about this topic and deliver it to themselves in the mirror. The speech should aim to convince an imaginary audience that the speaker is correct to be frustrated.

How did this make them feel? Was it awkward? Did they enjoy it?

## Exercise: Famous Speeches

The following page contains examples of famous speeches with an explanation of why they are effective. Get your pupils to watch these speeches themselves and send you their thoughts. Why do they think these are well-delivered speeches? What point were the speeches trying to make? What parts of the speeches would they like to emulate?

Building on the mirror exercise, get your pupils to deliver a section of one of these speeches they like best in front of the mirror. Was this easier to do than their own speech? Did they feel more confident when they had an actual speech to copy?

Like acting, good style involves taking on the role of a character—usually far more powerful and confident than one would be in everyday life. This may feel unnatural at first but developing your debating persona is incredibly helpful in gaining good style.

It's important to note that there is no "one" sort of style that's better than another. Some speakers deliver speeches best in an aggressive, forceful style, while others are more effective speaking calmly and methodically. The most appropriate style to use may also depend on the content of a speech.

## Different kinds of style

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Your pupils will be familiar with this famous speech but it's well-known for a reason. The points King makes may seem obvious now but it's useful to watch this speech thinking about the context of the time. It's an effective speech because of how King makes supposedly radical and extreme arguments look like common-sense.

## Martin Luther King



## Barack Obama



This was the speech that introduced Barack Obama to America and launched his career. Pay attention to how he deploys his personal story in the speech and how he uses his explanation of America as a way of unifying the audience and bringing them to his side.

In this short speech, Jacinda Ardern hits back at the Australian Prime Minister on the issue of immigration. Note how she delivers her speech calmly while still making it clear that she is angry and has the moral high ground. Also note how she humanises New Zealand immigrants in order to garner sympathy and make the Australian PM look bad.

## Jacinda Ardern



## Barbara Castle



In this speech, Barbara Castle makes a case against the European Union. A lot of this speech is repeating arguments in favour of the EU to draw attention to how ridiculous Castle thinks they are- this is very difficult to do! If done badly it can sound like you are making your opponent's arguments for them.

Julia Gillard uses this speech to draw attention to misogyny from Tony Abbott. This speech is aggressive and combative, but Gillard uses this forceful tone to draw attention to how offensive Abbott's actions are and inspire a sense of righteous fury in her audience.

## Julia Gillard



## James Baldwin



In this speech, James Baldwin makes the case that America's success has come at the expense of black people. Pay attention to how his speech is constructed and how he delivers very complex ideas in a way that is accessible to his audience.

This speech contains very clever framing. AOC could have simply pointed out all the corrupt things it is legal to do, but taking on the role of someone doing this corruption makes the audience realise how easy it is to do and draws attention to the injustice of the situation, making it more relatable.

## Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez



# Common style mistakes

Common style mistakes include:

- Crutch-phrases that waste time like "ladies and gentlemen" or "obviously"
- Mumbling and/or swallowing words that make it hard to hear what a speaker is saying
- Speaking too quickly and letting your sentences run into each other, not being clear when one point is ending and another is starting
- Low energy- does NOT mean speakers need to be aggressive
- Physical issues: slouching, pacing, fiddling

## Exercise: Recording Ticks

Get your pupils to record audio of themselves delivering a two minute speech in favour of the topic "*This house would ban school uniforms*" (or another topic of your choosing). Importantly, this speech should be impromptu and not delivered from a pre-written set of notes.

After delivering the speech, pupils should listen back to their recording and take note of all the vocal ticks they identify. This should be a little awkward and embarrassing to listen to- that's the point! Often we don't realise the unhelpful and repetitive phrases we use in speeches- "ladies and gentlemen", "obviously", "we can see that" and the best way to deal with this is to draw attention to it.

Speakers may also identify other stylistic things to work on when they listen back to their speech- recording speeches is a useful tool, especially for newer debaters.

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## Exercise: Power Poses and Gestures

One way to build confidence in debating is through "power poses". Like many style exercises, this may seem forced and artificial at first but will help your speakers develop their debating persona. These also stop common physical mistakes like slouching or fiddling.

Get your pupils to deliver their speeches from the mirror debate exercise again, except this time while maintaining a power pose throughout. These poses could include: hands on hips, arms folded or hands in front of you with elbows bent, like you're holding an imaginary ball.

If your speakers have a tendency to gesticulate too much in a way that is distracting, get them to deliver a speech with their fingers of each hand touching each other. If they shuffle, get them to deliver a speech while standing on a piece of A4 paper.

## Exercise: Emotion Debating

Get your pupils to deliver an impromptu one minute speech in front of the mirror on the motion "*This house would allow victims of crimes to choose the criminal's punishment*" (or another topic of your choosing). First, they must deliver the speech normally. Next, they must deliver the same speech as angrily as possible. Finally, they must deliver the speech as somberly and sadly as possible.

Which emotion did they like best? Which did they think was most effective? Which did they think was most appropriate? Why?

# Content

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Content refers to the arguments you make in a debate- the substance of your speech.

Usually, content is weighed equally to style. What you say is just as important as how you say it. However, good style cannot save bad content and good content cannot save bad style.

Content also encompasses how arguments in a debate are organised. Do they flow in a logical way? Is the argument being made easy to follow? Is the conclusion of the points being made clear?

## Exercise: Argument Building

Many pieces of writing online are very good examples of how to construct an argument. Get your debaters to read this article

(<https://www.manrepeller.com/2019/02/trap-of-turning-hobbies-into-hustles.html>) and send you their thoughts on it.

Can they summarise the point of the article in one sentence? Do they agree with the point? What did the author use to back up their argument? Was the author's use of counter-argument (saying what people who disagree with her think) useful?

# Staying Informed of Current Affairs

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Many debates are about current affairs. To excel in these debates, speakers must have good knowledge of the world around them and what's happening in global affairs.

Many young people will be intimidated by the news—encourage them to walk before they run. If news about the Middle East is too confusing or dense, for example, they can start with basic explainers on the region. Get them to make a list of terms or ideas they did not understand in an article ("military industrial complex", "austerity") and then research them.

## Exercise: News Quiz

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This is a fun way to keep your debaters informed. Each week, assign one pupil to put together a short quiz (around a dozen questions) for the rest of your debaters on events that happened in the news that week. Keep a leaderboard to track who is the most informed and make the quiz especially competitive.

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# News Sources for Debaters

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There are many places for debaters to read the news. As in life generally, it is good to use trusted, unbiased news sources. However, debating is about presenting both sides of an argument and it is often very useful to read from sources you disagree with and think about them critically.

Podcasts, especially short ones that come out daily, can be easy ways to stay on top of the news. Some good ones include:

*The BBC World Service Global News Podcast*

*Today in Focus*

*The Economist 'Editor's Picks'*

*The New York Times The Daily*

*The Guardian Audio Long Reads*

## Consuming news strategically

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Debaters should consume the news actively- thinking about what they're reading or watching and how to use it in a debate. Good questions to ask after consuming something are: *What did this teach me? What argument could I use this to back up?*

## Building a "Case"

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Your "case" refers to all the arguments your team has come up with. "Case building" therefore refers to the process of coming up with these arguments, as well as prioritising them in order of importance and deciding which speaker will make each one.

You should always put your most important arguments first. This gives them more time to be discussed in the debate, and gives you time to defend them from your opponent's rebuttal.

### Exercise: Actor Analysis

One way to come up with arguments if you're stuck is through "actor analysis". This refers to the process of looking at all the "actors" in the debate- i.e.: those who will be affected by the motion in some way.

Send your debaters the motion "*This house believes the government should pay everyone's wages during lockdown*" and get them to identify 3 "actors" in the debate and 1 argument for each in favour of the motion- why this actor would benefit from the motion happening.

# Conclusion

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I hope you found the information in this document useful. If you have any questions, or suggestions for areas you would like covered in future materials, please do not hesitate to send an email to [jordan@esusScotland.org.uk](mailto:jordan@esusScotland.org.uk).

This period is a difficult one, but with great difficulties come great opportunities. We certainly have a lot to debate about! I sincerely hope that we will be able to continue the in-person aspect of our Speak up Scotland programme as soon as possible and, in the meantime, please do stay safe.

All the best,

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