



CONNECTICUT MIDDLE SCHOOL DEBATE LEAGUE

How to Write a Good Reason for Decision (RFD)

How to Write an RFD:

1. Identify the reason/reasons for your decision.

The reason for decision must be based on the arguments presented in the round. It is not enough to only comment on style. However, there are a variety of ways in which one side's arguments might have prevailed, so it is not enough to simply say that one side's case was better. Some potential reasons for decision could be "opp didn't respond to the prop case but prop responded to all of opp's contentions" or "the prop proved that the status quo has problems that the resolution would address while the opp side didn't explain why the status quo was good enough and also didn't propose an alternative."

2. Be specific!

If you think one team had better arguments/clash tell them which arguments/clash were the best and why. If a specific piece of evidence won the debate tell the debaters which one. This is the type of feedback that helps debaters improve!

3. Be kind, but tell the truth

Don't be overly harsh on your ballot. For example, it would be rude to say, "all of prop's contentions were completely nonsensical." However, on the other hand, don't sugarcoat it. Our debaters spend weeks writing their cases—tell them what you thought! When judges tell debaters that "everyone in the round was amazing!" debaters know that, even if it was true, there are more substantive comments that could have been made.

4. Don't be a debater!

Judges must evaluate rounds based on what they heard, not what they wanted to hear. If you thought one of prop's contentions was weak, but opp never addressed it, the weakness of the argument would not be a reason to vote for opp. Similarly, if you thought one of opp's refutations was not very strong, but it was the only refutation in the round, that would be a reason to vote for opp. Our judges usually have great thoughts on what could have been a good argument to make! It's ok to tell the debaters what could have been a great argument, but it's NOT ok to use your own opinions to decide the round.

Example Ballots with Critiques:

“Opp needs to use their time. Prop can’t just read.”

This RFD is lacking for a couple of reasons. First, it doesn’t tell the debaters *why* one side won and one side lost—based on these comments, either side could be listed as the winner. Second, there is no mention of the *arguments*. All RFDs should be based on the content of the debaters’ speeches rather than solely on style. Third, while the CTMSDL encourages judges to take debaters seriously and give real feedback, many debaters would interpret a ballot with only these two sentences as overly harsh. Try to say something encouraging to the debaters and try to comment on their arguments so that the debaters know you listened closely and cared about the round.

“The prop team was more successful with making sure to effectively address all of opp’s points. Also, prop was able to rebuild their points with examples and evidence.”

This RFD is a little better than the previous one because it does reference arguments. However, none of the information is useful to the debaters or their coaches going forward. In a debate, the team that better addresses the opposing team’s points and rebuilds effectively usually wins, so writing this on the RFD, while important, is not enough. Instead, this judge needs to tell the debaters *which* refutations were effective and *which* examples were most persuasive. This helps the debaters know what worked and what didn’t so they can improve going forward.

“Prop had strong contentions that the opp did not fully refute.”

This ballot has the same problem. The judge needs to say *which* contentions were strong and *why* they were strong. In addition, the judge should comment on *why/in what way* the opp refutations were incomplete.

“I give it to prop for a few reasons. Their case never gets responded to, and they always warranted their case. I also buy their safety point about needing regulation.”

This is a good RFD. A lack of refutation from one team is a good reason to vote for the other side. It is also great that this judge points out which argument she liked the best (i.e. the one about safety) as this tells the debaters which point was most persuasive.

“The opp case was build around a counterplan that advanced eliminating the death penalty. But prop never advanced imposing the death penalty so it isn’t clear that the opp contentions applied to the prop case. Prop presented three contentions that opp never contested until the opp rebuttal, so these replies were new arguments, and also many were based on comparison to the death penalty.”

This is a great RFD. The judge identifies multiple reasons for the decision using specifics from the round and explains those reasons clearly. This ballot would be useful to debaters and coaches going forward—debaters can learn from this ballot why their counterplan failed and how to fix the problem in future round.