

Drills for Middle School Debaters
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1. News Brief

Find a news item relevant to the upcoming topic (or send your debaters forth to find them) and assign it to a student at the end of one practice. Begin the next practice with a five-minute presentation by the student. They should explain:

1. What happened?
2. What does it teach us about the topic?
3. If it what happened was good, how can we repeat it? If it was bad, how can we prevent it?

Alternatively, if you cannot reasonably assign homework, you can try an abridged version in practice. Ask one student to present something they've read in the news recently, then ask the next student to propose a motion related to that news item, then ask the next student for a prop contention, and the next for an opp contention.

2. Actor Analysis

When preparing to write cases on a new resolution, have the students brainstorm to come up with all the actors in the motion. Actors are:

- Parties who might implement the motion.
- Parties who will be affected by the motion.
- Parties who will behave differently in response to the motion.

You may want to complete this step yourself, so you can prompt the students if they have overlooked any particularly important actors. Then, for each actor answer the following questions, when applicable:

1. How does the resolution benefit them?
2. How does it harm them?
3. How will they help the resolution to succeed? Why will they respond that way?
4. How will they resist or undermine the resolution? Why?

3. Interpretations

To learn about modeling, give students a motion and break them up into teams of 3-5 people. Each team gets a certain amount of time (5 minutes is good) to come up with as many interpretations of the resolution as possible. Interpretations encompass both your definition of the terms and your plan for how to implement the motion, if you have a plan. I like to use the motion "THW discourage the consumption of meat" because there are so many different ways to do that.

Now have the groups take turns presenting one interpretation per turn. Each group gets:

- 1 point for ridiculous interpretations (Poison 1 in every 10,000 hamburgers)
- 2 points for every serious interpretation (Tax meat)
- 3 points for every creative but still debatable interpretation (Require that everyone slaughter their own animals)

Once an idea has been presented, other groups receive no points for presenting it. As coach, you'll have to moderate, deciding on point values and ruling on what does or doesn't count as a new idea.

4. Argument Volleyball

Divide students into two groups, and have them sit in two long rows facing each other. Give them a motion, and assign one side prop and one side opp. Give them just one minute to come up with contentions. Inform the students that once a member of a team has presented, they cannot present again until all of their teammates have gone. This prevents talkative students from taking over, and requires quiet students to participate.

Pick one side to go first. They will select a single representative to present **one** contention in one minute. Then give the other side 45 seconds to refute that contention--again via a single representative. Then give the first team 45 seconds to respond to that refutation. Continue going back and forth like this, but periodically shorten the amount of time that each team gets to respond. Eventually one team will be unable to articulate a valid response in time (you'll have to judge this) and the other team gets a point. Then switch and have the other team present a contention for the opposing side and repeat. Be sure to flow the whole thing on the board.

Teams might give non-responsive answers that don't actually refute what their opponents just said (for example by merely reiterating their own point, or refuting some other argument instead) at the very least you should point this out, but optionally you can create a "sudden death rule" where teams can challenge their opponents' point as non-responsive, and they immediately win if it is or lose if it's not.

5. Avalanche

The coach or an experienced debater gives a very long and detailed constructive speech. Or, a student gives a regular constructive and the coach/debater gives a long and detailed rebuttal. Be sure to give yourself unfair advantages like 8 minutes of speaking time and the opportunity to do research beforehand. (You can use a 1st Prop speech you find online for this.)

Next, students must respond in 90 seconds, with the rule that they *must answer at least two contentions*. The point is that they are forced to group contentions together, identifying a common element shared by multiple contentions and using it to simultaneously address multiple points. To make the exercise go especially smoothly, you can plan out the speech in advance and deliberately include these kinds of commonalities so that you know the students will have something to work with.

6. Highbrow / Lowbrow

Pick something highbrow (The United Nations, CRISPR, classical music) and something lowbrow (The NFL, Doritos, Sean Mendez) and have a student give a speech in which they confidently explain to the audience 2-3 reasons why these things are actually very similar or the same. For example, just like Doritos, the UN is unnatural, breaks easily under pressure, and is ultimately a waste of money. Ideally students will elaborate on each point, and even more ideally they will make the speech entertaining. Give the student about 1-3 minutes to prepare (eg while another student is presenting). Speeches generally last 2-4 minutes.

Other example highbrow topics:

- Marriage
- Philosophy
- Cyrus the Great

- The US constitution
- The Nobel Prize
- Whatever classic literature your school assigns for English class

Other example lowbrow topics:

- Clash Royale
- Shoe with built-in toes
- The Roman Circus Maximus
- Instagram models
- Curly fries

Your students might enjoy being asked to come up with lists of highbrow and lowbrow topics for later use.

7. Lifeboat

You are all on a sinking ship, but the lifeboat does not have enough room for everyone. Students must pick who (or what) they are, and then argue why that makes them most deserving of a place on the lifeboat. For example:

- I am an amateur astronomer, so I can help us navigate back to land using the constellations.
- I am a billionaire, and I will give away my fortune if I make it back alive.

Optionally, students can also go around and challenge each other's positions (what's to ensure the billionaire will keep her promise?).

8. War Speech

Give a student an extremely humdrum topic. They must give an inspiring, dramatic speech exhorting the audience to join their cause, reminiscent of something out of *Independence Day*, *Lord of the Rings*, etc. Examples:

- It's cold outside, put on a sweater.
- Eat a high-fiber diet.

This drill is useful practice for students who are shy, or give monotone speeches.

9. Press Conference

One student assumes the position of Press Secretary. Other students must address them as Madam Secretary / Mister Secretary / Esteemed Secretary, according to the student's preference. The Press Secretary is then given an absurd proposal or position to defend. They do not give a speech. Instead, they call on members of the press corps (all the other students) who ask them questions in an attempt to stump them.

Example:

- We should replace the NYC municipal water system with a municipal Gatorade system.
 - Question: Won't this leave everyone covered in sticky, sugary residue, leading to a 10000% increase in people getting swarmed by bees?

Students often ask weak questions ("But won't this fail because of X?") which are an opportunity to give advice on good and bad POIs. Press secretaries might give really weak answers and then call on someone else, refusing to grant a follow-up. On the one hand, as coach you can feel free to forbid this and compel the press secretary to give a better answer. On the other hand, if audience members are thinking strategically, they will follow up on each other's questions.

If someone stumps the press secretary, they become the new secretary. If the audience is stumped, pick a new press secretary. Either way, give them a new topic.