Points of information are elements of Worlds-Style debate as well as other formats of parliamentary debate where debaters have the opportunity for direct exchange with one another. A point of information is a question or a statement made by one debater to another debater who is in the process of giving a speech. The debater who wants to ask a question of or make a statement to the debater who is giving a speech is said to be offering a point of information. In the most positive sense of the word “offering,” one debater is offering another the chance to engage a potential weakness or lack of clarity regarding the argument that is being presented. But, a point of information is not a gift in the traditional sense because it is usually offered as a criticism rather than as a support of a point the debater is making.

Chapter Outline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offering, Accepting, and Refusing Points of Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offering Points of Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purposes of Points of Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing Effective Points of Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedures for Offering Points of Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responding to Points of Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms and Concepts From Chapter 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion Questions For Chapter 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercises For Chapter 11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Offering, Accepting, and Refusing Points of Information

In the true sense of an offer, the debater who is giving the speech can either accept or reject the offer of a point of information. After all, the speaker has been given a certain limited amount of time to speak and, therefore, has the right to use that time as he or she sees fit. So, the speaker can accept or to refuse the offer of a point of information as he or she decides. If the offer of the point of information is refused, the person offering the point should sit down and allow the speaker to continue. If the offer of the point of information is accepted, the person offering the point has a maximum of 15 seconds to make a statement or ask a
question. After the point of information is given, the speaker then will respond directly to the statement or the question.

By convention of Worlds-Style debate, points of information are only offered by members of one side (Government or Opposition) to members of the other side. Thus, speakers on the Opposition side can only offer points of information to speakers on the Government side, and speakers on the Government side can only offer points to speakers on the Opposition side.

As stated previously, the point of information can last no more than 15 seconds, and the person offering the point is not allowed to follow up with an additional comment or question.

Also, by convention, points of information cannot be offered during the first minute of the speech and cannot be offered during the last one minute of speaking time. The purpose of that convention is to allow the speaker to begin and end his or her speech without the possibility of interruption. As a signal that the time has come when points of information can be offered, the judge will knock one time on the table after one minute of a speech has elapsed. As a signal that points of information no longer are allowed, the judge will again knock once on the table when only one minute remains in the speaking time. The knocks signal when the speaker is or is not in protected time when no other points of information are allowed.

The remainder of this chapter will discuss points of information from the perspective of the person offering a point, and from the perspective of the speaker who must decide whether to accept or reject the point and, how to respond if accepted.

Offering Points of Information

Any discussion of offering points of information should include the reasons underlying points of information and how to think about what kinds of points of information to offer. Additionally, the discussion should include the choices available to debaters about procedures they should follow to offer effective points of information.

Purposes of Points of Information

Points of information are offered for a variety of reasons. Reasons range from clarifying arguments, to refuting arguments, to telegraphing one’s points to the audience, to setting the overall agenda for the debate.

One reason for offering a point of information is to clarify what a speaker is saying. Sometimes, a speaker is so unclear that the audience, the judge, and the other debaters have difficulty understanding one or more points that the speaker is making. Offering a point of information as a request to clarify a point that is not particularly clear may not be the best strategy for the debater whose singular goal is to try to win the debate or to try to place first in the debate but an ethical debater may want to offer a clarifying point of information in
order to help create a better debate for all involved. A point offered for this reason usually benefits the speaker rather than the person offering the point of information because it signals to the speaker that things need to be clarified and gives him or her the opportunity to that which is confusing.

However, for the debater who has a genuine interest in creating a better debate for all four teams, such a point of information is a good one. Adding clarity to an opponent’s speech—especially if that speech is the Prime Minister’s speech—has the potential to have a positive effect on the overall debate and, thus, improve the experience for all four teams. Therefore, offering a point of information to clarify an argument or a position can be seen as a positive contribution to the debate, although it is not a selfish contribution to a particular team or debater.

A second very common reason for offering a point of information is to gain the opportunity to directly refute an opponent’s arguments while the person is in the process of making the argument. In that case, as soon as the speaker makes an argument that the debater wishes to refute, that debater should offer the point. If the point is accepted, the debater will immediately refute the speaker’s argument. Refuting an argument directly using a point of information can be more effective than waiting for the speech to present the refutation because the argument and the refutation are so close together in time. Using refutation in a point of information signals to the audience and judge that the debater is skilled as a critical thinker; that the debater is able to think of and conceptualize refutation on the spot. Debaters need to be cognizant of the fact that becoming overly aggressive in using refutation in points of information can cause judges and audiences to characterize those debaters as antagonistic, intimidating, and even bullying. Points of information should be used to refute arguments that need to be refuted, but should not be used to diminish the debating skills of other debaters. Sometimes, points of information used as refutation have a tendency to distract the speaker from a point he or she is making. Intentional distraction should never be the purpose of a point of information. In fact, a point of information should be used to keep the debate on track, not to push it off track. Debaters who use points of information to intentionally distract their opponents will quite justly be seen in a negative view by judges and audiences.

A third reason to offer points of information is to telegraph the debater’s own stance to the audience or judge. Telegraphing an argument, as the term implies, suggests that the debater is trying to send a message to an audience or judge in a manner that the argument would be heard earlier than it would normally be heard. So, if the debater intends to make an argument in the Leader of Opposition speech, but can telegraph the argument as a point of information to the Prime Minister, the argument arrives at the audience and the judge prior to the time that the Prime Minister speaks. Thus, sometimes an opportunity might arise for a debater to insert his or her main argument as a point of information prior to the time he or she is designated to speak. In that case, the argument arrives at the judge and audience before the designated speaker even takes the floor.

Another situation exists in which a debater might want to telegraph an argument using a point of information. That situation occurs when a debater hears the speaker making an argument that is contrary to one of the very important arguments the debater intends to
introduce in a later speech. In that case, the debater can offer a point of information and, if it is accepted, can then state and briefly explain the argument. By making the argument in the point of information the debater will prepare the judge or audience to pay careful attention to the argument when the debater makes it later. Additionally, if the debater briefly makes the argument in a point of information, and the debater who accepted the point of information later responds, the debater can then more fully develop the argument in the his or her speech.

A fourth reason for offering points of information involves the opportunity to establish or re-establish the direction of the debate. If, from a particular debater’s point of view, the debate has gotten off track, or if the debater believes the debate is not taking the direction the debater thinks it ought to take, a point of information can be a useful means of refocusing the debate. The notion of focusing the debate or setting the debate is sometimes called setting the agenda for the debate, or simply, agenda setting. By successfully setting the agenda for the debate, one team or one side may be able to dictate the overall outcome of the debate. If one team or one side sees a particular argument or set of arguments as especially important, or if they see a particular perspective on the issue as important, then setting the agenda to focus on those arguments or perspectives is a very useful tool of persuasion. The ability to establish the framework or perspective within which the debate is seen by the audience or judge is one of the most important things that a team can do to have their arguments evaluated favorably.

Using points of information to set the direction or agenda of the debate may be one of the most important uses of points of information for members of the First Government and First Opposition teams during the second half of the debate. Remember that the debate consists of eight constructive speeches, and the members of the First Government and First Opposition teams are finished with their speeches after the third and fourth speeches. Without some means to continue to participate in the debate, the members of the teams in the first half of the debate have little to say about the direction or focus of the second half of the debate. Points of information give the members of the first two teams the opportunity to continue to participate, and even to possibly redirect the debate to the issues that they consider most important.

**Developing Effective Points of Information**

Effective points of information must be formulated during someone else’s speech. They are not elements of debate that can be formulated in advance of the debate. As a result of the necessity to formulate points of information during an opponent’s speech, the actual development of these points requires quick and critical thinking. The following are a few things to which debaters should do and should pay attention to during others’ speeches so that they can effectively develop points of information.

First, listen carefully. Although that bit of advice may sound obvious, debaters need to understand that a point of information can be developed from any argument they hear that can or should be refuted. Debaters need to listen carefully to all arguments so that, at the time they hear an argument being made that they can refute, they should immediately consider offering a point of information. Sometimes, however, instances where refutation is obvious
are not the best times to offer points of information. If the refutation is unimportant, that is, if it would not be important enough to offer during a speech, then the debater should think twice about offering the refutation as a point of information. When the debater makes the judgment that the point should be refuted, they should stand up immediately to offer the point.

Second, debaters should pay particular attention to arguments and to refutation made directly against those arguments. For example, if a debater accuses another debater of committing an inconsistency, the accused debater should immediately stand to offer a point of information. Similarly, anytime an argument is directly addressed to a particular person, that person should try to respond to that argument immediately. To do otherwise may give the judges and audiences the idea that the accused debater agrees with the accusation.

Third, like the second instance above, if a debater has personally refuted an argument and the speaker is in the process of trying to rebuild that argument, the first debater ought to offer a point of information relevant to that rebuilding process. Again, not to do so may indicate to the judges and audience that the rebuilding effort is successful because it is going uncontested.

Fourth, especially during the later phases of the debate, debaters should look for opportunities to direct or redirect the debate to an agenda that is consistent with the most important issues in the debate and is most favorable to their side. This is a very important opportunity that ought to be taken by members of the Opening Government and Opposition teams. Because they have no formal occasions to speak in the second half of the debate, points of information represent their only opportunities to contribute to the debate in the most important second half. They should use points of information to set or reset the agenda of the debate, to direct or redirect the debate toward points they made during their speeches, as well as to contribute excellent argumentation, in general.

Finally, almost as important as deciding when to offer points of information and what kinds of points to offer, debaters also need to think critically about when they should not try to make offers. Sometimes, a decision regarding whether or not to offer a point of information has to do with the timing in the speech. For example, a good time to rise to offer a point of information is immediately after the judge sounds the knock on the table indicating that protected time is finished. Rising at this first available moment signals to the judge that the debater is ready and eager to engage in the debate. If, on the other hand, a speaker is in the middle of developing an important argument, the debater wanting to offer a point of information might predict that the offer would not be accepted. The debater should consider waiting until the person is concluding a point or is making a short pause or transition between arguments. Doing so not only improves the debater’s chance of having a point accepted, but it also does not interrupt the speaker, thus improving the debate for everyone.
**Procedures for Offering Points of Information**

Regardless of the purpose that a debater has in mind when offering a point of information, a certain process needs to be followed. First, the person offering the point of information needs to get the speaker’s attention. The debater can gain attention by standing and raising a hand, by simply standing quietly, or by standing and saying something like “point of information, please.” The decision to simply stand or to vocalize the offer of a point of information is not trivial. In the first place, an offer of a point of information should be made in a manner that does not attempt to distract the speaker. In this regard, the most courteous way to offer a point of information is to simply stand quietly. However, occasionally the speaker may be standing in a particular position where he or she does not have a good view of the debaters on the other side. In that case, perhaps the most courteous way to offer a point of information is to stand, then during a pause in the speech to say “point of information please.” Being courteous and not distracting the speaker is certainly one criterion to be used in deciding how to go about offering a point of information. Another involves making sure the speaker knows when a point is being offered. A speaker cannot accept a point of information if he or she is unaware that someone is offering one. Therefore, if a debater stands to offer a point of information and realizes that, for whatever reason, the speaker has not seen that he or she is preparing to offer a point, the debater should wait for a pause in the speaker’s speech, perhaps even for a transition between arguments, then should politely vocalize the offer.

Second, after getting the speaker’s attention, the person wanting to offer the point of information needs to wait to be recognized by the speaker. The person cannot actually offer the point of information until recognized by the speaker. The speaker may refuse the point by verbal statement (such as, not at this time please, no thank you, etc.) or by nonverbal signal (such as waving in a downward motion to signal the person to sit back down). Alternatively, the speaker may accept the offer of the point of information by saying something such as “I’ll take your point.” Remember, the decision to accept or reject a point of information belongs solely to the speaker and cannot be appealed. Finally, when and if the offer of a point of information is accepted, the debater has a maximum of 15 seconds to actually complete the offer with a question or statement, and needs to be careful not to exceed that limit even though no one may be timing the point. Remember, the speaker has offered 15 seconds of his or her time, and the debater offering the point should show the corresponding courtesy of not abusing that offer.

**Responding to Points of Information**

The person speaking controls the time allocated for his or her speech and, therefore, needs to make decisions about accepting and declining points of information. Debaters should carefully consider which points to accept and which to decline. If a point is accepted, the debater needs to respond immediately and confidently. The following are some ideas that debaters should consider when deciding to accept offers of points of information and when actually responding to those points.
First, debaters should accept offers judiciously; speakers should accept some but not too many offers of points of information. Speakers who accept all points of information risk losing control of their entire speech and allowing their opponents to control the direction of the debate. Alternatively, by accepting no points of information, a debater may communicate to the judge or audience that he or she does not have much confidence in what is being argued or that he or she is unable to respond quickly to questions or criticisms. Most traditions of parliamentary debate suggest that a speaker accept a minimum of two points of information and a maximum of three or four.

A second factor to be considered when deciding which points to accept is the level of a debater’s comfort in the particular part of his or her speech. Debaters should accept points when they are in a comfortable part of their speech. If the debater is comfortable making a particular argument, for instance, then the chances are better that he or she will be able to respond to the point with confidence. If the debater is having difficulty thinking of what to say, he or she should not compound that difficulty by accepting a point of information.

A third factor to be considered when deciding whether to accept or decline a point has to do with the person offering the point. Sometimes beginning debaters are afraid to accept a point of information from a strong speaker. As debaters become more confident, they need to consider accepting points from strong debaters rather than from relatively weaker ones. By accepting a point from one of the strongest speakers on the opposite side, debaters communicate to the judge and the audience that they have no fear of engaging the strongest speakers.

In any case, debaters should probably not accept more than one point from any speaker. In fairness to the two other teams on the opposite side of the debate, if a debater is going to accept only two offers of points of information, they should consider accepting one offer from each team rather than two points from any single team.

Beyond the decision of whether or not to accept offers of points of information, the debater needs to think in advance about how he or she will respond. Some simple guidelines may prove helpful.

First, once a debater decides to accept a point of information, he or she must be prepared to respond to the point immediately. Responding immediately demonstrates to the audience and the judge that the debater is a quick thinker and is able to think while he or she speaks. Sometimes a debater is tempted to respond to a point by saying “I’ll get back to your point later.” That is almost always an unwise response because it signals, rightly or wrongly, that the debater cannot think of the proper response quickly.

Sometimes, a debater, particularly a beginning debater, finds responding immediately to be especially difficult. That difficulty can be compounded if a debater finds the question to be difficult or requiring information that he or she simply does not possess. In such cases, a debater should be prepared to respond by arguing about the relevance or the importance of the question, or comment rather than trying to bluff others into thinking that they have information they simply do not have. So, to say something like “I think your question is a
provocative one, but I don’t believe it is one that will prove central to this debate” is better than trying to give an answer involving information that the debater really does not have. A debater who takes offers judiciously increases the chances that he or she will be able to choose times when the questions will be directed toward information that he or she has. For the sake of ethical communication, as well as avoiding the appearance of trying to bluff through a lack of knowledge, debaters should learn to respond immediately with answers that are truthful.

Second, when debaters respond, they should not do so meekly, but should do so in a confident manner. Being confident does not mean being bombastic or even forceful. Debaters can respond in a confident and assertive manner without being forceful or aggressive. They should respond in a very clear and self-assured manner that suggests they are very confident about their answer. Even when debaters are unsure of the answer to the point that is posed, they should still muster all their confidence, even if they must say something like “Good question. I really don’t know the answer to it, but my partner and I will do our best to respond to it when you present that information in your speech.”

Third, having responded appropriately to the point, a debater should not allow others to ask follow-up points. As we have already said, the convention of Worlds-Style debate does not allow for follow-up questions or comments. Sometimes, a debater attempts to follow up a point of information with another argument or question. The speaker should not allow such follow-ups. One good way to discourage a debater from asking follow-up points is to carefully manage your eye contact. A debater should make eye contact with the person offering the point of information while that person is offering the point. To do so is a simple courtesy and signals that the debater is interested in listening carefully to the offer in order to respond appropriately. Then, as the debater starts to respond to the point, eye contact should shift to the judge or the audience. Doing so will usually discourage the debater from trying to follow up.

**Summary**

Often, debates can turn on how skilled a person is at giving or responding to a point of information. In any event, points of information are among the most interesting and dynamic parts of the debate. A debate in which everyone offers and responds to points of information is much more engaging than a debate that is nothing more than eight speeches given in monologue.

At their worst, points of information can devolve into debaters attacking other debaters to show how they are better than their opponents. At their best, they can be opportunities to interact directly with other debaters, and especially with the arguments offered by other debaters so that everyone can improve their arguments and make them the best that they can be. Effective points of information are, thus, essential for effective debating, especially if debate is to have the generative function that is its potential.
Terms and Concepts From Chapter 11.

- Protected time.
- Maximum time for points of information.
- Telegraphing an argument

Discussion Questions For Chapter 11

- Why does the speaker have the right to accept or refuse offers of points of information? What is the maximum time for an offer of a point of information?
- To whom and by whom can points of information be offered? What is the signal for the beginning of protected time?
- What are the important purposes for asking points of information?
- When does the need for clarity constitute a good reason to offer a point of information?
- What effect does being overly aggressive in offering points of information have on judges and audiences?
- What are important reasons for the 1st Government and 1st Opposition teams to offer points of information?
- What are some good ways for debaters to think of effective points of information?

Exercise For Chapter 11

This exercise can be used for one student speaker and up to six other students who will offer points of information. Have one student deliver a standard Prime Minister speech. This student should be instructed to accept as many offers of points of information as possible, even if it causes the student to exceed the time limit. Other students in the audience should rise to offer points of information as often as they can think of them. Discussion that follows should focus on the effectiveness of both the offers of points of information as well as on the effectiveness of the responses.