Chapter 21

Judging and Evaluating Debates

The previous chapters outlined practical and conceptual ideas that help students become strong debaters. Since educational debate is a competition, it cannot take place without at least one judge. The judge makes sure that students adhere to the fundamental guidelines of the activity, and ranks the teams so that a winner can eventually be determined. Without the judge, students would have less incentive to address the topic, follow time limits, or engage one another; thus, the judge is of the utmost importance. Another important function performed by the judge is facilitating debates. Judges also serve a separate, crucial purpose—to educate debaters. Good judges not only help tournaments run on time, they help debaters improve, and, thus, can affect the quality of future debates. This chapter will explore the basic mechanics of judging and the role of the judge as educator. Included in this exploration will be some unique elements that complicate and enrich judging in Worlds-Style debate.

Chapter Outline

- Mechanics of Judging Worlds-Style Debate
- Guidelines For Speaker Points
- Speaker Point Range and Frequency
- Judge as Educator
- Summary
- Terms and Concepts From Chapter 22
- Discussion Questions For Chapter 22

One of the unique features of Worlds-Style debate is that most anyone can be a judge. Students, for example, are sometimes used as judges. Some judges are former debaters or debate teachers, and others hold University or community leadership positions. This variety works well for Worlds-Style debate partially because multiple judges are ordinarily assigned to adjudicate a single debate, with an experienced judge designated as Chair of the judging panel. Although many judges are current or former debaters, they should not think of themselves as being in a debate role. Instead, they should envision themselves as being in the role of a teacher. While judges need to help maintain order in the debate and rank teams to decide a winner, their most important roles are to give the debaters advice to help them improve their understanding of argumentation and their abilities, and to help students understand the decision that is made. In order for judges to
be effective educators, they must first consider basic practicalities regarding the mechanics of judging.

**Mechanics of Judging Worlds-Style Debate**

Once the draw is posted and the topic announced, all judges should make note of the topic, look at the posted draw to see which debate they are assigned to judge, and keep track of when the debate is to begin. A Worlds-Style debate is usually adjudicated by a panel of judges rather than by a single judge. The panel consists of a Chair, usually the most experienced of the panel, and one or two other judges called panelists. So, a judging panel will consist of a Chair and one or two panelists. The Chair will then go to a ballot table to collect a ballot before the beginning of the debate; the other judges may or may not have one, depending on the tournament. Having collected the ballot or ballots, all judges should then go to the room assigned for the debate at the appropriate time. Once all judges and teams are at the room, the Chair of the panel will convene the debate.

The Chair has an important role above and beyond serving as one of the judges: the Chair’s role is to help conduct the debate. The debate cannot start until all of the debaters and judges are present. The Chair must make sure all four teams and all judges are present before starting the debate. The Chair must then mark on the ballot which debater on each team is speaking first and second, confirm that the correct teams are in the room, and make any necessary changes to correct spelling errors of the students’ names or institutions. Once everyone is ready, the Chair will also introduce the topic of the debate, and introduce each speaker prior to his or her speech.

One of the judges must keep time if a timekeeper is not provided. In Worlds-Style debate, the timer must knock on the table after the first minute of each speech and again before the last minute, indicating that the speaker is open to points of information from the speakers on the other side of the issue. If debaters are talking too loudly during someone else’s speech, or if points of information take longer than the allowable fifteen seconds, the Chair may interject a comment, because his or her responsibility is to keep order during the debate.

Just as the debaters need to take notes to help keep track of important arguments, judges should also write down the major ideas of each speech in order to fulfill their responsibilities as judges. Although no single method is the “right” way to take notes, judges need to have sufficient notes to allow them to recall the major claims that each speaker has made, indicate how those claims engage other ideas presented in the debate, and, whenever possible, keep track of suggestions they might have for specific speakers regarding their argumentation or delivery. Keeping sufficient notes will take practice. At the very least, when the debate has concluded, judges need adequate notes to help determine how the teams should be ranked, to determine individual points for each debater, and to provide constructive feedback to each of the debaters.

Through a process of deliberation, judges determine both the rank of the teams and each individual’s speaker points. Teams are ranked 1-4 (1 is the highest) and ties are not
allowed. Each individual debater is awarded speaker points that are between 0-100 (100 being high) but, generally, the range is considered to be between 65 and 85. Only full points are allowed (no half points) with a score of 75 considered average. The total of individual speaker points of the two debaters on a team must correspond with their ranking. Thus, the highest ranked team must receive the highest combined individual speaker points. Two speakers can have the same number of points, but the total speaker points awarded to any team must be different by at least one point. Panelists should double-check the math to make sure it is accurate and that the speaker points correspond to the team ranks.

Speaker points do not just represent a speaker’s delivery, style, or mastery of language; they represent the quality of the debater’s arguments and their verbal and non-verbal skills. Individual speaker points represent an equal combination of the manner in which debaters speak and the content of their speeches. Speaker points help show the relative position of debater as well as the quality of that debate when compared to other debates. Thus, judges must think carefully about the points that each speaker receives and should try to be consistent in how they evaluate debaters. A speaker who receives an 85 should be very engaging, well organized, and have sound organization. Such a speaker is a one who the judges believe would be in elimination rounds; 85 is a score that should generally only be awarded in rare situations. A speaker who receives a 65 is considered poor—perhaps he or she was disorganized, lacked support for his or her arguments, and/or did not speak for the complete seven minutes.

The two tables below, prepared by Professor Eric Barnes, provide more specifics regarding awarding speaker points.
Table One
Guidelines For Speaker Points

GUIDELINES FOR SPEAKER POINTS

Individual points are not as important as team rankings, but they are important in running a fair tournament, and they can only do their job if all the judges at a tournament assign points in a similar way. Frequently, there is a problem of a few judges giving many very high points to the debaters they judge, and this makes the points almost meaningless as a tool for running a fair tournament. The chart below should help you decide what points to assign:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RARE</th>
<th>Common</th>
<th>Rare</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>95-100</td>
<td>Perhaps one of the very best debating speeches ever given, which leaves you (and the opponents) virtually speechless because they are so impressed.</td>
<td>90-94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85-89</td>
<td>This is an excellent speech, where central arguments engage completely with the most important issues and are supported by deep and compelling analysis. Sophisticated responses would be required to refute them. Delivery is very clear and very persuasive.</td>
<td>80-84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75-79</td>
<td>Almost all arguments are relevant and are mostly persuasive. Occasionally, the speaker may have some: deficits in explanation, simplistic argumentation or irrelevant arguments. The speech is engaging, clearly structured and successfully fulfills its basic role in the debate.</td>
<td>70-74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-69</td>
<td>Some relevant arguments are made, but with very simplistic explanations. The speaker is clear enough to be understood most of the time, but this may be difficult or unrewarding. The structure of the speech is weak, with a poor attempt to fulfill the role of the speech.</td>
<td>65-69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-64</td>
<td>The speech rarely makes comprehensible claims. It is VERY difficult to understand, with little or no structure, and with no evident aware of role.</td>
<td>60-64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-59</td>
<td>It is unclear what this speech has to do with the debate, and it is both confusing and confused. No structure or role fulfillment exists. Or, alternatively, speaker points in this range may be given to a speech that was unethical or offensive. (Report this to the CA)</td>
<td>55-59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After the debate, the Chair should dismiss the debaters and have them wait outside while the judges discuss their decision. One aspect that distinguishes Worlds-Style debate from other varieties of debate is that judges make decisions by consensus. In rare situations, only one judge adjudicates a debate. However, more often, two or more judges must agree through consensus on the rankings of the teams and the speaker points for each individual speaker for the debate. Taking good notes is important for judges to make their cases for particular rankings. To facilitate the consensus process, the Chair should lead a discussion to determine each team’s appropriate ranking.

In the discussion to determine rankings, the Chair has several responsibilities. The Chair should make sure that the discussion happens in a timely manner and should set a timer to help make sure that discussion time does not run overly long. Many tournaments set a time limit of ten or fifteen minutes for such discussion. Generally, the Chair will give the
other judges (the panelists) a few minutes to review their notes and independently decide on their own initial rankings. That process is important to help ensure that panelists gain experience making their own decisions about a debate and also makes sure that the Chair’s opinions do not overly influence the other judges. The panelists should share their decisions before the Chair. When first offering rankings, discussion should be brief; areas of disagreement can receive more attention later. Panelists should indicate whether they have uncertainty about any rankings, but by offering their initial impression of the round, they help give direction to the discussion. Because of time limitations, discussion may need to be focused on areas of disagreement, but all positions should be discussed. The Chair should act as a facilitator; the Chair will have his or her own rankings, but should be open to the perspectives of the panelists. During the discussion, the judges must also come to a consensus on the speaker points that each individual speaker receives. Whenever possible, consensus judging is preferred. However, in some situations, rankings will have to be put to a vote. In those situations, the Chair’s vote serves as a tiebreaker.

All judges, and especially the Chair, should be familiar with the rules of Worlds-Style debate (outlined in Chapter Five). The rules of Worlds-Style debate are not so firmly cast that any particular action will automatically earn a team first or last place. The rankings and the speaker points are an accumulation of the things debaters do to make them more or less persuasive. Judges should be open to different types of arguments, even if they were unexpected. Judges should also be as impartial as possible about the topic that was presented. Judges should make their decisions based on the quality of the arguments and responses presented during the debate, not based on their previous beliefs.

Judges should be unbiased toward any team in the debate and should reflect this behavior during their deliberation. Even if a judge knows that a particular team or a particular university has a reputation for having very good debaters, that knowledge must not affect the judge’s determination of that team’s specific performance in the debate. Good humor during the deliberation and during oral feedback can also help people feel more positively about the decision, even when it might be different from what they originally wanted. Once the judges reach a decision, unless it has been otherwise stated, that decision is shared with the debaters.

Judges should not assess rankings based on possible refutations and arguments, but should base the rankings on the actual refutations and arguments that each team decided to advance. Decisions should not be based on specific arguments that judges wished they had heard in the debate. A judge might, however, provide debaters with ideas about how to approach a similar topic that they might debate in the future. However, judges are also reasonable people, and, if an argument is too absurd or unsupported to make sense, that argument may be taken out of consideration. Each team must earn their ranking, and no team should automatically receive first or last place because of one argument.

The deliberation period can be contentious, so a positive attitude helps each judge feel respected and that his or her ideas were heard. Consensus decision-making will mean that some judges may not have their opinions represented by the rankings. However, using supportive non-verbal and verbal feedback will improve how everyone feels about the
decision. Judges should listen carefully and stay focused on resolving areas of contention, because time is limited.

The last responsibility of the Chair is to complete the ballot, which should occur before the oral feedback, whenever possible. A sample typical ballot is provided below. The ballot should include the following information about the debate: judges’ names, round number and start time for the debate, and room for the debate. Then, the ballot should also include a space for a ranking of each team, a space for individual speaking scores for each debater, and a space for team score (which is the total of the individual speaker points for that team).

### Sample British Parliamentary Debate Ballot

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Judge Name:</th>
<th>Open BP-Debate Round 1 – 4:15 pm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Room: Center Hall 107</td>
<td>2012 GXU Invitational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Round Start: 4:15</td>
<td>Ballot Due: 5:45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>First Government</strong></td>
<td><strong>First Opposition</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank (1-4)</td>
<td>Rank (1-4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Score (100-200)</td>
<td>Team Score (100-200)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Speaker Scores (50 – 100)</td>
<td>Individual Speaker Scores (50 – 100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prime Minister</td>
<td>Leader of Opposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputy Prime Minister</td>
<td>Deputy Opposition Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Second Government</strong></td>
<td><strong>Second Opposition</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank (1-4)</td>
<td>Rank (1-4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Score (100-200)</td>
<td>Team Score (100-200)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Speaker Scores (50 – 100)</td>
<td>Individual Speaker Scores (50 – 100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of Government</td>
<td>Member of Opposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Government Whip</strong></td>
<td><strong>Opposition Whip</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judge Signature</td>
<td>Judge's School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments and Reasons for Decision:

Remember that team rankings must correspond to a team’s combined number of speaker points. If judges are having difficulty reconciling team speaker points with rankings, they may want to reconsider their rankings. Since points and rankings must correspond, it can be helpful to begin by first ranking the highest speaker and the lowest speaker to determine the range within which you are working. The Chair will also record the
information on the ballot, and, if available, get the ballot to a volunteer to take back to the tabulation room. If a volunteer is not available, a panelist may need to take the ballot back to the tabulation room in order for the tournament to run on time.

**Judge as Educator**

After the decision is made, the Chair should bring the debaters back into the room to announce their rankings and provide oral feedback. All judges should be prepared to offer specific comments both in the decision-making process and in oral feedback. The discussion of rankings and the oral feedback are important moments for the judge to act as an educator. For some debaters, public speaking may be an anxiety-causing process, and a tournament will be better if students feel supported and enthusiastic about the process, rather than defeated or nervous.

Oral feedback is a valuable moment for debaters to learn more about argumentation and delivery. The judges’ feedback needs to clarify how the rankings were determined and why certain teams were preferred over others. The Chair should lead the discussion of the ranking to the debaters (this discussion should also be timed; five to ten minutes is standard). Clarifying the decision in a concise and thorough manner helps the debaters learn more about debate and helps them feel that their ideas were heard and considered. Good listening, both during the debate and during deliberation, good note taking, and strong communication skills of judges help students understand the decision as clearly as possible. Judges should also be prepared to give feedback to debaters about their manner and delivery that would be helpful for them to improve for future debates, but, because of time constraints, those discussions should occur after the decision has been discussed, and only as time then allows.

While the Chair leads the discussion during the feedback session, he or she should also include the input of the panelists and, if possible, allow them time to give additional feedback. In the rare circumstance where consensus cannot be met and the panelists outvote the Chair on the rankings, one of the panelists should lead the discussion of the rankings.

The Chair usually has the most judging experience, and his or her role is to help lead a productive conversation that respects the opinions of each judge and yet, make decisions when opinions vary. In that moment, judges can learn from one another what arguments they find persuasive and what their thoughts are about argumentation structure and delivery. Remember that variety helps keep debate interesting, and listening with an open mind helps educate judges in different ways of thinking about debate.

In many situations, judges may suggest that debaters find them later to discuss more specific details. Judges should attempt to make themselves available and keep their notes so they are able to have those conversations. The focus of oral feedback should be on areas that judges find relevant to debating, generally, and judges’ feedback should be constructive and especially encouraging to new debaters who may need additional practice.
Because many judges are former debaters, they may be tempted to draw parallels between the judging process and debating. In both roles, strong listening and note-taking skills can help to better express an opinion. However, judges are cautioned against seeing the deliberation process and oral feedback periods as “debates.” While certain teams must “win,” the process should be seen as learning and teaching moments. Judges can broaden their knowledge about debate and argumentation by remaining open-minded during the consensus period and by ignoring their preconceptions about certain positions on a topic or about certain teams. Judges may become good friends and strong colleagues by remaining professional and respectful during the deliberation process—this can be a good time to “network” and meet other professionals who are also committed to debate.

**Summary**

Oral feedback is an art. Helping students to understand their ranking, and teaching them about the nature of argumentation in a concise way may take practice, but it is a useful skill that can be applied to other group situations, to the classroom, or even to one’s career. Of course, judges who are careful about completing ballots and conscientious about time limits help a tournament run smoothly, and that improves everyone’s experience. A competition cannot happen without the debaters, but a high-quality competition also takes the hard work of thoughtful judges.
Terms and Concepts from Chapter 22

Check your memory and comprehension by describing or defining these key terms and concepts:

- Adjudicating panel
- Chair
- Team ranks
- Speaker points
- Average speaker points
- Speaker point range

Discussion Questions For Chapter 22

- Discuss the important principles for judging a debate.
- What are the most important criteria for determining speaker points?
- What are the most important criteria for determining the team ranks?
- What responsibilities does a chair have for conducting a discussion?