

Introduction

Style refers to the way debaters speak and deliver their speeches. To get higher style marks, speakers will need to make their communication effective and impactful. The following are a few tips which could be of use to speakers looking to improve the stylistic aspects of their speeches.

Vocal Style



Speak Slowly

With a limited amount of time available for speeches, Debaters are often tempted to speak as quickly as possible to get as much information out as possible. This is a flawed approach and very few speakers speak effectively by speaking fast. Debaters should instead try to speak as slowly as possible, speeding up only on occasions to add some variety. Speaking slowly leads to the following benefits:

- a. It allows Debaters to think before they speak, allowing for better word selection and precision in delivery. Debaters speaking fast often use words without thinking and will often use inappropriate terms. For instance, an Opposition Speaker may mistakenly say that a policy was “impartial” instead of “impractical,” and be attacked by the Proposition for this misrepresentation.
- b. It allows the speakers to breathe easily and ensure a steady supply of oxygen. This prevents the choking or coughing fits which usually occur to very fast speakers.
- c. It makes the speakers appear calm and confident. However, the speakers will have to ensure that the slow speed does not lead to a dip in energy. This can be attained with the proper variations in pitch and volume.
- d. Most importantly, speaking slowly gives the judge time not just to track the points delivered but also to process and evaluate them. If the judges are unable to follow the speaker because the speech was too fast, then the arguments and rebuttals, good as they are, will not be receiving their highest possible scores.

Speak with Pauses

Debaters should also learn to put natural pauses into their speeches. These pauses need not be long and will last up to 3 seconds at the most. However, they allow the speakers to do the following:

a. Pauses allow the speakers to add emphasis to a certain idea or point. Put a pause before a concept or idea and it is made clear, with dramatic effect, that this is a critical point. For instance, the speaker could say, “the only way to fix this problem in society is to implement... Affirmative Action.”

b. Pauses are good transition markers. Using these pauses at the end of each rebuttal and argument lets the judges know that the speaker is moving to a new point. This signals to the judges that the previous point is finished, so that they can make a quick evaluation of it.

c. Pauses may be critical when using a microphone. Although it may not be evident to a speaker on a stage, using a microphone often results in an echo, especially in large halls and auditoriums. In these cases, pauses will have to be used even more often to ensure that the speech does not become garbled by echoes.

Modulate Pitch

Debate speeches, even on the funniest of topics, could be rendered dry and unpalatable by a speaker with a monotonous voice. As such, Debaters need to learn to vary the pitch of their speeches so that they can make the aural quality of the speech more interesting. Pitch variation also allows for emphasis to be made on the key elements of the speech.

Control Volume

Volume control is critical in making debaters' speeches effective and well-received. The following factors should be kept in mind with regards to volume.

a. Avoid high volumes: Some speakers appear to believe that the louder team will always win. This is not the case! A debate featuring debaters yelling at the top of their lungs will leave the judges' ears ringing and the audience in shock. This is especially the case when the debate is

taking place in a small enclosed room and the sound is bouncing off the walls.

b. Avoid low volumes: Some speakers are naturally soft-spoken. However, these speakers are often hard to hear and understand when they are speaking in large arenas or when they have to compete with ambient noise (e.g., from fans and air-conditioning units). One rule of thumb is that the speaker needs to be heard by the last member of the audience seated furthest away.

c. Use variation for emphasis: Varying the volume is a fantastic way to put emphasis on certain words. Lowered volume usually makes the audience edge forward in anticipation and the raised volume (without shouting) after that moment drives a critical point home.

Use Shorter Sentences

Debaters should use shorter sentences whenever possible and avoid long run-on sentences. Each sentence should convey a single point. This makes the sentences easier to understand and also results in more natural pauses between the points. Furthermore, since speeches are often interrupted by POIs, shorter sentences ensure that there will be less “broken” sentences where the speaker stops in the middle of one sentence and fails to complete it after the POI.

Avoid Filler Words

Debaters should not waste the precious time available for the speech on unnecessary words. Many Debaters end up using many “crutch” and “filler” words such as “Ladies and Gentlemen” and “like” and “erm” during their speeches. These tend to be highly distracting for listeners and cause unnatural interruptions in the speeches. In severe cases, these words tend to form the vast majority of the speech! Debaters should remove these words from their speeches altogether and instead replace them with pauses instead.

Accents

The rules for the World Schools Debating Championships state that speakers are not to be penalised on the account of their accents. However, speakers should still work to make sure that their accents do not lead to their words being misunderstood. Thus, if speakers know that there are some words which present difficulties, they should seek to replace them with easier to pronounce substitutes. This also does not mean that speakers should adopt a British or an American accent just for debate. This could be unnatural and in most cases, hard to maintain.

Avoid Cloning

Debaters should try to make themselves as stylistically distinct from their teammates and opponents as possible. When three speakers speak at the same pace, with the same intensity and volume, it is very difficult to establish each speaker's individuality. This is made worse if all six speakers were of the same ilk. 6 Clones speaking does not lead to good stylistic variation. As such, even as the Debaters keep in mind what their most comfortable style of debating is, they should also observe how the other speakers have been and try to differentiate themselves where possible. If most preceding speakers were laid back, the ensuing Debaters can speak with greater energy and fervour. If the speakers had been intense, the follow-up speakers could adopt a calm and cool persona to have more contrast.

Visual Style



Eye Contact

Debaters must make sure that they make eye contact with the judges and the audience as much as possible. Maintaining eye contact and not looking down at the floor signals that the debaters believe in their own arguments. Locking eye contact also means that the judges and audiences are locked into the speakers and are less likely to be distracted by other factors. This does not mean that the Debaters should stare at these people! However, establishing eye contact with the judges and audience members and “panning” the room will do wonders in projecting the image of a confident speaker.

Eye contact also means that the debaters should not be looking down at their speeches or notes and simply reading them. Looking down automatically lowers the volume of the speaker, as the speech is now likely to be directed to the floor rather than to the audience and the judges. Reading also makes the Debaters look as if they are not comfortable with their own material and in some severe cases, even makes it look as if the Debaters were reading words written by someone else!

Standing Stance

One nervous gesture common in debaters is the tendency to shift their weight from leg to leg. This has the effect of making their bodies sway back and forth or from side to side. This is very distracting for the judges. Debaters should instead stand with their feet at shoulder's width and lock their knees so that their stance will be absolutely stable. This may look a little unnatural for some speakers, especially the ladies. In these cases, the legs can be planted closer together but the knees should remain locked.

Movement

Walking around is something that has to be restricted within a debate. A moving speaker often takes the attention of the judges and the audiences away from the speech and towards the movement. Thus, if there is to be any movement at all, it should be limited and employed only when the speaker is in between points and has a natural pause. Otherwise, it is preferable to stand still and deliver the speech. Debaters should avoid speaking while walking. This tends to direct the voice to the sides of the room rather than to the judges and the audiences. The Debater's back should never be shown to the judge as it is often seen as a rude gesture.

Gestures

The use of gestures can help to put emphasis on key points in the speech. However, the excessive and repetitive use of gestures can also become very distracting and annoying for the judges. Debaters should try to have the controlled use of gestures as much as possible instead of letting the hands gesture on autopilot. Note: Debaters' hands should never be put into the pockets of jackets or trousers, as this leads to a very uncouth appearance.

Attire

Debaters should always dress as formally as permissible by the rules. Furthermore, they should ensure that they look as professional as possible and that their appearance is neat and clean. For instance, this means:

- a. Short and neat hair for the gentlemen and neatly tied up hair (if long) for the ladies,
- b. Jackets, Trousers and Skirts which are well-fitted,
- c. Shirts which are tucked in,
- d. Appropriate footwear (black leather shoes for both genders), long socks (not ankle socks) of the appropriate colour for the gentlemen and tights if applicable for the ladies.

Having the clean professional image demonstrates to the judges that the team is taking the debate seriously and that the speakers take pride in their appearance. Judges, if only at a subconscious level, are more likely to treat debaters with professional appearances much more seriously compared to debaters who are unkempt and dressed casually. Debaters should also take the chance to train at least once with full competition attire in order to get used to the outfits.

Whenever possible, Debaters should also try to look older, rather than younger. This makes the judges and the audience treat the Debaters' points more seriously. This will mean that accessories should be chosen to make the debaters look older and more serious as well. For instance, a judge is more likely to view Debaters as serious when they are wearing wire-frame spectacles than novelty style glasses.

Speech and Oratory Competitions



Handling Props



Extra care should be given to the handling of microphones and lecterns, since they will restrict the movement of the Debaters. If Debaters see that they will be speaking using these tools, they should always ask for an opportunity to have a dry-run to mentally and physically adjust to these constraints.

Lecterns tend to block most of the speakers and are particularly disadvantageous to vertically challenged debaters. Thus, if possible, avoid using lecterns. One option is to stand next to the lectern.

Microphones are usually provided on an adjustable stand. In this case, the Debater will have to be very careful to keep the head still so that the mouth will be at a constant distance from the microphone. Turning the head, even slightly, could lead to a sudden drop in volume.

Furthermore, the use of microphones on stands usually means that it may have to be adjusted constantly during the debate to cater for the different heights of the Debaters. If the adjustments are made by support staff, it is better to signal to them to make the changes prior to approaching the microphone. Otherwise, having to stand there while the change is being made can be distracting and distressing.

In some rare cases, the Debaters will be given hand-held microphones. These are problematic as debaters usually need one hand to hold the books or cards and the other to manipulate them. In these cases, it might necessary to use a table or lectern to hold the cards and notes. All debaters should try to practice this during training sessions as it is a complicated process.

In some cases, the debaters may be given lapel microphones with the transmitters to be affixed to the belt or waist band. These tend not to give too much trouble but debaters have to ensure that the mics are completely turned off after their speeches are done lest they pick up intra-team communications.

Humour

