



DEBATING: A BASIC INTRODUCTION



BEGINNER

Let's start at the beginning. Every debate needs a topic. This is a contentious assertion that forms the basis for the debate. For example, the topic might be "THAT IT IS BETTER TO BE SMART THAN TO BE KIND" or "THAT THE UNITED NATIONS HAS FAILED".

This book relates to a specific but common style of debate. It is the style used in most schools throughout Australia and in many other countries, at the Australian National Schools Debating Championships and at the World Schools Debating Championships. In this style, there are two teams in every debate. One team is required to argue that the topic is *true*. This team is called the 'affirmative', or sometimes the 'proposition'. The other team is required to argue that the topic is *not true*. This team is called the 'negative', or sometimes the 'opposition'.

Each team uses two basic types of argument to support for its side of the topic. First, there are *substantive arguments*. These are prepared arguments in favour of a team's side of the topic. Second, there is *rebuttal*. Rebuttal is your attack on your opposition's arguments. The difference between substantive arguments and rebuttal is the distinction between showing why your team is *right* and showing why your opposition is *wrong*. It is impossible to say whether substantive arguments or rebuttal are more important – each is just as important as the other, and each is vital for successful debating.

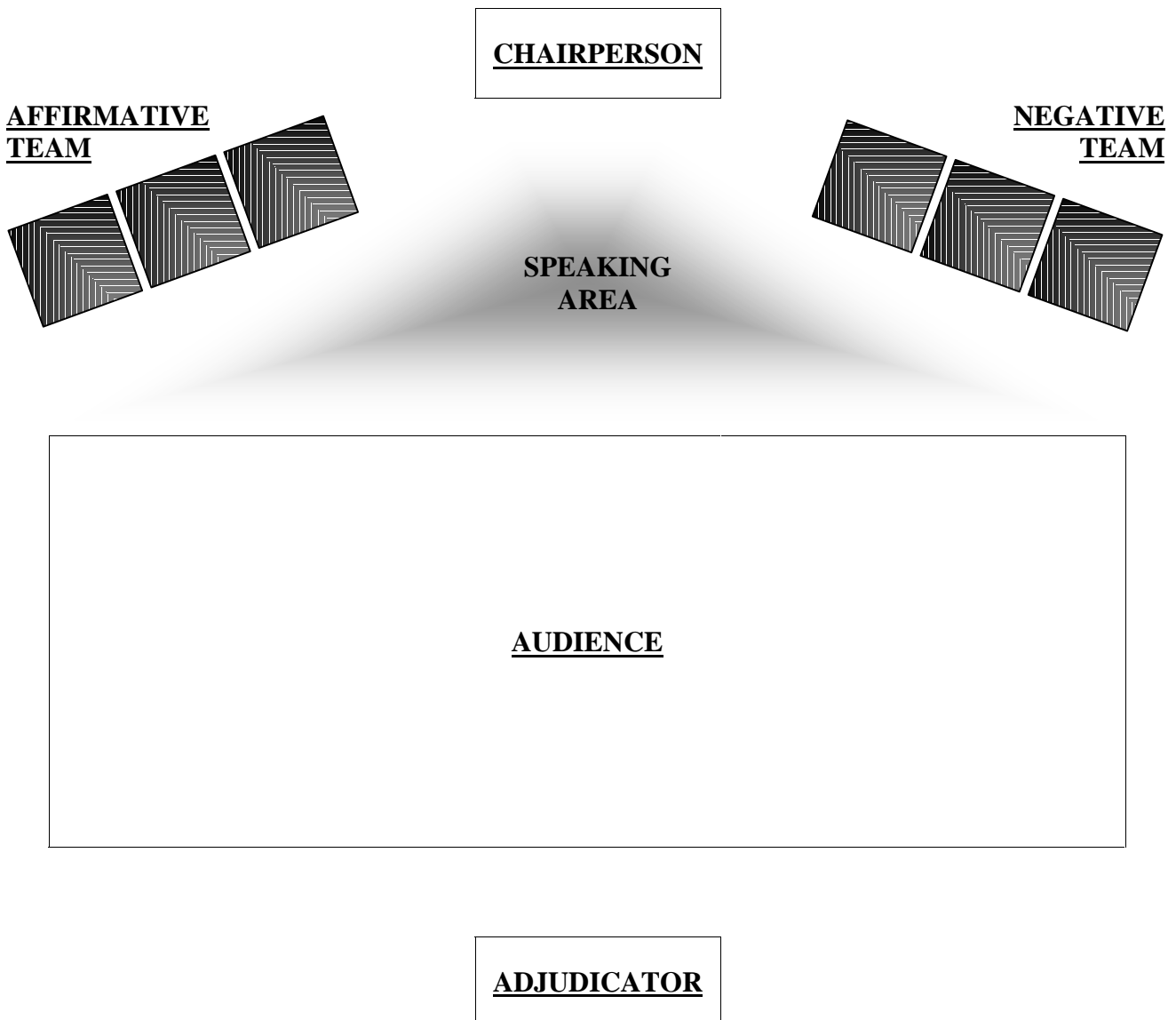
There are three speakers on each team. Speakers are usually identified by their speaking number and their team side. For example, debaters might speak of the 'First Affirmative' (the first speaker of the affirmative team), or the 'Third Negative' (the

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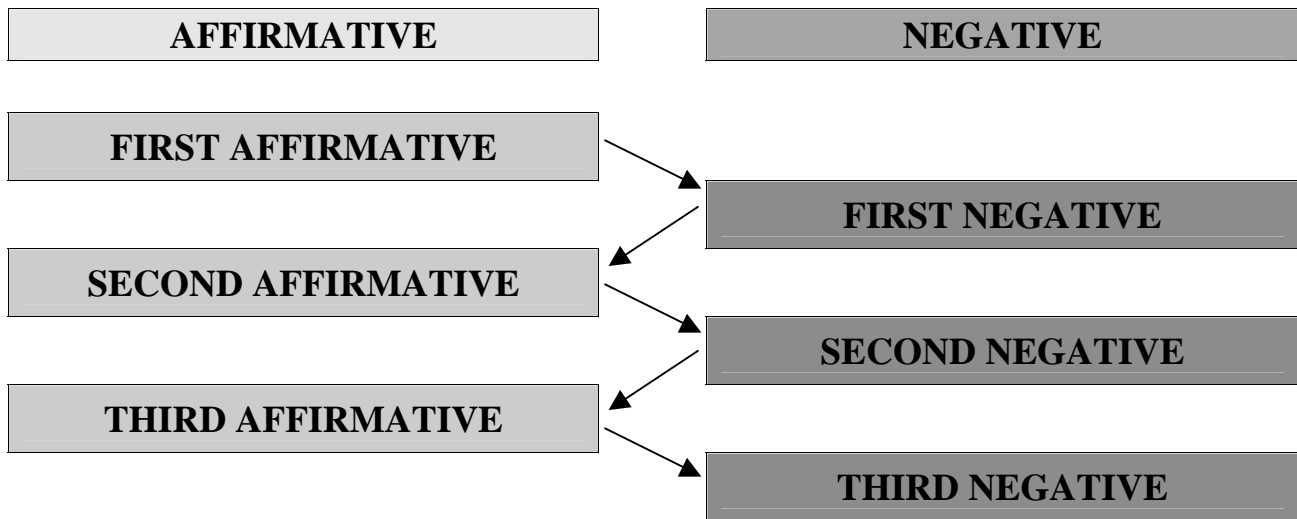
third speaker of the negative team). Every speaker except the First Affirmative (the first speaker in the entire debate) is expected to rebut his or her opposition. The first and second speakers on both teams are also expected to present substantive arguments. The third speeches, therefore, are used for rebuttal and summary.

The debate is ‘controlled’ by a ‘chair’ (also referred to as a ‘chairperson’). Debaters should always start their speeches by acknowledging both the chair and the audience. A male chair is usually referred to as “Mr Chairman”; a female chair as “Madame Chair”. A common way of starting a debating speech is therefore, “Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen”, or “Madame Chair, ladies and gentlemen”. It is the duty of the chair to call each speaker in turn. For example, the chair might introduce the first speaker of the debate by saying, “It is now my pleasure to introduce the first speaker of the affirmative team, to open her team’s case, Julie.” A suggested list of a chairperson’s duties is provided in Chapter Five.

The following diagram shows the basic lay-out of a debate in this style.



Participants speak in order, alternating sides. The affirmative team speaks first. The following diagram shows this.



Every debate has a result – one team wins and one team loses. There cannot be a draw. The result is decided and announced by the adjudicator – somebody who has watched and followed the debate carefully in order to decide the result. Adjudicators are not allowed to make random or arbitrary decisions – they must follow clear guidelines about what is, and is not, good debating. Of course, debaters and audience members will often disagree with an adjudicator’s decision, and sometimes adjudicators disagree with each other. However, this is part of the challenge of debating: to debate well enough that you can persuade *any* adjudicator that you deserve to win the debate.

Adjudicators use three categories to consider debates:

- ⇒ Manner describes the *way* that a particular speech is presented: ‘how you say it’. For example, how interesting, sincere or humorous is the speaker? In Australia, the average mark for manner is 30, but scores generally range from 28 to 32.
- ⇒ Matter describes the arguments that you present, both in their general strength and in the way that you support and explain them. Like manner, the average mark for matter is 30, but scores generally range from 28 to 32.
- ⇒ Method describes the *structure* of your speech. It can often become a ‘mixed bag’ category involving all those parts of your speech that don’t seem to fit into either manner or matter. The average mark for method is 15. Scores will generally range from 14 to 16.

The World Schools Debating Championships use the similar categories of **style**, **content** and **strategy**.

- ⇒ Style equates to manner. At the World Schools Debating Championships, the average mark is 28, but scores range generally from 24 to 32.
- ⇒ Content equates to matter. The marking scheme is the same as for style.
- ⇒ Strategy equates (broadly, at least) to method. The average mark is 14, with marks ranging from 12 to 16.

It is important to consider the weightings of these categories. First, matter and manner (content and style) are weighted equally. Many debaters and supporters automatically assume that a team that presents well should win the debate – this is not necessarily the case. Second, method (strategy) is only weighted half as significantly as matter and manner, but is still significant nonetheless. Many debaters and supporters discount the importance of method, seeing it as a ‘poor cousin’ to matter and manner. However, although it is weighted less, method can and does directly affect the outcome of many debates.

Regardless of how effective the categories are in evaluating speeches, or which marking scheme is being used, they are not very effective in explaining or teaching debating. This is largely because method and matter (content and strategy) are very closely linked - if you structure your speech well, you will naturally present a stronger argument. Similarly, a strong, clear argument is impossible without at least some structure. Therefore, if you try to prepare debates by separating matter and method, you risk becoming confused and complicating your arguments.

Although many good books divide their explanation into the traditional categories of manner, matter and method, I have divided this book into what I consider to be the best three categories for teaching debating: Preparation, Rebuttal and Manner. The first two categories together cover matter and method. The third category, as the name suggests, is the traditional category of manner - it covers the *way* that you deliver your speech.

So let us begin!