

Introducing Debate Formats

Introduction to British Parliamentary Debating

A. Goal of the lesson

This lesson aims to familiarize students with the British Parliamentary debate format by providing them with an overview of the **structure**, **rules** and **objectives** of a British Parliamentary debate.

B. Activities

Lecture (30 min)

Explain the basic principles of British Parliamentary debating. Focus more specifically on:

- The Structure of a British Parliamentary debate
- Objectives and win conditions
- Constraints on time (length of speeches, protected time, etc.)
- POIs
- Prep time, what is and isn't allowed
- Practical applications, competitions

While explaining the basic principles of the format try to focus on the underline reasons *why* these rules are necessary and how they contribute to an engaging, fair and structured discussion. For example, when explaining POIs it isn't enough to point out that a POI is a short statement or question that challenges the speaker while speaking. Students should be made aware that POIs, like other features of BP debating, further an important and desirable end. POIs contribute to a fairer and more engaging debate, particularly in situations where teams aren't able to directly respond to a point or issue being raised within the debate. By the very structure of the format, a speaker from opening government can't directly respond to a speaker from closing opposition, but they can challenge them through POIs.

Emphasizing the underline reasons why rules exist minimizes the possibility that beginners will perceive them as arbitrary restrictions on discussion and incentivizes them to think about ways to utilize the rules to achieve the objectives of the debate.

Mock Debate (30 min)

To conclude the lesson, organize a mock debate. Select a motion and encourage 8 students from the group to participate. Arbitrarily assign the positions in the debate and announce the selected motion. Teams should be given 10 minutes to prepare. Considering that this lesson precedes other important lessons such as motion analysis and speaker roles, speeches shouldn't be longer than 2 minutes.

After the debate give a brief overview of the debate. While doing so, don't overwhelm the students with concepts in BP debating that they are unfamiliar with. The purpose of the mock debate is to ensure that students understood the lecture.

Hint: For the purpose of the mock debate, try not to select motions that require very specific knowledge of a certain topic. This may amplify any existing fears beginners may have when approaching competitive debating. The aim isn't to make them feel inadequate, uninformed or unknowledgeable, but rather to illustrate the excitement of using critical thinking to challenging ideas about society. So for the purpose of the mock debate, try to select motions that the average student, regardless of educational and cultural background can easily access. Examples include: This house would introduce a 100% inheritance tax, This house would legalize all drugs, This house, as the feminist movement would encourage woman not to wear make-up.

C. Preparation

In order to prepare the lecture, reading the following materials is strongly encouraged:

- [British Parliamentary Debating \(for Beginners\), by Tim Squirrel](#)
- [The Oxford Union Society Guide for Schools' Debating](#)
- [The Cambridge Union Society Introductory Guide to Debating](#)

NOTE:

Even though these guides include topics which are not strictly relevant to the specific lecture outlined in this lesson, it is encouraged that you go through them as they give you a broader understanding of British Parliamentary debating.

These additional resources are useful in terms of understanding the nuances of BP debating, even though they may not have much application in this specific lesson:

- [Debating guides](#)
- [How to debate, a blog dedicated to teaching competitive debating](#)

Think about potential motions for the mock debate. Sites like <https://www.debate-motions.info/> can provide useful examples.

D. Hints

Since the British Parliamentary debate format is primarily practiced by university students, it is probable that some of the students in your group will be familiar with certain aspects of competitive debating or other debate formats. If that is the case, try to engage them while illustrating your points. For example, if there is a student in your group that is familiar with the World Schools debating format and you are explaining the concept of POIs, try to engage with their preexisting knowledge. Ask them to explain it to group, whether they recall interesting examples etc.

Many of the rules of competitive debating can seem odd to beginners and non-debaters. For example, many novices find it difficult to come in terms with the idea that in a competitive debate you are often asked to defend a position which you may not necessarily agree with. Expect such questions to be raised and try to prepare answers which emphasize the purpose of such peculiarities.

Many of the rules of the British Parliamentary format can seem intimidating to beginners. As a beginner it is quite frightening to imagine in just 15 minutes you have to come up with a coherent case that encompasses important and logical reasons as

to why a certain motions should be passed or rejected. Try to reassure your students that such challenges can easily be overcome with practice and time. Nobody is *that* good in their first debate.

Do not overcomplicate the rules of the format and try to allocate your time wisely. For example, the distinction between government and opposition bench is somewhat intuitive, the distinction between opening government and closing government is not.

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If this lesson is one of your first encounters with your group try to assess the group dynamics and use that knowledge for future lectures.

E. Verification

Require feedback at the end of the lecture.

Also, try to complete the lecture by short recap of the main rules of BP format. You can use questions like:

- What is the main goal of opening government/opening opposition/... ?
- How much time speakers have?
- When is it possible to give POIs?

