



How a Congressional Debate Session Works.

For new Congress students and their parents. Follow one session from the first gavel to the last vote, and learn who speaks when, how long each part lasts, and why the order matters.

The big picture

Congressional Debate (also called Student Congress) is a legislative event. Instead of one team against another, a whole room of students, called a **chamber**, debates bills and resolutions the way a real legislature would. Every student is both a speaker and a voter. Judges (called scorers) sit in the room, rank the speakers, and also score the student who runs the room, the **presiding officer (PO)**.

Chambers vary in size. Many tournaments aim for roughly 15 to 20 students, and large events run several chambers at once. Each session has its own PO, its own seating chart, and its own set of legislation. Speaking order starts fresh at every new session.

Key pieces of a session

PIECE	WHAT IT IS	WHO HANDLES IT
Legislation	The bills and resolutions to be debated, written by students or supplied by the tournament (many tournaments use NSDA legislation)	Students or the tournament; the tournament sets the list
Docket	The ordered agenda of legislation the chamber will take up	Set before the tournament or by the chamber, depending on the league
Presiding officer	The elected chair who runs the room, recognizes speakers and keeps time	Elected by the chamber at the start of the session
Parliamentarian	A neutral person who answers procedure questions and steps in only when asked or for a major error	Assigned by the tournament; practice varies by league
Scorers	Judges who rank speakers and score the PO	Assigned by the tournament

Speech and questioning times

The pattern below matches the NSDA national tournament scorer instructions, which say these limits cannot be suspended. **Always confirm with your tournament invitation or league rules**, because some state leagues change times, add grace periods, or format questioning differently.

SPEECH	SPEAKING TIME	QUESTIONING TIME
Authorship or sponsorship (first speech)	Up to 3 minutes	2 minutes
First negative speech	Up to 3 minutes	2 minutes
Every later speech	Up to 3 minutes	1 minute (varies by league)

A common practice is a 10-second grace period: the PO begins gaveling at 3:00 and cuts a speaker off at 3:10 (other leagues differ). Questioning is often run in blocks of 30 seconds per questioner, but this varies by league. Ask your coach or read the tournament rules.

Precedence and recency: who gets to speak

Because everyone wants to speak, the chamber needs a fair way to choose. Two ideas do the work:

- ♦ **Precedence:** the PO tracks how many times each student has spoken in this session. Students who have spoken the fewest times get priority.
- ♦ **Recency:** when students are tied on precedence, the student who spoke least recently goes first. Many chambers apply similar fairness to questioners, so ask how yours does it.

At the start of a session, before anyone has a record, the PO picks speakers fairly and explains the method to the chamber. Precedence does not reset in the middle of a session. It resets when the next session starts. NSDA scorer instructions prohibit choosing speakers by counting motions or questions, or by how long a member has stood.

Why parents should know this

A student with a great speech but a low position in the order may get only two speeches in a session. Learning to rise quickly for the first speech on each new piece of legislation (when allowed) is a real strategy, not just politeness.

A session step by step

- 1 **Call to order.** The session opens and the rules are explained, usually by a tournament official or the parliamentarian.
- 2 **PO election.** Students who want to preside give short candidacy speeches, then the chamber votes by secret ballot. Majority wins.
- 3 **Seating chart and docket.** The new PO records names, schools and the legislation list.
- 4 **First piece of legislation.** The author or a sponsor gives the opening speech, followed by questioning.
- 5 **Alternating debate.** Speeches alternate between support and opposition, each followed by questioning, until the chamber votes to end debate.
- 6 **Vote and next item.** The PO runs the vote, then the chamber moves to the next legislation on the docket.
- 7 **Adjournment.** The chamber ends the session when time is up or by motion.

First-session reminders

- ☐ Know the legislation on the docket and have a speech outline for at least three items
- ☐ Bring a pen, a timer, an extra copy of evidence and your name placard
- ☐ Learn how your league wants you to ask to speak (usually stand and state your name)
- ☐ Practice rising quickly and politely without interrupting another student

Next step

Want a plan built around your debater? Book a free consultation with Scholar Coach at the link below.

Built from public guidance: NSDA Nationals Congressional Debate scorer instructions · Wikipedia: Congressional Debate · NSDA Congressional Debate Frequently Used Motions table. Rules change by league and tournament, so always confirm against your tournament invitation and current league rules.

Want a plan built around **your** debater?

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