



Middle School Speech and Debate: Start **Here.**

For middle schoolers and parents deciding whether to try speech and debate. Learn how to get started, how to choose an event, and what a good first year looks like.

How to start

Many middle school programs focus on learning and enjoying the activity more than on results, though this varies by program. Eligibility and grade divisions are set by each league. Whether your path is a school team, a club, a community program or a regional league, the first steps are the same.

- 1 Find a team.** Ask your school, check your state speech and debate association, or search for local clubs and leagues.
- 2 Ask what events they offer.** Middle school offerings vary by league.
- 3 Attend one practice or watch a tournament.** Seeing a round removes a lot of mystery.
- 4 Check age and grade rules.** Divisions and eligibility differ by league and tournament.
- 5 Pick one event for the first season.** Add a second later if desired.

Event families

Names and availability vary by league, but most events fall into a few families.

FAMILY	EXAMPLES	GOOD FIT FOR STUDENTS WHO...
Prepared speaking	Original Oratory, Informative	Like writing and presenting
Interpretation	Storytelling, Duo, Poetry, Prose, Declamation	Like performing and reading aloud
Limited prep speaking	Impromptu, Extemporaneous	Think fast and like current events
Debate	Public Forum, Lincoln-Douglas, Policy, World Schools, Big Questions (where offered)	Like arguing and teamwork

Time limits at the NSDA Middle School National Tournament (each with a 30 second grace period). Local leagues may use different limits, so check yours.

EVENT	TIME LIMIT
Declamation	10 min
Dramatic Interpretation	10 min
Duo Interpretation	10 min
Humorous Interpretation	10 min

EVENT	TIME LIMIT
Informative Speaking	10 min
Original Oratory	10 min
Program of Oral Interpretation	10 min
Poetry and Prose Interpretation	7 min
Original Spoken Word Poetry	5 min
Storytelling	5 min

Which event fits? A quick quiz

Circle the statements that sound like you.

- ☐ I like to tell stories out loud (Storytelling, Prose, Poetry)
- ☐ I like to act and play characters (Duo, Dramatic or Humorous interpretation)
- ☐ I want to teach people something I find cool (Informative)
- ☐ I care about a problem and want to change minds (Oratory)
- ☐ I like talking with a partner (Duo, Public Forum)
- ☐ I like to disagree politely and think on my feet (debate, Impromptu)
- ☐ I like the idea of research and current events (Extemp, debate)

Tally by family. Try your top choice for a month; it is fine to switch. Students often discover that a second event strengthens the first.

Year-one goals

Keep goals about growth, not trophies.

WHEN	GOAL
First month	Attend practices, learn event rules and vocabulary
First tournament	Finish all rounds and enjoy the day
Mid-season	Apply one piece of ballot feedback
End of season	Improve a skill: eye contact, structure, rebuttal or memory
Always	Be kind to competitors and judges

Win condition for year one

Show up, try, learn something and want to come back. Results will follow in later years.

First tournament packing list

- ☐ Registration confirmation and event entries
- ☐ Printed or digital speech or case copy, as allowed
- ☐ Water bottle and snacks
- ☐ School-appropriate professional attire (varies by league)
- ☐ Comfortable shoes

- Want help matching your child to an event? Book a free consultation at the link below.

NOTES

Book a free consultation. The short intake takes about a minute and opens right away.

BOOK NOW →