



How a Policy Round Works, **Speech by Speech.**

For new debaters and parents watching their first round. Learn who speaks when, how long each speech lasts, and what each speech is supposed to accomplish.

The big picture

Policy debate (also called CX, short for cross-examination) is a two-on-two format. One team, the **Affirmative**, proposes a change called a **plan**. The other team, the **Negative**, argues that the change is a bad idea, or that the Affirmative did not meet its obligations. A judge (or a panel) decides who did the better debating.

The same team debates both sides during a tournament, so every student must be able to argue for and against. In the NSDA format each partner gives one constructive speech and one rebuttal speech (eight speeches in all, four constructives and four rebuttals), and each partner also asks one set of cross-examination questions and answers one.

Where the topic comes from

Policy debate usually uses one national resolution, and the NSDA rules point families to the NSDA topics page for the current one. Your state or local league may choose differently, so confirm with your coach or your league website.

The speech order and times

These are the times in the NSDA High School Unified Manual (2021-2022 edition) for policy debate. Other leagues, novice divisions and middle school events may use different times, so always check your tournament invitation.

Times can vary by league.

ORDER	SPEAKER	TIME	JOB OF THE SPEECH
1AC	1st Affirmative	8 min	Read the plan and the full case
CX	2nd Negative questions 1A	3 min	Clarify the case, set up arguments
1NC	1st Negative	8 min	Present the negative arguments and attack the case
CX	1st Affirmative questions 1N	3 min	Clarify the negative arguments
2AC	2nd Affirmative	8 min	Answer every negative argument
CX	1st Negative questions 2A	3 min	Find what was dropped or unclear
2NC	2nd Negative	8 min	Extend some arguments in depth, answer the 2AC
CX	2nd Affirmative questions 2N	3 min	Clarify the negative position
1NR	1st Negative	5 min	Cover the other half of the negative arguments
1AR	1st Affirmative	5 min	Answer the whole negative block
2NR	2nd Negative	5 min	Pick the best arguments, explain why Neg wins
2AR	2nd Affirmative	5 min	Last speech, explain why Aff wins

The NSDA rules require that each debater gives one constructive, one rebuttal, one period of questioning and one period of answering. The table shows a common pairing of who asks in each cross-examination; your coach or league may assign it differently.

1AC = first affirmative constructive. **NC** = negative constructive. **NR** = negative rebuttal. **AR** = affirmative rebuttal. The two negative speeches in a row (2NC then 1NR) are called the **negative block**. The Negative uses it to put heavy pressure on the Affirmative in the middle of the round.

Prep time

Each team also gets a bank of preparation time that partners divide as they choose. NSDA rules give each team 8 minutes (raised to 8 by the NSDA board in 2020). Other leagues commonly use 5 to 10 minutes, so confirm the amount with your tournament.

What each side must prove

SIDE	CORE BURDEN	TYPICAL TOOLS
Affirmative	Show the plan fits the resolution and is a better choice than doing nothing	Plan text, problem, advantages, solvency
Negative	Show the plan should not be adopted, or that the Aff failed a required test	Disadvantages, counterplans, topicality, kritiks, case attacks

The judge usually weighs the whole round at the end. A strong team does not argue everything. It picks a few winning arguments and explains clearly why they matter most. Later guides in this series cover each tool in detail.

A parent's viewing guide

Policy debaters often speak very fast, and that surprises first-time parents. Do not worry if you cannot follow every word. The judge flows (takes detailed notes) and many debaters read from printed evidence. You can still tell a lot from what to watch:

- ◆ Does the speaker signpost, for example saying "first, on their disadvantage"?
- ◆ Does the second speaker respond to each point or skip some?
- ◆ In cross-examination, do the questions have a purpose, or does the speaker just fish?
- ◆ In the last speeches, do students explain why they are winning, or only repeat evidence?

Want a plan built around your debater?

Scholar Coach works with new and experienced debaters on speaking, case writing and strategy. Book a free consultation at the link below.

Built from public guidance: NSDA High School Unified Manual, 2021-2022 edition (speechanddebate.org) · DebateUS: The Basic Structure of Policy Debate. Rules change by league and tournament, so always confirm against your tournament invitation and current league rules.

NOTES

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

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