



Judges, Ballots and a Tournament-Day Checklist.

Understand the different kinds of judges, what ballots usually include, and how parents can prepare for a smooth tournament day.

Types of judges

At a policy tournament, you may be judged by a coach, a former debater, a college student or a trained community volunteer. Many tournaments let judges share their preferences in writing ahead of time, often through a judge philosophy (paradigm) page on Tabroom. Read it when it is available.

JUDGE TYPE	WHAT THEY OFTEN PREFER	HOW TO ADAPT
Experienced policy judge	Fast delivery is fine, detailed flows, technical arguments	Signpost clearly, answer every argument
Lay or community judge	Clear, conversational speaking and explanation	Slow down, define terms, explain impacts
Parent or new volunteer	Easy-to-follow story	Use plain words, fewer arguments
Mixed panel	Unknown	Speak clearly enough for the least experienced judge

A good rule

If you are unsure how fast or technical to be, ask the judge before the round: "Do you have any preferences about speed or style?" Many judges appreciate it.

What judges write on ballots

Ballots vary by league and tournament. Under NSDA district rules, judges in preliminary rounds pick a winner (no ties) and give each debater speaker points on a 30-point scale, and the district decides whether full, half or tenth points are used. Judges in elimination rounds give only a win or loss. NSDA rules also say no debate ballot may be submitted without a written reason for decision, and they strongly discourage judges from disclosing decisions in preliminary rounds. Point scales and rules **vary by league**, so check your tournament instructions. Common comment sections include:

- ♦ **Reason for decision:** why the judge voted the way they did
- ♦ **Strengths:** what the team did well
- ♦ **Improvements:** one or two things to practice
- ♦ **Argument notes:** feedback on a specific argument or card

After the round, read the ballot together. Underline repeated advice, because patterns across ballots show what to work on next. A loss with a clear explanation is useful information.

Tournament-day checklist for parents and students

- ☐ Confirm check-in time, location and dress code the night before
- ☐ Pack: printed and digital cases, evidence, flow paper, pens, timer, charger
- ☐ Bring water, snacks and a light lunch
- ☐ Dress in professional or business casual clothing
- ☐ Arrive early so no one rushes
- ☐ Check the pairings and room numbers when posted
- ☐ Introduce yourself to the judge and opponents
- ☐ Keep a copy of every ballot
- ☐ Thank the judge after each round
- ☐ Plan a calm debrief on the ride home

How parents can help

- ♦ Ask what the student learned, not only whether they won.
- ♦ Do not argue with the judge or coach the student between rounds unless the coach asks you to.
- ♦ Help with logistics so your student can focus.
- ♦ Celebrate effort, improvement and sportsmanship.
- ♦ Check your tournament's spectator rules, because some rounds are closed to observers.

NOTES FROM TODAY'S BALLOTS

Want a plan built around your debater?

Scholar Coach can help your family prepare for tournament season. 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

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

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

BOOK NOW →