



Big Questions Debate: **What Makes It Different.**

A guide for students and parents to the NSDA Big Questions format: how a round runs, how it differs from other debate events, and how to start preparing for topics at the crossroads of science, philosophy and religion.

What is Big Questions?

Big Questions is a National Speech & Debate Association (NSDA) format in which students debate topics that sit where **science, philosophy and religion** meet. The topics deal with deeply held beliefs that people rarely examine. Students are assigned a side before each round, present a case, rebut, and take part in a live question period. According to NSDA's student manual, competitors can debate one against one, two against two, or one against two, and ordinary members of the public are often recruited as judges.

Because you can be assigned either side, the format rewards curiosity and fairness. You practice explaining a view well, including one you may not hold yourself.

How a round runs

SEGMENT	TIME	PURPOSE
Affirmative constructive	5 min	Present your case
Negative constructive	5 min	Present the opposing case
Question segment	3 min	Free-flowing questions; Affirmative asks first
Affirmative rebuttal	4 min	Answer, rebuild, add evidence
Negative rebuttal	4 min	Answer, rebuild, add evidence
Question segment	3 min	Same form as the first
Affirmative consolidation (called consolation in some NSDA documents)	3 min	Narrow to the core of the debate
Negative consolidation (called consolation in some NSDA documents)	3 min	Narrow to the core of the debate
Affirmative rationale	3 min	Summarize why you won; no new arguments
Negative rationale	3 min	Summarize why you won; no new arguments

Each side also receives **3 minutes of prep time** to use whenever needed (not in the middle of a speech). These times come from NSDA's student format manual and judge training. Formats are updated over time, so check the current NSDA Big Questions materials before your event.

What makes it different

The Negative has a job

The Negative is expected to argue the resolution is actively false, like being the Affirmative on the opposite statement, not just to attack the other case.

Plain-language judging

Community judges mean slow, clear delivery, simple explanations and fewer technical terms.

Depth over quantity

With a five-minute constructive, two well-developed contentions usually beat four rushed ones.

Students stay on the exact topic. Arguments that wander away from the resolution are not evaluated. Judges are asked to decide who did the better debating, using both argument quality and delivery.

Building an argument: claim, warrant, impact

- 1 Claim.** A clear statement of what you will prove. Example: "Curiosity about the universe is valuable even without practical payoff."
- 2 Warrant.** Why it is true, using logic or research. A quote from an author is not a warrant by itself; you must explain the reasoning.
- 3 Impact.** Why it matters in this debate. What follows if you are right, and why the judge should care.

Find the current topic

Big Questions resolutions change by season. Look for the current resolution on the NSDA website or ask your coach or tournament host. Do not rely on old topic lists.

Getting started this week

- ☐ Read one short, balanced article about the current topic from two different viewpoints.
- ☐ Write a one-sentence claim for each side.
- ☐ Practice a two-contention, five-minute constructive out loud with a timer.
- ☐ Have a family member ask you three questions and answer each in 20 seconds.
- ☐ Switch sides and repeat.

Built from public guidance: NSDA Big Questions Debate: Judge Training (2023) · NSDA Big Questions Debate Format Manual. 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.

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