Lincoln-Douglas Debate: An Introduction

Created by Josh Roberts

Abstract: Are you new to LD and wondering what this activity is all about? The purpose of this article is to help explain the background and basics of Lincoln-Douglas Debate so that you may prepare to competitively participate in the activity. This is a great starting point for anyone interested in learning about LD—be it teachers who want to add this event to their squad, or students looking to compete.

A History of LD Debate: How Did it all Begin?

In 1858, there was a Senate Race in Illinois between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas. At the time, Stephen Douglas was the incumbent, but in an attempt to take Douglas's seat, Lincoln challenged Douglas to a series of debates. Although the exact format of the debates was slightly different than the Lincoln-Douglas of today (back then, the first speaker spoke for 60 minutes, the second speaker had a 90-minute rebuttal, and then the first speaker had a 30-minute rebuttal/time for closing arguments) the adversarial nature of the debates was similar.

What is Lincoln-Douglas Debate Now?

Lincoln-Douglas debate (more commonly referred to as LD) is a competitive speaking activity that involves two debaters arguing for and against a resolution that is selected by the NFL (National Forensics League) and voted on by coaches. Today, somewhat like the old debates, LD focuses on the conflicting values of social and philosophical issues, for example, by examining questions of morality, justice, democracy, etc. Typically, LD debates concern themselves with deciding whether or not certain actions, or states of affairs, are good or bad, right or wrong, moral or immoral.

What Do We Debate and Who Debates?

LD debaters debate predetermined topics or resolutions. Every year on August 15, the first topic for the season is announced. This gives debaters until early September to begin research on the topic. In LD, topics change every two months, with the next topic being announced one month prior to it being debater. So, the September/October topic is announced August 15, the November-December topic is announced on November 1, the January/February topic is announced December 1, and so on.

But what is a resolution? A resolution is a statement or an assertion that places two sides in conflict. For example, "Resolved: In a democratic society, felons ought to retain the right to vote."

As evidenced by the adversarial nature of debate, there are two sides to each debate, and these are known as the affirmative and the negative. The affirmative debater upholds, affirms, or agrees with the resolution.

125 Watson Street, PO Box 38, Ripon, WI 54971-0038
(920) 748-6206 • www.speechandebate.org

His or her job is to present arguments in order to persuade the judge that the resolution is true. The negative debater, on the other hand, disagrees with the resolution and presents arguments to persuade the judge that the resolution is false.

Each debater is responsible for arguing, or advocating, for his or her side of the resolution in front of a judge who decides which side of the resolution s/he will vote for, based on the arguments presented in the debate round. Debate's most important concept is forced choice, which is also known as clash. This means that the judge is required to select (vote) between two mutually exclusive propositions. For example, if you are forced to choose between buying a soda and keeping your dollar, you can only choose one of those options. If you are having trouble figuring out the conflict scenario in the resolution, add the word "NOT" into the text to give you an idea as to what the negative must defend. "Resolved: In a democratic society, felons ought not retain the right to vote." This will also help you with other resolutions, as some of them will be negatively worded.

How Does LD Debate Work?

In each preliminary round, one debater is assigned to defend the affirmative, and the other debater is assigned to defend the negative. During the course of the tournament, you will be forced to defend both the affirmative side and the negative side many times. In each round, you will be assigned a flight (1st or 2nd), a room, an opponent, and a judge.

In the debate, you will present a case that you have prepared before the tournament defending your side of the resolution, make arguments against the case your opponent presents, and answer the arguments that your opponent makes against your case. Based on the strength of your arguments, how persuasive you are, and other factors, you will be awarded with either a win or a loss. Judges will also give you speaker points (on a scale of 1-30) based on how well you debated and spoke.

The structure of tournaments is as follows: the first few rounds, anywhere from 3 to 8, will be preliminary rounds. The purpose of these rounds is to develop a ranking within the tournament that will determine who proceeds to elimination rounds. Tournaments will "break"[1] anywhere from the top 64 to the top 4 debaters (depending on the size) to elimination rounds. Those debaters that will compete in these rounds are the debaters that had the best overall record and speaker points from the prelim rounds.

If you make it to elimination rounds, then you continue to debate as long as you win. At most tournaments, your elimination rounds will contain three judges (known as a panel) instead of one judge like prelims. Typically, tournaments give out trophies for those who place well and for those who have good speaker points. Speaker points are not only a way to win trophies, but also play a very important role in "seeding"[2] debaters for elimination rounds.

[1] To "break" means, simply, to advance past elimination rounds.

[2] Much like the NCAA tournament, debate tournaments determine which debaters deserve to be at the top of the bracket based on the number of wins that debater accumulates in prelims, and based on their speaker points (or speaks). So, if you win 4 of your 5 prelims and average a 28.5 every round, you will be seeded higher than another debater who wins 4 prelims but only averages a 28. Higher seeds will debater lower seeds in elimination rounds, giving you a strong incentive to get as high of speaks as possible.

What Skills are Necessary to be a Good LD Debater?

To be an effective LD debater at any level, you need to possess a few skills. First, and foremost, the ability to communicate is crucial. If you have great arguments to make, but lack the ability to explain them to a judge who may very well know nothing about the topic you are debating, then you won't win very many rounds. Your job is to convince the judge that what you are defending is true, which requires the ability to connect with them and explain arguments in a way that makes sense to them.

Being a good communicator may be the most important skill that you can possess in LD, and is one that will serve you well throughout your life. You need to be able to take a complex message and be able to explain your argument in a way that someone with no experience on the topic can understand and agree with your point. You also need to be able to communicate clearly in a written manner. What I mean by this is that you need the ability to write clearly and concisely in order to communicate (in case form) your arguments to the judge.

You must also have great listening skills. These are important because there is another debater in the round trying to disprove what you are saying, so if you are not listening to what he or she has to say, you will be ill-prepared to answer the arguments and effectively defend your position.

One of the most undervalued skills in LD is the ability to efficiently research. The arguments that you present in round will very rarely be your own thoughts or opinions. Instead, your job in the time leading up to the tournament is to research and become an expert on the topic. You need to be able to find articles, read them, and pull evidence from them to build support for your side of the resolution. These articles should almost always come from reputable news sources, experts in the field, and/or law journals that have articles relating to your topic.

More than being able to communicate clearly, you need to be able to present your arguments effectively. This means that you should practice speaking fluently, persuasively, and sometimes at different rates of speed.

Another part of LD debate today is cross-examination (refer to the bottom of the article for an outline of the structure of LD rounds). In cross-examination, you need to be able to ask questions about your opponent's case and arguments in order to expose weaknesses, set-up arguments you want to make, and gain clarity or understanding of what your opponent is saying.

How Do I Keep Track of the Arguments My Opponent Makes?

The way that debaters keep track of what arguments have been made in the round is through a method known as "flowing." Flowing is, essentially, a glorified way of taking notes. Flowing is key to ensuring that you successfully respond, or refute, your opponents case and arguments they make against your case.

Flowing entails outlining the main points of each speech in the debate. However, unlike traditional note-taking where you write notes across an entire sheet of paper, you should use a legal pad, printer paper, legal paper, card stock (with flowing, it's a bit of a "whatever floats your boat" mentality) and separate it into five columns on the sheet of paper your flowing the affirmative case, and four columns on the sheet of paper that you are flowing the negative case. This means that you should always have, at the very least, two

sheets of paper prepared on which to flow. In each of these columns, you will flow the arguments vertically, leaving space in between each unique argument that you need to answer.

Example – Resolved: Burger King is better than McDonald's.

Affirmative Case	1st Negative Rebuttal (also part of the Negative Construction)	1st Affirmative Rebuttal	2nd Negative Rebuttal (also referred to as the 1NR)	2nd Affirmative Rebuttal
Burger King is better than McDonald's because the Whopper is made with better quality meat.	Actually, McDonald's meat is of better quality because it isn't frozen for weeks before cooked (probably almost certainly false, but regardless).	Burger King's meat isn't frozen any longer than McDonald's, and their patties are made with a higher quality meat.	McDonald's and Burger King get their meat from the same source, which means that this argument is neither a reason to vote affirmative or negative since it doesn't offer a unique justification to eat at Burger King.	Burger King's meat is still of higher quality than McDonald's because Burger King takes more steps to ensure that their burgers are kept in environments that keep the meat as fresh as possible.
Burger King is better than McDonald's because their value menu is a more cost effective choice for customers.	McDonald's offers customers a wider variety of options on their menu, making it a more attractive option for customers.	McDonald's value menu, even if it does have a wider variety of options, does not give customers the same amount of food, so their money is better spent at Burger King.	Actually, McDonald's value menu gives customers the choice of purchasing a double cheeseburger with 25% more meat, according to a study presented in the first negative construction.	This argument is false; the negative did not respond to my answer to this study that it was based on how McDonald's used to make their burgers not how they currently make them.

This should give you an idea as to how you should be flowing arguments. Each argument is in its own part of the flow, and you should flow your opponents' answers, as well as your responses to their answers, next to the original argument so that you can always have an idea of what arguments you do or do not have to answer.

Your flow for the negative should look identical, except that you won't flow the affirmative case on the negative flow, so you will have one less column. (If writing at the top of the column what speech belongs there will help, I encourage you to do that.) For the negative flow, it should look like:

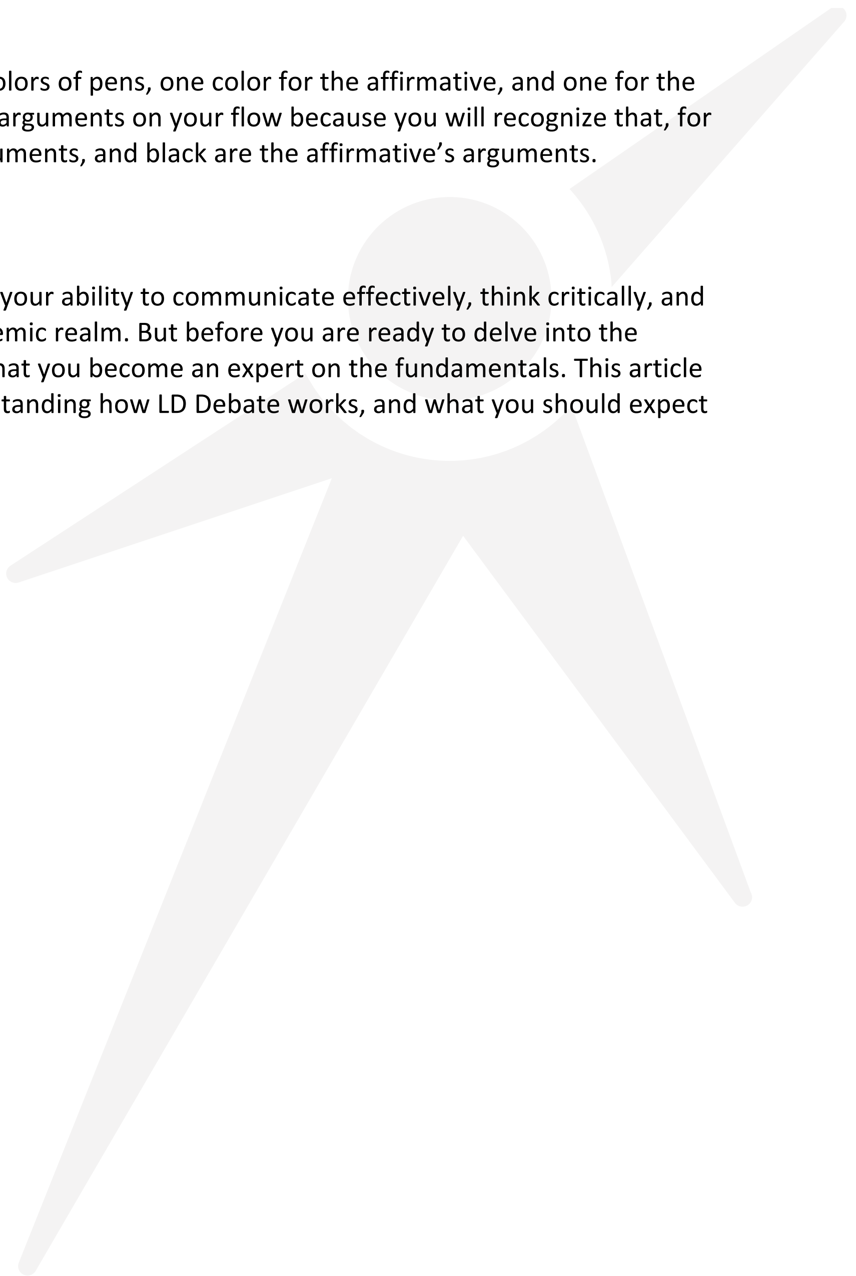
Negative Constructive/Case (also part of the 1st Negative Rebuttal)	1st Affirmative Rebuttal	2nd Negative Rebuttal (1NR)	2nd Affirmative Rebuttal

Flowing Basics

When you flow, you should use two different colors of pens, one color for the affirmative, and one for the negative. This will help you identify each side's arguments on your flow because you will recognize that, for example, red arguments are the negative's arguments, and black are the affirmative's arguments.

Conclusion

LD Debate is a great activity in that it enhances your ability to communicate effectively, think critically, and research arguments just as they do in the academic realm. But before you are ready to delve into the incredible intricacies of LD Debate, it's crucial that you become an expert on the fundamentals. This article should give you a solid starting point for understanding how LD Debate works, and what you should expect to see at any given tournament.



LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATE SPEAKING FORMAT

The speaking order and times in LD Debate are as follows:

Affirmative Constructive (AC)	6 minutes
Cross-Examination of the Affirmative by the Negative	3 minutes
Negative Constructive (NC)	7 minutes
Cross-Examination of the Negative by the Affirmative	3 minutes
1st Affirmative Rebuttal (1AR)	4 minutes
Negative Rebuttal (NR)	6 minutes
2nd Affirmative Rebuttal (2AR)	3 minutes

Preparation Time

Preparation time is the time you get in between speeches/cross examination to prepare a rebuttal against your opponent and a defense of your arguments.

Prep Time: 4 minutes

Recommended Allocation of Prep Time

Affirmative	**Negative**
AC – use 0 minutes	1NC – use 2 minutes
1AR – use 2 minutes	1NR – use 2 minutes
2AR – use 2 minutes	
TOTAL PREP USED: 4 MINUTES	TOTAL PREP USED: 4 MINUTES

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