



National Association
for Urban Debate Leagues'

Debate Coaching Fundamentals



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BASIC COACH RESPONSIBILITIES

BEFORE THE SCHOOL YEAR STARTS

- Identify Debate Room/Practice Locations
- Review Tournament Schedule and Key Dates
- Get schedule approved
- Communicate with your local league about upcoming season and events
- Identify core files and familiarize yourself with content
- Review curriculum to plan early practices
- Attend coach workshops when applicable
- Plan recruitment strategy, identify returning debaters to help if possible

DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR

- Run consistent after school debate practices at least twice a week
- Recruit new students
- Manage tournament registration
- Chaperone and coach students at tournaments
- Judge at tournaments
- Participate in local league coach community meetings
- Communicate with local league staff
- Attend end of the year events
- Complete paperwork for needed by league, school, and district

THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

- Create and maintain a supportive culture
- Maintain a relationship with your administration
- Celebrate successes
- Promote your squad and the league
- Build community relationships



TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF FIRST

Realistically, coaching a debate squad requires three hours of afterschool time every week from September through April, one Saturday per month for tournaments, and additional time for planning and completion of forms (registration, transportation, permission, etc.) This is a commitment that will have a significant and positive impact on all the students on your squad, which is why we all love doing this, but you should consider establishing some expectations and processes to help ensure you maintain a healthy balance for yourself.

- **Limit student access** - As a coach, you will want to be available to your debaters, but you need to set limits. If you give out your phone number, students will use it. They may also take it to mean that calling five minutes before a practice to say they are not coming is acceptable. While there are worse problems to have than students so interested in debate that they want to stay after school every day to work on it, this can unnecessarily sap your energy. Communicate limits clearly and stand by them. Teach your students to respect the needs of others.
- **Seek coaching assistance** – Recruit one or more teachers or school staff members as an assistant coach. These assistants are a valuable resource and will allow you to delegate some responsibilities to free up personal time.
- **Seek league assistance** - Most leagues provide materials and support for teachers. This may mean workshop opportunities with other coaches, email support from a league staff member, or even on- site support from the league. Take advantages of these opportunities and use those resources wisely.
- **Get to know the other coaches** – Other teachers are great resources for innovative ideas and advice.
- **Encourage student leadership** - Encourage debaters do as much of the work as possible. Students who have been to summer debate institutes may well know more about debate than their coach, and if they are mature, they can often be trusted to judge a JV practice round or take primary responsibility for teaching a given topic. You will need to direct and coordinate the instruction and strategizing that your squad does, you do not have to do all the work, like cutting evidence or writing blocks. Instead, assign these tasks to students and offer guidance, as necessary.
- **Manage Your Calendar** – Take the time to place all league event, school events, and personal events on a calendar and plan out the entire year. This will help you spot issues early and prioritize your time.



SETTING ACHIEVABLE GOALS

Because not all students are going to get awards, medals cannot be an individual student's goal at every tournament. Instead, focus on a smaller goal for each student. Prior to the tournament, create a goal for each round. Each goal should build off the next so that they add a new skill to each round. The goal is not to win a medal, but instead to see tangible results from smaller, more achievable goals. At the end of the tournament, the reward is for the debater to feel achievement from personal growth, not from external recognition. Conventional success (in terms of awards) will come through the process of self-improvement and growth.

If time allows, have a meeting place in between each round to gather and have everyone reflect on their small goal for that round. Ask each individual student to name one new thing they learned in that round. Ask them to explain what they did in the round to help achieve their personal goal. Before they go to their next round, remind them of their next goal or ask them to come up with their next goal based on feedback from previous judges.

Suggestions for individual round goals (with increasing degrees of difficulty)

- Speech Time: Use all your speech time
- Teamwork: help each other more than in previous rounds during prep time; coordinating our arguments from the constructives to the rebuttals
- Use of Evidence: refer to a card you have already read; explain the warrants from a card; compare your carded piece of evidence to an opponent's argument
- Cross-Examination: asking a pointed question about a piece of evidence your opponents read; following up one question with another one probing the answer your opponents gave
- Refutation: take your flows up to the podium to use as a guide to answer arguments; reference your opponent's argument before making your responses
- Impact Calculus: make a magnitude, time frame, and probability argument for your



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impacts; make your impact calculus comparative to your opponent's impacts

- Narration: Tell your judge the story of your case or disadvantage; frame for the judge the most important facts and why they should vote for you.
 - Structure: giving your judge a “roadmap” of what order they will making arguments; “signposting” in each speech to let the judge know you are moving to another topic; not jumping between flows/major arguments; going line-by-line to answer opponent's arguments in the order they made them by using the flow as a reference
- Flowing: flow in the proper columns; write down more tags; flow authors; flow every speech including their own; different arguments on different papers
- Thinking on your feet: successfully answer one unfamiliar question in Cross-Examination, respond to one unfamiliar argument by applying what we know and using our logic
- Exploring the Core Files: Use at least one more new argument, try using Topicality, a Disadvantage, or a Counterplan.

When at practice the next week, have a time set aside to have everyone celebrate their individual achievements and reflect on how much they have grown from the past tournament. If they feel down, remind them of the tangible things they did better over the course of the tournament. Ask our staff to come in to help you debrief and encourage the team! You can also have your own individual Awards Ceremony after each tournament, with certificates or small prizes - so that kids know they did something well:

- Best flow
- Most improvement in speaking
- Most courageous in dealing with a difficult round
- Best cross-ex questions
- Best job of answering unfamiliar cross-ex questions
- Best job of supporting your partner in your round and during prep time
- Best questions for the judge after the debate to guide improvement
- Best sportsmanship and engagement with opponents and other schools
- Most resilient in pushing through disappointment



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Remind students that we win or lose as an entire team. Students that succeed at one individual tournament do so because of the collective preparation and support of all the other students on the team leading up to the tournament. Set broader goals like having the entire team win more overall debates than the last tournament or to win at least one debate against a rival school your students lost to at the last tournament. Use more of the Core Files or try new arguments. Our expectation for that tournament might not be to win more, but to see pathways to how we can use this experience to win more debates on new or better arguments the NEXT tournament. There might be short-term setbacks as we learn the new concepts, but it is necessary for longer-term growth and success.

Finally, keep things fun! Play a fun speaking game at the start of the first practice after a tournament, then debrief. Too much about our students' lives is too serious already - debate should feel productive, fun, and open. Come back to the team norms and goals you have established together and reinforce what is good about what your students have done toward those norms and goals.



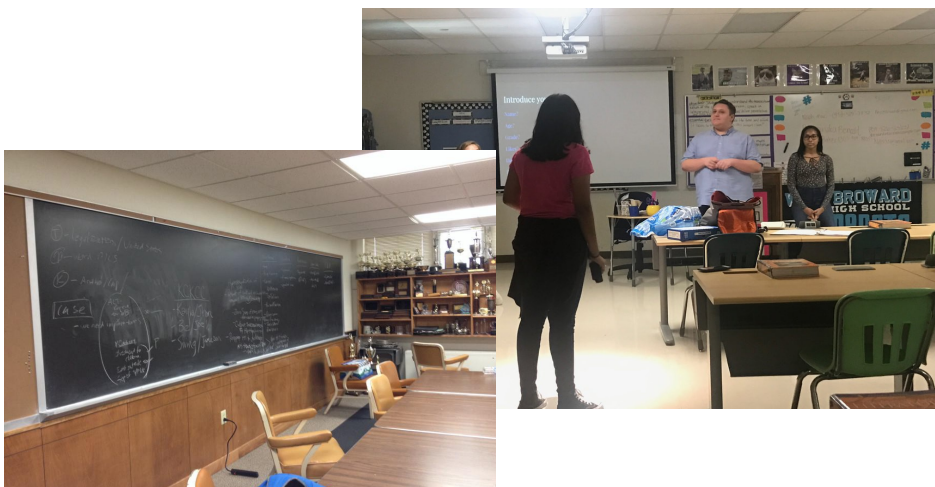


THE SQUAD ROOM

Your squad room is the home base for your squad, and it is important that there is a consistent place for meetings and file storage. Squad room must haves:

- Culture – Organize the space for your squad to reflect their goals and values. This includes what is posted on the walls, how the space is organized, and what resources are in the room. Include a space to celebrate successes and photos of squad members.
- Consistency—If you share a room, be sure to reserve the squad room for your practice times throughout the year.
- Storage space—Debaters will have files and other materials, having mailbox space or closet space for student files, forms and communications will be a tremendous asset.
- Communication – Set aside wall space for announcements, skill and content reminders, and shout-outs for students. Supplement this with electronic communication.
- Office Technology – Your squad will need internet access for research, a printer, and access to a copier.
- Collaboration – Have students help design the space, take ownership of posting photos, and manage the posted reminders.

Note: If you share a room, communicate with other teachers frequently about practices and squad needs. Keeping those lines of communication open will reduce friction with colleagues.





RECRUITING FOR AFTER SCHOOL DEBATE

One of the most important parts of a debate squad is having students interested in your program! There is a lot competing for students' time and the attrition rate for a debate squad can top 50%. You need to over-recruit, using students, other teachers, and staff members you know have good relationships with students.

- **Your enthusiasm is what gets students interested** at the start and gets them out to that first tournament, where they can get hooked on the activity. Students want to be a part of something that is energizing and challenging.
- **Ask colleagues** (administrators, teachers, counselors, support staff, etc.) to be on the lookout for recruits: It is impossible to talk to every student who may be interested in debate. To cover your bases, make sure you have colleagues on the lookout as well. Create an envelope with a printed invitation to join the squad with the date and time of the next meeting and some key sales points. Make the time to meet them personally if possible. Students will respond to the time and energy you have put into getting to know them and being interested in having them on your squad.
- **Distribute fliers and hold awareness events.** Enlist your current debaters to design interesting materials and events. Ask your current students what got them interested in debate and why they came back. Try to design a first meeting that mimics those experiences and materials that can be posted around the school that accurately convey what to expect. Get administrative and teacher approval to have your experienced debaters give five-minute presentation in classrooms. Hold a short exhibition debate as an assembly activity with a follow up Q&A.
- **Be early and be present.** Make sure your posters and materials are posted and listed with all your school's offerings. Have a presence in key common areas or sign-up activities. Remember that your best ambassadors are your current students so arrange for them to be present to answer questions.
- **Borrow great ideas** from coaches like Dave Hayes from King College Prep and have a parent info night where you invite students and parents. Order pizza, have food related to the countries in the topic, have a screening of the Great Debaters with popcorn – the idea is yours, but make sure it is engaging and appealing. I've learned you can be creative about resources, involving parents – some restaurants will donate food or donate a portion of proceeds and throw in meals if you help pass out advertisements or get people to come out for one weekday evening when business is typically slow.



RECRUITING FOR A DEBATE CLASS

One of the most important parts of a debate squad is having students interested in enrolling in the class. Each year incoming students will have the option to sign up for a limited number of electives and it is your job to put debate on their radar as an elective they want to opt into. Here are some tips to increase your odds of success:

- Know the freshman enrollment period. Many schools have freshmen picking their electives as early as February of the previous year. They need to know that debate is an option they should pick long before they have seen a tournament.
- Review the course information in the student handbook, be sure it is up to date and if it is not work with your department head and guidance office to make sure it accurately reflects your program.
- Attend incoming freshman parent nights/activities. Make sure you have a presence at the nights that introduce students to the school. Bring information about your class, including materials that show off the activity (trophies, pictures of the squad, etc.). Remember that your best ambassadors are also your students so if you have a couple of upperclassmen free who can answer questions about debate bring them along.
- Recruit in middle school classes that will feed into your program. If you know the middle schools that feed into your high school work with them to have 15-minute introductions to debate for your students.
- Get to know the guidance counselors who assign freshman electives. Give them an idea of the types of students you are trying to recruit and check in with them as they are assigning classes to see how the process is going. This is also useful for determining the types of questions students and parents have about debate so you can adjust materials for recruiting accordingly.

Note: You may find you have missed a deadline or two for some of these things. Course descriptions, for example, often must be approved early, or perhaps you are reading this after the freshman enrollment period. If that happens, do not panic, check the tips in recruiting if you have an afterschool program and make a calendar note of the change for next year.



- **Be a novel presence at any activity fairs or meetings open to many students.** For example, have students deliver short debates in the hallway using a PA setup on controversial, but entertaining topics, or have two students walk around with a sign reading “Think You Can Out-Debate Me? Pick a Topic” and they can have a brief discussion with any student who stopped them. Give them a hat with some slips of paper listing fun topics in case students could not think of an issue to debate about.
- **Make each returning student responsible** for bringing people into the squad. Assign Varsity to bring in 2 friends and 1 student they are not friends with but whom they respect as being smart and think would be good at debate.
- **Design a dynamic introductory meeting.** There are a lot of ways to do this (pizza parties, activities, student led discussions, etc.) keep it fun as you introduce the activity.
- **Have a permanent presence in the school** by making certain any trophies your squad has won are placed prominently in the building, along with photographs of your squad. Have a big debate squad banner in the hall of the squad room. Have debaters wear t-shirts with debate logos.
- **Do not be afraid to challenge students from the start.** There are many activities which are minor commitments – debate is not one of them. While you are trying to recruit people, be upfront about expectations. If practice is twice a week, make sure people understand the attendance requirements. Be transparent about what tournaments entail even as you make them sound fun. Give students a vision of what you are looking for and be transparent. The first informational meetings should tell students what kind of squad they will be part of – have some message for what the squad believes in, such as, “Our goal is to be one of the best squads anywhere and that requires teamwork where we are responsible ourselves, our coach and each other.”
- **Keep recruiting.** Recruiting is not a once-a-year thing where you give up if your first push fails. Do not presume that what worked for one coach will work for every coach. Even the best debate squads keep less than half of students who show up at the first informational meeting.



COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR LEAGUE

Each year the policy topic changes and leagues create a new set of core files that will introduce students to the topic. While some more advanced students will use files beyond this set, most debaters will start here. Since these are the introductory materials for the topic, it is important that coaches are familiar with them.

- Get the core files and planned progression from your local league.
- Review the content and ask your local programming staff questions about any concepts you want their help introducing.
- Amend the novice curriculum to include activities that are relevant to this year's core file set.
- Familiarize yourself with evidence rules, i.e. when are new files being introduced and plan your practice time accordingly.
- Update glossaries to include key terms from this year's topic.
- Update graphic organizers to reinforce ideas from the core files.
- Update or create posters to reinforce ideas from the core files.

Note: One of the most challenging aspects of teaching debate is the changing content. All coaches feel more comfortable with some topics than others. If you have more experienced debaters on your squad, a great way to keep them involved and build squad chemistry is to have them teach components of the core files. It will give you a chance to work with them as mentors and they will learn the concepts better by teaching them.

Local leagues often provide workshops to help coaches develop their skills. These provide a good opportunity to get to know your local league staff and other coaches. This is also a valuable time to bounce ideas off other coaches.

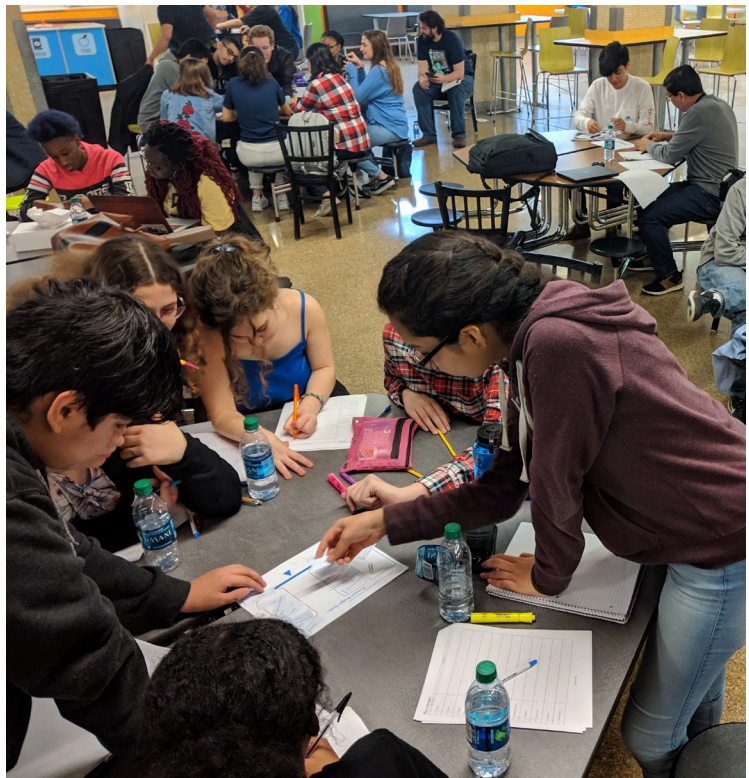
- Ask league staff for the date of any workshops in advance and make plans to attend all or part of them.
- Review your materials in advance of the workshop and identify specific areas you'd like to improve; be sure your league programming staff knows what you'd like to work on over the summer so they can help you use your time wisely.
- Make plans to attend any logistical meetings where schedules, tournament changes, and corefile rules may be discussed. If you cannot attend that meeting be sure to find a representative to attend or arrange a separate time to get key information.
- Set aside planning time after the workshop to revamp any curriculum or calendar needs so they are ready to go when the school year starts.



FACILITATING GREAT PRACTICES

Debate practice is a time for your squad to come together, build relationships and work core concepts and skills. They should be planned as carefully as any core content lesson. Ideally, squads will meet at least twice a week for an hour after school.

- Have a common meeting place. Design that space for the learning environment your squad needs. See page five.
- Maintain a common structure for each practice so that students always understand what is expected and what their role is.
- Set desired norms collaboratively with your students and honor them. For instance, if the norm is to be on time and prepared, make certain you are always on time and prepared and hold your students to that expectation.
- Have a check-in activity as a way of helping students decompress from the school day and refocus.
- Use a meeting agenda just like you would use an agenda in your classroom to keep students on track. This will also be helpful for you as a reminder for
- Follow a lesson plan and check for learning.
- Build in a reminder/housekeeping time near the end to cover any announcements, paperwork, or upcoming events.
- Close with a check out activity to build squad cohesion and support students.





SETTING THE CALENDAR

The debate schedule will be created during the summer and will set the cadence for your squad's year. For example, the curriculum for novices is paced off the tournament schedule, some school or community events may conflict with certain tournaments, and school administrations often require a lot of lead time for approving activities. Therefore, it is critical to identify all dates early.

- Get the tournament schedule from your local league.
- Decide if you will other event, such as local invitationals, community events, or school events that the squad will participate in?
- Create a single calendar with all debate squad and school events.
- Confirm you can attend all events. If there is an unavoidable conflict do you have another teacher who will attend? Identify and confirm with other individuals who may be helping you.
- Get approval for any events that require administrative or district approval.
- Post the schedule prominently in your squad room, include it in start of the year student handouts, parent night materials and online.
- Identify needs for each tournament (transportation, forms, hotel, judging, etc.) and set aside time each week to ensure confirm logistics, for example:
 - 5 weeks prior: sign up posted, transportation confirmed, all school approval confirmed
 - 4 weeks prior: online registration complete, student information sheet available for students and parents, recruit judges to cover your judge obligation, confirm file requirements by division
 - 2 weeks prior: confirm student attendance, collect field trip forms (process?), confirm transportation, confirm judges, create tournament folder (link to tournament folder contents page), make any changes to online registration
 - Week of tournament: make any changes in a timely manner, confirm transportation, confirm judges, finalize tournament folder.
 - After tournament: review what worked, adjust for future tournaments, as necessary.



COACHING TO AND THROUGH A TOURNAMENT

As they say, the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry. Students will have scheduling conflicts, papers will get lost, events will run late, etc. Careful planning makes managing last minute changes easier and teaches models time management and self-control for students.

THE WEEK RUNNING UP TO THE TOURNAMENT

- Check that every student has all their files and that those files are organized. There is often a lot of last-minute copying and filing.
- Tell your students to keep all their debate flows. These are invaluable for feedback and self- reflection.
- Instruct the students ahead of time that you will ask them to select a speech from a round they lost to redo later.
- Tell students to warm up their voices the night before by reading their full 1ACs and 1NC blocks.
- Tell them to get at least 8 hours of sleep.

ITEMS TO BRING TO THE TOURNAMENT

- A schedule of the day's events
- All the locations for the day's events
- Your students' contact information (in case they are late or separated from the squad)
- Contact information for any volunteers or judges that you brought with you to the tournament.
- Bus driver's contact information (if necessary)
- A folder of key information, including:
 - A roster of participants (including students, judges, bus drivers, etc.)
 - Contact information for participants
 - Copies of field trip forms for students. Note: this paperwork should include allergy information and any emergency consent to treat. Some schools do one



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form at the start of the years, other require a form each tournament. Know what you need and be sure you have this in case of emergency.

- Any dietary information/allergies you need to know for your students.
 - Vital information for the tournament (the schedule, location, transportation information, etc.)
 - Clearly mark this folder with contact information for coaches in case it is misplaced.
 - Use this folder to file receipts or invoices for the weekend.
 - After the tournament make copies of any paperwork you need, file any invoices or reimbursements with the appropriate person, re-file any field trip forms for students.
- Be sure you establish a common meeting point with students when you arrive. Be available for questions there after rounds.
 - If the tournament is running behind be sure students update their transportation plans.
 - Make sure all students have left before leaving the tournament.





BEFORE THE FIRST ROUND

- ❑ Check in immediately at the registration table while your students find a good place to set up. Examine the school's registration sheet and take care of any revisions that need to be made.
- ❑ Take some time with each team to remind them of their goals for the tournament.
- ❑ Have teams describe the thesis of their affirmative case, summarize what they expect the negative's strategy to be, and summarize how the affirmative wins the debate. Ask good, critical, pointed questions about anything that does not make sense to you, help them explain it in a way that makes sense.
- ❑ Check that the teams what case/s to expect. Have them state the exact plan aloud and then summarize the Harms. Have them explain what the 1NC strategy is, including Topicality, disadvantages, and on-case arguments, and why that wins the debate. Ask good, critical, pointed questions about anything that does not make sense to you, help them explain it in a way that makes sense.
- ❑ If the tournament is running behind be sure students update their transportation plans.
- ❑ Project calm and confidence to the students.
- ❑ Help your students find themselves on the pairings sheet when it is posted. It is usually by school name and student initials.





DURING A TOURNAMENT

It is important that students take some of their free time to socialize, unwind and replenish between rounds. That said, you can help them make the most of down time while being careful not to burden them. Squads that work together and spend time together have more fun and win more debates. One sign of a struggling, unsuccessful debate squad is when students are all doing their own thing when not in debate rounds.

- Help novice debaters get to where they need to be with everything they need. Beginning debaters do not do any of these things on their own.
- Tell your students to take notes when the judge gives them oral critique.
- Students should discuss each round immediately afterwards, so they do not forget important lessons. Ask them questions like:
 - Were there any new or unfamiliar arguments you heard that would need to be addressed in future debates?
 - What could you have done better to respond to a situation in the debate or to help your partner?
 - Was there anything the other team did well that you could learn from and pick up for your own debating?
 - What was the toughest cross-examination question you heard that you had trouble answering?
 - What arguments made it to the 2NR and 2AR?
 - What do you feel worked especially well in this debate? The more specific the responses get about arguments and evidence, the more your students are learning.
 - “The judge was wrong” is not an acceptable statement. Debate is about advocating through persuasion. Beginning debaters will not improve if they blame adults or more experienced debate judges for their inability to communicate effectively.
- If you have any students not debating a round, have them watch and flow a round. If you are judging, have them join you in that debate.
- If you are judging, set a good example by returning to the common meeting point quickly.
- After a tournament, you should receive a “packet” or a folder of ballots from the tournament. Split them up by debate pairs so your students can read the



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commentary they received.

- Have students review the ballots side by side with their flows and their notes from oral critiques.

AFTER A TOURNAMENT:

- CELEBRATE THE SUCCESSES OF THE TOURNAMENT. EVERYONE HAD SOME SUCCESSES.
- Remind students that debate is a subjective activity and that complaining about judges or complaining about how other teams “cheated” or were unfair is something that our squad will de-emphasize and choose not to dwell on because it limits our improvement. Talk through adaptation strategies for next time.
- Collect the ballots from the tournament. Organize them to return them to students during your first practice after the tournament. (These are the debrief practices that happen after every tournament in the curriculum, they include activities to identify successes, challenges, and ways to improve).
- Have students reflect upon their stated goals for the tournament, the experience and feedback of the tournament, and then write two things they are proud of and two things they plan to improve for the next tournament.
- Ask debaters to make a list of *skills* their judges want them to improve while you write them on the board. These skills will be what you look for during redo speeches.
- Have debaters should select the speech they want to redo. Have each student select one or two primary goals to work on during that redo speech.
- Any affirmatives you *do not* have a case negative for should be an assignment due before the next tournament. You want the 2Ns to talk together to come up with a strategy the whole squad can use.
- Ask debaters to make a list of *negative* arguments they faced.
- Any negative arguments you *do not* have an answer for should be an assignment due before the next tournament. You want the 2As to work on creating answers to these negative arguments.