



Podium Debate

Intro to debate. What it actually is, and why it matters.

A free 45-minute session for parents, assuming zero knowledge.

The promise for the next forty-five minutes.

01

You should understand what a debate round actually is.

This is the literal thing your kid could potentially do on a Saturday morning.

02

You'll know what evidence does and doesn't show.

Peer-reviewed studies, with sources on the slide, including limitations.

03

You'll be able to decide either way.

Including deciding this isn't for your family. That's a real outcome and a fine one.

Before we start: where are you starting from?

Type **A**, **B**, or **C** in the chat.

A

I know nearly nothing and have never seen a debate round.

Most common answer, by a lot.

B

I've heard about it (from another parent, a school, etc.).

Solid place to start!

C

My child already competes.

You might basically be an expert yourself!

Part 01

What a debate round actually is

In its most literal sense, it's forty-five minutes, two students, one topic.

01

Lincoln-Douglas: one student against one student, not a team

One round with two students

01

A question

Every student in the country debates the same question for two months.

02

Two sides

Your child prepares both. They find out which side they're on when the round starts.

03

A case

Written in advance. Six minutes, read aloud, with evidence behind every claim.

04

Cross-examination

The other student asks them questions, face to face. This is the part kids end up loving.

05

A judge

One adult, a ballot, a decision. Then they shake hands and do it again.

Learn domain knowledge, research skills, and how to communicate.

“Resolved: Outer space colonization is a moral imperative.”

This is the real question. Every Lincoln-Douglas debater in the country argues it for two months. It is already out and it is the first topic this cohort preps.

Your turn Anybody have ideas on which side would you take? Why?

Topic selected by 61% of 2,285 student voters and 60% of 534 coaches. Source: National Speech & Debate Association, which has more than 150,000 student members; its 2026 National Tournament in Richmond drew over 7,000 competitors.

Debate teaches content-agnostic skills.

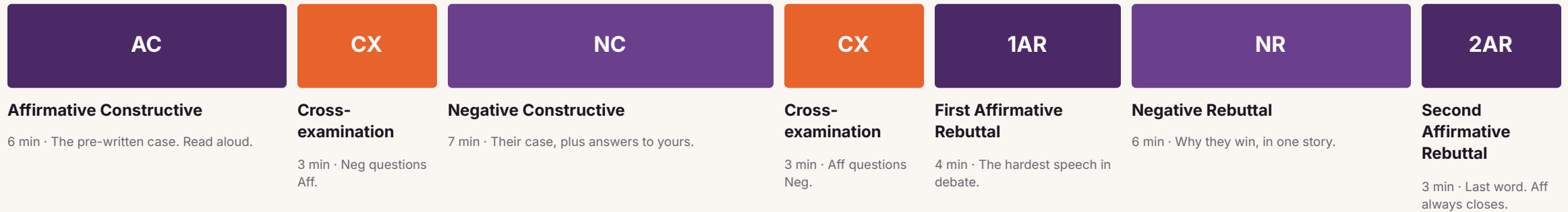
They prepare **both** sides. They find out which one they're on when the round starts and they will argue the opposite side an hour later, against a different opponent, in the same tournament.

That is the whole point. It builds the rarest reasoning skill there is: engaging the other side's **best** argument instead of its worst one.

It is also, quietly, why debate kids write better, for one cannot argue a position they have not genuinely understood.

A round drawn to scale

Seven speeches, thirty-two minutes of speaking, and a decision.



Plus four to five minutes of prep time per side, spent whenever they choose.

32 minutes of speaking, eight of prep, and a few for the judge to decide. Start to handshake: about forty-five minutes.

Why this format?

Not all debate is the same debate.

Lincoln-Douglas

1 vs 1

Values, ethics, and current events

New topic every two months

Individual accountability. There is no partner to hide behind so every speech in the round is theirs.

Public Forum

2 vs 2

Small-scale policy implementation

New topic every month

The most common format in the country, and what almost every program on the market sells.

Policy

2 vs 2

One resolution, all year

Deep research, very fast delivery

The most technical of the three. Usually high school, usually a big time commitment.

Podium runs **Lincoln-Douglas**. It is the format where a young student can't hide behind a partner.

“My kid is quiet.”

What parents assume

Debate is for confident, loud kids.

A shy child will be overwhelmed.

You need to be good at speaking first.

What actually happens

There's a script and a clock. Six minutes, prepared in advance, read aloud; it's far easier for a reserved kid than being called on in class.

The quiet ones are usually the better-prepared ones. They tend to do well.

Speaking becomes the **output**, not the prerequisite.

Part 02

What the benefits / costs are

Debate is one of the more rigorously studied extracurriculars in education research.

02

Speaking from personal experience

I did debate for years, and have grown immensely

Academically

Math, humanities

Socially

College, friends, family

Others agree:

"Debate has been the single most important activity for my college admissions process. Without it, I wouldn't have had direction - the community it provided could not be understated."

- High school senior (student) during the '24-'25 season

"Earlier last year, her teachers said that they thought she was smart, but didn't speak in class. Now [after Podium], she's a lot more confident and got complimented on a recent presentation."

- Parent of middle-schooler during the '25-'26 season

Academic skills · Boston Public Schools, ten years of data

68%

of an additional year of English
Language Arts learning, for middle and
high school debaters.

Measured as a **0.13 SD** gain on ELA test scores.

Gains concentrated in analytical subskills

Not rote ones. The effect shows up in exactly the kind of reading that gets harder every year of school.

The largest gains went to the students who started furthest behind

Which is the opposite of what most enrichment does.

No measured harm anywhere else

Maths scores, attendance and discipline records were unaffected. It didn't come out of something.

Why this study, and not a friendlier one

It uses a student-fixed-effects design - each student compared to themselves in years they did and didn't debate. That is what defuses the obvious objection: that debate kids were already high achievers.

Schueler, B. & Larned, K. - Boston Debate League / University of Virginia / Harvard. **SD** = standard deviation, how researchers measure how far a score moved. In education research anything above 0.10 SD is considered a real, meaningful effect, and most classroom interventions land well below that.

Debaters graduate more, enroll in college more, and place better.

High school graduation rate



College enrolment rate



Bars are percentages of each group. College enrolment gains were concentrated in four-year and private institutions.

70%

more likely to graduate

Chicago debaters, 1997-2007, vs. comparable non-debaters in the same schools.

“Promising”

U.S. Dept. of Justice rating

From the federal CrimeSolutions evidence registry, not the debate industry’s own marketing.

These are strong, repeatedly replicated associations rather than proof that debate alone caused them; see the next slide but one. **pp** = percentage points: “+12pp” means twelve more students out of every hundred, not a vague 12% bump.

The skills debate builds are the ones the labour market is actually paying for.

+0.4

GPA

Debaters posted roughly a 0.4-point higher average GPA than a comparison group of non-debaters in the same schools, alongside a lower dropout rate.

Mezuk et al. (2011)

Grit

and growth mindset

Beyond test scores, debate is linked to gains in persistence and growth mindset; this is often the actual thing parents are looking for when they choose an activity like this.

Kalesnikava et al. (2019)

1980–2012

the social-skills premium

Jobs requiring high social skills grew steadily while math-intensive, low-social-skill roles shrank as a share of employment. Wage growth was strongest specifically where both were required together.

Deming (2017), Quarterly Journal of Economics

Debate is the one activity that trains both halves at once: read something hard, work out what is true, and then say it out loud to somebody who disagrees.

What the research does **not** say.

It does not prove debate causes admissions outcomes.

These are strong quasi-experimental studies with careful controls. While there may be some relationship and benefits from skills created, good students are broadly good students.

It does not mean every child benefits equally.

Students self-select into debate. The studies correct for this statistically, and the authors say so plainly rather than burying it.

It does not replace everything else.

Debate is an unusually efficient literacy intervention and it is not a substitute for the ordinary things.

Part 03

Where it can lead

Stated carefully, because the honest version is good enough and the dishonest version is everywhere.



What is the college implication?

Admissions: Pipelines / recruiting

Scholarships

Convincing stories / awards

Performance: Academic skills development

Interview practice / interpersonal skills

College debate programs recruit the way athletic programs do.

Most extracurriculars end at high school graduation. Competitive debate is one of the very few where the next level is actively looking for your kid; and most families have never heard this exists.

Coaches scout

College debate coaches judge at high school tournaments specifically to find talent. They are in the room, watching, taking names.

Camps are funnels

University programs run summer camps that double as a recruiting pipeline into their own squads.

Schools compete for recruits

They compete with each other for strong incoming debaters, the same way athletic programs compete for athletes.

Wake Forest University's debate program publishes its own guide to how college debate recruiting works, written for high schoolers being recruited:
debate.wfu.edu/recruiting

Debate scholarships are real. Here are six of them.

Northwestern University

“Good Night, and Good Luck” Scholarship

Awarded to standout competitors at the NSDA National Tournament. Covers full tuition over four years.

Emory University

Robert W. Woodruff Debate Scholarship

Awarded via the Barkley Forum through the Emory Scholars Program. Four-year renewable: full tuition, fees, and room and board.

Harvard University

Harvard Diversity Project

Since 2017, has raised more than \$1 million to bring over 100 students onto full scholarship through Harvard's debate residency.

University of Michigan

Charles and Lisa Spies Debate Scholarships

A named scholarship fund for the Michigan debate team, backed by a \$1 million gift directed toward debater scholarships.

University of Texas at Austin

Longhorn debate scholarships

Scholarships and out-of-state tuition waivers for the program's most competitive debaters, backed by an endowment established in 2007.

Dartmouth College

The Brooks Cup

An endowed prize established in 1922, awarded annually to Dartmouth's outstanding debater of the year.

Support varies enormously by school; from a tuition waiver up to full tuition, fees and board. **The point is that real, active pipelines exist, and almost nobody outside debate knows about it.**

And it doesn't stop at the scholarship

Debate continues as a serious competitive activity at:

Harvard*	Yale*	Stanford*	Princeton	MIT	Columbia	UC Berkeley*
University of Chicago	Northwestern*	Emory*	Michigan*	Dartmouth*		
Brown	Cornell	Penn*	NYU*	UNC	UT Austin*	Georgetown*

Students we've coached have ended up getting into every one of these universities.

Bolded schools (with stars *) have discrete, meaningfully impactful pipelines, while others have active campus organizations that prioritize debate.

Part 04

How a family actually starts

The part where I stop talking about debate in general and tell you exactly what we do, what it costs, and what it costs you in time.

04

Grades 5-12 · no prior experience assumed

The first year, month by month.

Month 1

Format and vocabulary

What a case is, what a rebuttal is, how a flow works. Practice rounds inside the cohort only, so nobody is thrown in.

Month 2

First full case

Written with a coach, in their own words. First graded practice round against another student.

Month 3

First tournament

Usually online, usually four rounds in a day, usually a lot of nerves and one very good story afterwards.

Months 4-8

Repetition

A new topic every two months. Most students find their footing somewhere in here; and then it compounds.

The honest version: months one and two feel slow, and month three is when it clicks. If I told you it was thrilling from week one, you'd find out I was wrong in October.

A typical session with us, minute by minute.

0-10 min	10-25 min	25-55 min	55-75 min	75-90 min
Skill warm-up Quick drills targeting whatever the cohort needs most that week.	Demonstration & guided practice The coach models the skill, then walks students through it together.	Live speech or round segment Real reps; a constructive, a cross-ex, a rebuttal. Run live, not simulated.	Feedback & redos Immediate coaching, then a second live attempt applying it. Not notes for next time.	Goals, case assignment & Q&A Every student leaves with a specific next target and what to prep.

Ninety minutes, not sixty; because one round segment (constructive, cross-examination, rebuttal) takes fifteen to twenty minutes on its own. Sixty would force a lecture, and a lecture is not coaching.

Six to eight students, grouped by similar age and skill level, so nobody is bored and nobody is lost. Your child speaks in every session. Every session.

So “how is my kid doing” has a real answer, at any point in the season

Six levels. Published. Entirely merit-based.

1

Foundations

A first three-minute speech, delivered cleanly, with the round’s structure and timing down cold.

2

Case Construction

Writing an original case with a values framework and criterion, and asking a clean cross-examination question.

3

Refutation

Responding line-by-line off a flow, extending arguments across speeches, catching a dropped point.

4

Competitive

Ready for regional tournaments: adapting to lay and flow judges, cutting evidence independently on a new topic.

5

Circuit

Running and answering theory, kritiks and framework debates; preparing for bid-eligible tournaments.

6

Bid

Competing at a level aimed at Tournament of Champions qualification.

A strong fifth grader can sit above an older beginner. **Nobody moves up for age or tenure because it’s only for readiness.** Your child’s starting rung is set at their placement session, not guessed at.

The question every parent is actually asking

What it costs you in time.

Weekly

One 90-minute session

Evenings or weekends, online. We confirm your slot at the placement call.

Between sessions

30-45 minutes

Reading and case work, mostly independent. This is the part that actually matters.

Tournaments

Optional, roughly monthly

A Saturday, usually from home. Internal ones are included in the program.

From you

Almost nothing

No driving, no volunteering, no equipment, no fundraiser.

Less than a competitive sport. Less than a music program with recitals.

What's included that you wouldn't otherwise get

The thing parents tell me they've never had anywhere else: they can actually see what happened.

The one that matters most

Written progress notes after every single session.

Full and personal after a one-to-one. A shorter per-student note after every cohort session, per student, not per group. **Never a copy-pasted recap sent to eight families.** In a group format, this is the difference between knowing how your child is doing and hoping.

Always-on coaching access

A direct channel to coaching staff, so a stuck rebuttal on a Tuesday doesn't sit until next week.

A parent portal

Fees, sessions, the notes behind each one, coach feedback. You are not guessing and you are not chasing.

Internal tournaments, included

Real competition without a travel budget, the thing a solo tutor genuinely can't replicate.

Topic and case files, in-house

Produced by us, free with membership. Not an upsell.

Explicitly non-exclusive

Keep your school team. Keep other programs. There is no conflict, and we say so in writing.

A high-level overview: your actual options.

program	Published price	Roughly per month	Format	Where it genuinely fits
Bergen Debate Club	\$1,790-\$2,050 / 13-17wk term	≈ \$510-600	PF only, in person (NJ/NY)	In-person, if you live near them.
Potomac Debate Academy	\$850-\$1,100 / 12-16wk term	≈ \$275-285	PF & World Schools	Broad-grade enrichment, high volume.
DebateDrills	\$4,275+ / season	≈ \$535+	LD, online, premium	Circuit competitors with the budget.
Break Debate	\$1,500-\$4,000 / season	≈ \$190-500	LD, circuit-oriented	Committed competitors wanting deep prep.
CME Strategy	~\$4,000 / season	≈ ~\$500	LD, circuit-only, small-lab	Elite students chasing TOC bids.
TalkMaze	\$280-\$520 / month	≈ \$280-520	1:1 public speaking / PF	Purely private coaching.
NSD Online Classes	\$950 / semester	≈ \$240-315	PF only online. LD is camp only	A big brand, at a 1:12 ratio.
Podium Debate	\$165 / month (\$150 prepaid)	≈ \$150-165	LD, 6-8 per cohort, grades 5-12	Novice and middle-school students who want LD.

Notice the pattern: **nearly every one of these runs Public Forum**, the two-person partner format. Even NSD, the biggest Lincoln-Douglas brand in the country, sells LD only as a summer camp, not as an online class. Novice and middle-school LD is a near-empty category, and that gap is the entire reason Podium exists.

“If you want Public Forum for a high schooler, several of these are good and I’ll happily point you to them.”

Bars compare the monthly figure. Terms differ, so that column is a rough equivalence, not apples to apples: a season is eight months, a term twelve to seventeen weeks. Prices as published by each program, checked August 2026. Podium is month-to-month with no joining fee.

Before I ask you for anything

Who this is **not** for.

A student with no room for
30-45 minutes between sessions.

They'll churn in month two and have a bad time doing it. If the week is already a travel sport plus a maths program plus an instrument, tell me on the call and I'll say so plainly.

A family looking for a
guaranteed college outcome.

You shouldn't buy that from me. You shouldn't buy it from anyone, and the people selling it know exactly what they're doing.

A high schooler who specifically
wants another event.

Several of the programs on the last slide are genuinely good at that, and I'll point you to the right one.

If you're still unsure, set up a free consultation!

I'll ask about your child, you ask about the program, and by the end we'll both know whether this makes sense, or whether one of our competitors would honestly suit you more.

September 8

The season opens. The first topic is already out, so joining before then means starting prepped rather than catching up.

6-8 students

That's the cap per cohort, and it isn't a marketing number, it's how many people can actually speak in ninety minutes.

\$165/month

Locks in when you join. Month to month, cancel any time.

Introductory rate

Book a 15-minute call

podiumdebate.com/book-a-call

- link is in the chat · sachin@podiumdebate.com

Your questions.

Ask anything - including whether this is a fit for your particular kid. That's a better use of the next ten minutes than anything else I could put on a slide. Unmute, or drop it in the chat if you'd rather.