

# Judging Public Forum Debate



Public Forum is a team debate event that supports or rejects a position posed by the monthly resolution topic (announced at [www.nflonline.org/Topics](http://www.nflonline.org/Topics)). The clash of ideas must be communicated in a manner persuasive to the non-specialist or “citizen judge”, i.e. a member of the American jury. The debate should:

- Display solid logic, lucid reasoning, and depth of analysis
- Utilize evidence without being driven by it
- Present a clash of ideas by countering/refuting arguments of the opposing team (rebuttal)
- Communicate ideas with clarity, organization, eloquence, and professional decorum

The round starts with the judge facilitating a **coin toss** (the team listed first on the schematic/ballot, or that arrives to the room first may call the flip). The winning team selects **either**:

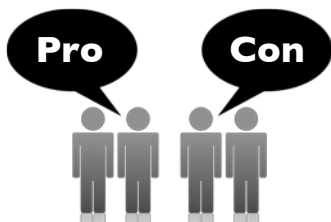
- ❖ The **side** – Pro (for the resolution) or Con (against the resolution) – they will argue
- ❖ The speaker **order** (begin the debate or give the last speech).

The team that loses the toss will then decide their preference from the option not selected by the winner (*i.e., if the winning team decides to speak last, then the losing team may decide which side they will argue*). The debate, therefore may begin with the con side, arguing against the topic. **The first team should sit to the judge’s left.**

## The Round

Public Forum focuses on advocacy of a position derived from issues presented in the resolution, not a prescribed set of burdens, a plan or value framework. In Public Forum Debate, the NFL defines a plan or counterplan as a formalized, comprehensive proposal for implementation. Neither the pro or con side is permitted to offer a plan or counterplan; rather, they should offer reasoning to support a position of advocacy. Debaters may offer generalized, practical solutions.

During **crossfire**, the two previous speakers stand, asking and answering questions in a polite, but argumentative exchange. Unlike traditional cross-examination, both speakers may question each other, however, the first question of the crossfire period is asked to the speaker who just finished. The judge may halt any crossfire lacking civility.



**Summary** speeches are rebuttals that extend earlier arguments made or answer opposing refutations, and may incorporate new evidence, but not new arguments.

In the **grand crossfire**, all four debaters may remain seated, asking and answering questions. The first question is asked by the team who had the first summary to the team who had the last summary. After that, any debater may question or answer.

The **final focus** is a compelling restatement of why the judge should vote pro or con. Given the short period, the team must articulate which arguments weigh most importantly on the decision. No new arguments are accepted in final focus speeches.

## Evaluation

Judges evaluate teams on the **quality** of arguments made, not on their own personal beliefs, and not on issues they think a particular side *should have covered*. Judges should write notes throughout the debate, assessing the bearing of each argument on the truth or falsehood of the assigned resolution. Logical reasoning, maturity of thought, and effectiveness of communication are of primary consideration. Evidence, examples, and analogies are to be used for the purpose of illustration. Debaters should use quoted evidence to support their claims, and well-chosen, relevant evidence may strengthen – *but not replace* – arguments.

In making a decision, a judge should be as objective as possible. The pro should convince the judge that the resolution should be adopted, and the con should prove that the resolution should be rejected. When deciding the round, judges should ask, “If I had no prior beliefs about this resolution, would the round as a whole have made me more likely to believe the resolution was true or not true?” Teams should strive to provide a straightforward perspective on the resolution; judges should discount unfair, obscure interpretations that only serve to confuse the opposing team.

Clear communication is important. Judges **weigh arguments** to the extent that they are clearly explained, and they will discount arguments that are too fast, too garbled, or too full of technical terminology to be understood by an intelligent high school student or a well-informed citizen. A team should not be penalized for failing to understand his or her opponent’s unclear arguments. Speakers should appeal to the widest possible audience through sound reasoning, succinct organization, credible evidence, and clear delivery. Points provide a mechanism for evaluating the relative quality of debating by each side. Write constructive suggestions for improvement to debaters on the ballot. Dishonesty (fabricating, plagiarizing, misusing research sources, etc.) should be reported to officials immediately after the round.