

# Practicing Debate

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THIMUN: Preparation  
and Practice –  
Booklet 9

All Model United Nations conferences use formal debate to reach a conclusion on a resolution, although the specific rules of procedure may vary from conference to conference. Both delegates and Student Officers need to be aware not only of the specific rules of procedure but also to have had considerable experience in debating before attending a conference at all.

### **What is a debate?**

A debate is a formal discussion of a controversial issue in which the parties involved argue with each other and try to reach a decision based on a democratic vote by all participants.

### **Where do debates take place?**

Debates take place anywhere where decisions have to be taken on the basis of discussion, e.g. in committee meetings of all kinds, in teachers' meetings, in Student Council meetings, in the board rooms of companies and organisations, in the parliaments of democratic countries and, of course, in the United Nations. For students in high school, the most common venue for debate will be a classroom.

### **Why are debates so formal?**

Formality, through the exercising of rules of procedure, ensures that each participant is treated with respect and has an opportunity to express his/her opinion without being intimidated or shouted down by other participants.

### **What are the rules of procedure?**

Although there are some universally accepted norms, most organisations develop their own individual set of rules and procedures which are best suited to their own particular situation.

Most Model United Nations conferences use their own rules of procedure which have been adapted from a combination of the UN rules and Robert's Rules of Order ([www.robertsrules.org](http://www.robertsrules.org)).

The THIMUN Rules, for example, are based loosely on Robert's Rules but have been adapted to fit the special circumstance of a five-day simulation of the United Nations for high school students. THIMUN-Affiliated Model United Nations have adapted THIMUN Rules to suit their own local circumstances.

The THIMUN Rules of Procedure can be found at:

<https://thehague.thimun.org/educational/>

### **So what are the universally accepted norms?**

- There must be an impartial Chairman or President to conduct the debate and make sure that the rules are obeyed. The role of the chairman is, therefore, much like that of a referee or umpire at a sports contest.
- Each side must be granted the freedom and an opportunity to express an opinion.
- A vote must be conducted at the end of the debate in which each participant is free to cast a vote based on his/her own conviction.

### **What formal terms of address and expressions do we need to know?**

The essential thing to be borne in mind by both the Chair and the members of the house is that a debate is a very formal means of discussion. Participants in the debate must be polite and formal at all times.

### **Remember that**

- All speeches and questions are addressed either to the Chair or through the Chair.
- All speeches should begin, therefore, by the speaker addressing the Chair, for example:
  - “Mr.(or Madam) Chairman, ladies and gentlemen of the house...”
- All references to other speakers should be in the third person, for example:
  - “As the honourable Proposer has told the house...”
- All points of information should be formulated as questions and so should begin with a phrase such as:
  - “Is the Chair/speaker aware that...”
- You need to be familiar with the special vocabulary and set phrases (a list of the most commonly used phrases can be found at the end of this booklet).

### **How many people do you need for a debate to take place?**

Debates can take place in forums of any size from a class with only ten students to a parliament with hundreds of representatives. In school the number of participants will be relatively small, say 20 – 30 people.

### **How long does a debate take?**

Although the time limit for debate is almost always fixed beforehand, debates can last any length of time. It could be a ten minute item on the agenda of a committee meeting, or a half hour during a class session, or a couple of hours at a MUN conference, or several days in a parliament or at a major international conference. In school, the time limit will be determined by the length of a school lesson period.

### **What can we debate about in school?**

The debate format can be used for classroom discussions in almost any school subject.

You are probably used to discussing controversial issues in English lessons or in the Social Sciences but, in the real world outside school, it is not only social scientists and literary or art critics who have differences of opinion. Natural scientists and even mathematicians disagree on any number of issues related to their subjects.

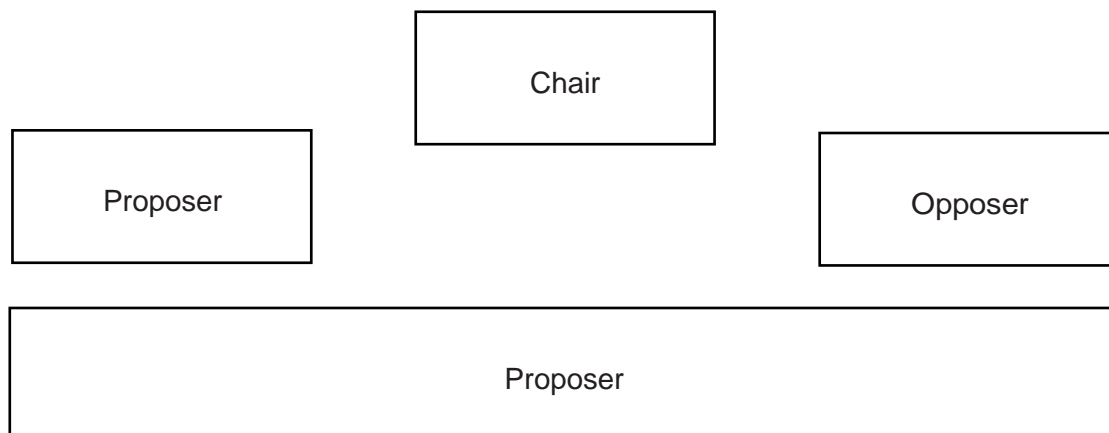
Of course, it might not be appropriate to take a vote on whether the Earth travels around the Sun or vice versa, but it might be possible to discuss what caused the extinction of the dinosaurs and take a vote, on the balance of probability, after the available evidence for differing views had been presented.

In addition, there are a large number of moral and ethical issues arising out of developments in the natural sciences which could be discussed in class.

Practicing debate in your normal lessons will obviously help to prepare you for debating at a Model United Nations conference. Try to persuade your teachers to use this format for classroom discussion. But be warned! You might be required to do even more homework and preparation for a debate than for a normal lesson. If you are a designated speaker, you will need to have good, well-substantiated arguments.

## What do you need for a simple classroom debate?

1. A topic formulated as a motion for debate, for example, supposing, as a member of Class 9, you wanted to discuss a ban on smoking in public places, you would need to formulate the motion in the following way:  
Class 9 believes that tobacco smoking should be forbidden in all workplaces, places of entertainment, restaurants, bars and public transportation;
2. At least two Main Speakers, one for the motion (the proposer or submitter) and one against the motion (the opposer): these are students who have elected or been selected beforehand to prepare speeches on the motion;
3. A Chair: this could be the teacher but, if the teacher is assessing the quality of the preparation and research or the performance of the students, then this role is better taken by a member of the class;
4. Rules of procedure which have been agreed upon beforehand;
5. A predetermined room layout for the Chair and the Speakers.



To help you develop your debating skills, there are three levels of debate practice that you could work on in school or in your MUN club:

Debate Type A – a short, quick debate on a simple motion with little preparation;

Debate Type B – a debate on a more serious motion requiring some preparation;

Debate Type C – a debate on a draft resolution in a role-playing format requiring considerable preparation,

## SAMPLE DEBATES

### Debate Type A

A simple “quickie” debate which could be done in a lunch break or in half an hour after school. This is a great way to get used to standing up and talking in front of others. It needs no real preparation and is simply an exercise in confidence building and speech practice.

**PERSONS NEEDED:** Chairman, two main speakers (Proposer and Opposer) and an audience

**MOTION:** This house believes that P.E. and sports lessons in school are a waste of time.

**PROCEDURE:** The speakers are allowed 5 minutes preparation time before the debate starts and a maximum of 3 minutes speaking time to argue for or against the motion. At the end of each speech, the speaker may take no more than two questions from members of the audience and make a short concluding statement. After both speakers have spoken, the chair will put the motion to the vote.

### Debate Type B

A short debate on a more serious topic with a short preparation time and with more complex procedural rules. This is a good way to build up knowledge of the debating rules and procedures you will need for an MUN debate. It requires that you do some research on the topic but you speak as yourself, not as a representative of a country or organisation, and the format of the motion for debate remains as a single statement of opinion.

PERSONS NEEDED:	Chairman, a number of speakers and an audience
MOTION:	This house believes that all existing nuclear weapons should be eliminated immediately
PROCEDURE:	Two speakers for the motion (Proposer and Seconder) and two speakers against the motion (Opposer and Seconder) are pre-selected. This might be some days beforehand to allow the speakers time to prepare their arguments on the basis of some research into the topic.

## General Rules of Procedure

The decisions of the Chair are final.

Only the Chair, a member of the house recognized by the Chair for a point, or the speaker holding the floor has any right to speak.

All speakers, including those rising to points, must stand when speaking and address the Chair first.

Points of information must be in the form of a question. The time taken for the question is not included in the debate time but the time taken for answer is included. The speaker may yield the floor within the debate time limit to another member of the house (e.g. the Seconder) to speak in favour of the motion.

The Chair may, if circumstances warrant it, extend or reduce debate times or speaking times and limit the number of points of information.

Except by a decision of the Chair, there will be no suspension of the rules or changes in the order of debate.

## Order of debate

The Chair calls the house to order.

The Chair calls upon the first speaker i.e. the Proposer or Submitter of the motion to read the motion aloud to the class.

The Chair then asks if anyone seconds the motion. Any member of the house may simply call out: the word "Second".

The Chair sets a debate time, e.g. 10 minutes for the motion and 10 minutes against the motion.\*

The Chair gives the floor to the Proposer, who makes a speech in favour of the motion.

The Proposer may yield to points of information, i.e. answer questions from members of the house who have been recognized by the Chair.

If a speaker yields the floor without nominating another member of the house, the Chair will recognize any member of the house who wishes to speak in favour of the motion. This procedure is followed until debate time for the motion has been exhausted.

When the debate time in favour of the motion has been exhausted, the Chair calls upon the speaker to yield the floor. The Chair then declares the floor open to members of the house who wish to speak against the motion.

The Chair recognizes a member of the house (e.g. the Opposer) to speak against the motion. The same procedure is followed for the Opposer as for the Proposer.

Amendments: Any speaker who has the floor may propose an amendment to the resolution.

A resolution may be amended by adding, striking, inserting, or striking and inserting any word, phrase or clause in the operative clauses.



The Chair will decide on the propriety of the amendment and the amendment is then debated as a subsidiary motion, in the same way as the main motion i.e. the Chair fixes a debate time for and against the amendment, recognizes speakers, closes debate on the amendment, conducts a vote on the amendment, which, if it carries becomes part of the resolution. Debate on the main motion continues then from the point at which it was suspended. The speaker who proposed the amendment will retain the floor if the amendment fails. If it succeeds, the speaker must yield the floor.

When the debate time has been exhausted, the Chair may, according to circumstances, propose an extension of time or close the debate and put the motion to a vote. Once the Chair has closed the debate, all points, except points of order relating to the conduct of the voting, are out of order. Voting is normally by means of a show of hands.

The Chair conducts the vote by counting the number of votes in favor, the number against, and the number of abstentions. Normally, a simple majority of those voting either for or against is required for the passing or failing of a motion, abstentions being simply disregarded. The Chair announces the result of the vote.

## **Debate Type C**

### **Debate on a draft resolution**

This is a full practice version of the kind of debate you will be involved in during a MUN conference. It involves research not only on the topic but on the policy of the country you will represent and the development of a draft resolution.

### **What is a resolution?**

Resolutions passed by the various organs of the United Nations are similar to laws passed in the legislative assemblies of democratic governments, such as Acts of Parliament in the United Kingdom or Acts of Congress in the United States. UN Resolutions express the will of the Member States in resolving the many issues with which the United Nations is faced.

Before a resolution is passed, a draft version has to be written, discussed informally, amended in the lobbying process and debated, usually in a committee stage as well as in a plenary assembly.

A draft resolution is a basis for debate just like any other motion. It is, of course, longer and more complex and will usually consist of several clauses, which may be discussed collectively or separately. In its draft form, it is essentially a document for discussion. Once it has been voted on and passed it becomes the decision and the policy of the body concerned.

A resolution consists of a single, long and complex sentence. It is divided into two parts: the Preamble and the Operative Clauses. The clauses are separated by commas and semicolons. The subject of the sentence is the body which is proposing the resolution. In general classroom debates one might use the name of the class or simply: This House. In the MUN Club or where you are using a role-playing simulation, the subject of the sentence should be the body or organ making the resolution, e.g. the General Assembly.

### **The Preamble**

All historical and background information, arguments, justifications and aims of the action which is to be taken as a result of the resolution are contained in the Preamble. Preambulatory clauses begin with a present or past participle or an appropriate adjective. The preambulatory clauses are separated from each other by commas.

### **The Operative Clauses**

The operative clauses contain the policy statements of the body making the resolution. Each operative clause should contain only one clear, unambiguous statement of the decision to be taken by the body. Each operative clause should be numbered separately, arranged in a logical or chronological sequence, and each must begin with a verb in the 3rd person singular of the Present Tense. The operative clauses are separated by semi-colons.

You will, of course, need to practice writing draft resolutions. See how to draft a simple resolution in Booklet No. 7.

Let us take the draft resolution from that Booklet as an example:

FORUM: 1st Committee  
QUESTION OF: The Elimination of Nuclear Weapons

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY,

Calling to mind the devastating effects of the atomic bombs dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima in 1945,

Referring to previous resolutions and treaties on nuclear disarmament, especially those relating to the establishment of Nuclear Weapon Free Zones, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons,

Deploring the fact that many previous decisions and agreements have not been implemented,

Recalling the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice on the request made by the General Assembly on the question concerning the Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons,

Reiterating the unanimous opinion of all the judges of the International Court of Justice that there is an obligation to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control,

1. Calls upon those Member States in possession of nuclear weapons to vigorously pursue “negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects” as required by the International Court of Justice;

2. Calls for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons by the year 2035.

### **Role-playing simulation**

Since this resolution has been written as a UN General Assembly resolution, it should be debated as a simulation exercise, in which the participants, play the role of Member States of the United Nations.

### **Allocating the roles**

In a school class or MUN Club there would not be enough students to represent every UN Member State. Therefore, in preparation for the debate, students would have to be assigned countries to represent on the basis of their specific interest in or relevance for the topic of nuclear disarmament.

Obviously those nations possessing nuclear weapons and those feeling most threatened would need to be represented. It might be a good idea to select the 15 countries represented in the Security Council, for example, since this would include the five permanent members, who all possess nuclear weapons, and then to add (unless already members of the Security Council) India, Iran, Israel, Japan, North and South Korea and Pakistan, plus a number of developing countries from Africa and Latin America, depending on the size of the class or group.

If all members of the class or club are more or less equal in terms of knowledge of the subject and speaking ability, then the roles could be allocated more or less randomly e.g., by drawing the countries out of a hat.

If the group consists of experienced as well as inexperienced students, which is often the case in a MUN Club, then the more experienced students might take on the roles of those countries likely to be in the forefront of the debate in order to serve as examples, but all members of the group should be expected to research their countries' positions and to prepare for the debate in equal measure.

The choice of Chairman is also very important. The student who takes on this role needs to have authority and to know the rules of debate thoroughly.

### **Rules of Procedure**

The General Rules of Procedure and the Order of Debate outlined in Debate Type B above could be used for a debate in class or in an MUN Club.

In a larger forum with more time available, the more detailed THIMUN Rules of Procedure should be used.

### **Preparing the Debate**

Before you start to debate on draft resolutions, you need to have practiced debating at a simpler level so that you are fully conversant with the correct terminology and forms of address (see above) and familiar with the Rules of Procedure. The better your knowledge, the more comfortable you will feel about obtaining the floor and speaking in the debate.

## **Research**

You will also feel much happier when speaking in a debate if your arguments are based on sound knowledge of the facts. Whether you are speaking for or against the resolution, you will need to have more facts at your disposal to bolster your arguments than simply those contained in the Preamble.

Your best resource will be the United Nations website ([www.un.org](http://www.un.org)) where you can find out what has been achieved so far in the field of nuclear disarmament. Then you will need to know your country's position with regard to nuclear disarmament.

## **Conclusion**

Practicing debate is an essential part of MUN preparation, so try to get as much experience as you can. This will help you to use the correct forms of address and to refer to yourself and to other speakers or delegates automatically using the third person.

## **Debating Terms**

### **The Chair (Chairman, Chairperson)**

The Chair's role is very important. It is his job to conduct the debate and to maintain order while remaining totally impartial.

### **The House**

All participants, e.g. the members of the class, except the Chair.

### **The Proposer or Submitter**

The person who is proposing the motion for debate.

### **The motion**

The proposal for debate which will eventually be voted upon.

### **A resolution**

In its draft form, a resolution is a long, complex motion, or series of motions, for debate. Once it has been voted on and adopted, it becomes the decision and policy of the forum which has debated it.

### **A point of information**

A question directed either to the speaker who has the floor or to the Chair by a member of the house who has been duly recognized by the Chair.

### **A point of order**

A question directed to the Chair by a member of the house who feels that a mistake has been made in the order of debate or who requires clarification of the rules of procedure.

### **To have the floor**

To have been given the right to speak in debate.

### **To yield the floor**

To give up one's right to the floor either finally or temporarily for a point of information to be asked.

### **Useful Phrases to be used by members of the house**

When starting to speak	Mr./Madam Chairman...
When asking for permission to speak	I request the floor/I wish to have the floor.
When beginning a speech	I wish to speak in favour of/against this motion/resolution/amendment because...
When wishing to ask a question	I rise to a point of information/point of order.
When asking a question	Is the Chair/the speaker (not) aware that.. Does the speaker (not) agree with me that.. The speaker stated in his speech...Does he (not) realise that...
When pausing to answer questions	I yield the floor to points of information.

When concluding a speech	I urge the house to give me its support by voting for/against this motion / resolution/amendment.
When moving an amendment	I move to amend the resolution by striking/inserting/adding the words...
When giving up the right to speak	I yield the floor (to the Chair)

### Useful Phrases to be used by the Chair

When asking the house to be quiet	The house will come to order. Will the house please come to order.
When starting the debate	The Chair calls upon Proposer/ Submitter to read the motion/operative clauses (to the house). The house/committee has heard the motion. Is there a second? The Chair fixes a debate time of 10 minutes for and 10 minutes against the motion. Mr. X (the Proposer) has the floor. All points are out of order until the speaker has concluded his speech.
When recognizing someone to speak	The Chair recognizes Y. To what point do you rise? Please rise and state your point (of information/order).
When the question is not clearly stated	Will you please state your point in the form of a question. The speaker appears not to have heard/understood your question. Will you please repeat/rephrase your question.
When asking for further points	Are there any further points on the floor? Are there any further points of information to this speaker?

When dealing with a point of order	There's a point of order on the floor. Please rise and state your point. Your point is (not) well taken.
When asking a speaker to conclude his speech	Will the speaker please make his concluding remarks.
When concluding debate time	Debate time for/against the motion/ the amendment has elapsed/been exhausted/has expired. Debate time has elapsed/expired. Will the speaker please yield the floor.
When extending debate time	The Chair proposes an extension of debate time by 5 minutes for and 5 minutes against the motion.
When concluding debate and moving to the vote	The debate is now closed. We will move into voting procedures. All points are out of order.
If there is a point of order during voting	Does your point of order pertain to the conduct of the voting? The motion will now be put to the vote. Will all those in favour of the motion/the amendment/the resolution please raise their hands. Will all those opposed to/against the resolution please raise their hands. Are there any abstentions? Will all those abstaining please raise their hands.
When announcing the result	The motion /amendment has been carried/ passed by X votes to Y with Z abstentions. The motion/ amendment has failed/ been defeated by Y votes to X with Z abstentions.