

Judge Handbook

SJD – Denver

October 23, 2026¹

Introduction

Thank you for judging at the Social Justice Debates-Denver on this important topic! We greatly appreciate your willingness to share your expertise and experience with our debaters. This document provides an overview of your role as a judge.

Please also consult the **Food Justice Topic Statement** available at the event website (linked just above this document). It provides key information about the topic students have been assigned to debate, the resources made available to them ahead of the event, and how they and you are being asked to interpret the topic, especially when it is translated into specific proposals by affirmative (pro) and negative (con) teams.

We will also distribute a **judge primer video and sample ballot** about a week ahead of the event.

Finally, there will be a **judge briefing and time to pose questions** at the event on October 23. If you would like to consult with John Rief about judging ahead of the event, please send an email (jrief1@msudenver.edu). He can either respond to questions via email or set up a brief Zoom conversation with you and/or others from your organization.

Summary

Each round of debates will last about an hour and will involve teams of 2-3 debaters each competing against each other on the affirmative (pro) and negative (con) sides of the topic.

Preliminary rounds will typically be judged by one individual, but if we have enough interest from community/stakeholder partners, we may end up paneling them (i.e., having 2-3 judges per round).

¹ This judge handbook is a slightly modified version of the one prepared by Ken Newby, Director of Debate at Morehouse College, for the Social Justice Debates national championship invite. It has been modified to address minor differences between that event and this one.

If you judge the final round, you will be on a panel (total number TBD). As we are using a HyFlex theater for this round, our panel will be composed of judges attending the event in person and those who will join us remotely.

Although the debate format is specified below, the debaters will be responsible for timing and attending to the order of their speeches. Your only responsibility during the round is to listen with an open mind and take notes on the debate.

The Social Justice Debates provide college debaters a rare opportunity to test their skills debating for judges from both inside and outside of the college debate community, including distinguished professionals and topic experts. Please do not worry if you do not have experience judging college debate rounds. **The most important thing to remember when judging a debate is that if a team convinces you they have won the round, they have won the round!**

The primary question you should ask yourself as a judge is which team has done the better debating on the question raised by the tournament topic. First and foremost, this question asks which team has been more effective in meeting their basic burdens of advocacy and rejoinder. This means “constructing” complete and persuasive arguments supported by logic and evidence, as well as directly responding to the key arguments constructed by their opponents. Secondly, judges should consider factors such as public speaking skills, organization, and command of the subject matter.

There is no single formula for determining which team did the best debating. In short, you are attempting to assess which team presented the most powerful advocacy when considering all of the many factors that advocacy entails.

Although judging is subjective, it is important that you do not allow personal bias or beliefs about the issues being debated to influence whom you choose as the winner. Indeed, you may conclude that a team has been more powerful in making its case even if you do not personally agree with the team’s arguments.

Topic Interpretation

Judges are asked to interpret the research questions raised by the topic in a manner consistent with the topic statement. Students are responsible for analyzing the topic and topic statement and understanding the research questions raised for debate. Students may quote from the topic statement as necessary to establish the parameters of the research questions raised by the topic.

Although it is discouraged and should be disfavored by judges, debaters will sometimes attempt to interpret topics in a manner that “tilts” the playing field to their advantage. This year’s topic statement has been provided to all judges and all teams to clarify the topic’s intended meaning. As a judge, you should attempt to interpret the burden the topic places on the affirmative (pro) and negative (con) teams in a manner consistent with the topic’s plain language and the context provided by the topic statement. When in doubt as to the plain meaning of the topic, you should adopt a “centrist” interpretation of the topic that allows both teams a fair chance to engage the core questions raised by the topic as described in the topic statement.

Cross-Examination

Cross-examination is an essential element of the debate format chosen for this competition. It is also an element that requires debaters to cooperate in good faith with their opponents, which may be a complicated proposition in a competitive debate. Cross-examination can be an invaluable tool for moving debates “forward” by clarifying areas of agreement, isolating areas of dispute, and allowing rigorous examination of opposing arguments. Cross-examinations may be far less productive, however, if debaters waste time and avoid having their arguments clarified and scrutinized by answering questions that haven’t been asked, filibustering, and otherwise failing to directly and succinctly answer questions to the extent possible. In such cases, debates may even become hostile as cross-examiners may be forced to talk over their opponent to prevent their opponents from dominating the cross-examination period.

In a court of law, judges will often instruct hostile witnesses (i.e. witnesses who are biased or adverse to the cross-examiner) to directly and succinctly answer questions to the extent possible so as to avoid wasted time and to allow cross-examiners to clarify the facts and arguments relevant to the judge’s or jury’s decision. “To the extent possible” is an essential qualifier to this requirement. Debaters should be allowed reasonable time to answer “open” questions or any other questions that cannot be answered in a straightforward manner.

For these reasons, debaters are asked to provide direct, succinct responses to direct questions in cross-examination. Filibustering, answering questions that haven’t been asked, and otherwise failing to provide direct, succinct answers to direct questions should result in lower speaker points and—in very close debates—assigning a loss. (Obviously, open ended questions may require open answers.)

Use of Evidence

Students introducing evidence should be ready to provide copies of relevant portions of the introduced sources to their opponents for review upon request. If they are unable to do so, the source(s) in question should be disregarded by the judge.

Speaker Points

In addition to determining a winner and loser, preliminary round judges will also assign speaker points to each debater in the debate. Speaker points should be assigned on a scale of 90-100 with no ties. Judges should be "reluctant" to give speaker points between 97-100 (i.e., absent an exemplary performance reflecting high level research, argumentation, delivery and performance, judges should not give speaker points in this range). **"Very Good"** performances should receive scores in the 95-96 range. **"Good"** performances should receive points in the 93-94 range. **Performances reflecting a serious lack of preparation or need for obvious improvement** should receive scores in the 90-92 range. No ties are allowed. Half points (e.g., 95.5) are allowed.

Equity Statement

While a judge may not consciously privilege the arguments or positions of particular groups of people over others, studies have shown that decisions nevertheless may be influenced by societal biases or prejudices in regard to, inter alia, race and gender.

For example, Daniel Kelley and Erica Roedder (2008) have found implicit bias in a number of settings analogous to debate including job hiring practices, grading, and sports officiating. Deborah Tannen (1998) has shown that in the field of competitive argument men are sometimes presumed to be more reasonable and less emotional and that these presumptions may lead a judge to implicitly give more weight to a man's argument than a woman's. We therefore ask each judge to consider their implicit biases in evaluating participants' arguments and performance before making their decision.

Format

Speeches	Time Limits
First Affirmative Speech	6 minutes
Cross-examination by Second Negative Speaker	4 minutes
First Negative Speech	6 minutes
Cross-examination by First Affirmative Speaker	4 minutes

Second Affirmative Speech	6 minutes
Cross-examination by First Negative Speaker	4 minutes
Second Negative Speech	6 minutes
Cross-examination by Second Affirmative Speaker	4 minutes
Preparation Time	2 minutes
Affirmative Rebuttal Speech	6 minutes
Preparation Time	2 minutes
Negative Rebuttal Speech	6 minutes

Students will compete in teams of 2-3 speakers each. Each speech will be assigned speaker points, however, if an individual speaks twice only one speech will count for purposes of determining speaker awards.

In each round, teams will be assigned to affirm or negate the topic. We will work towards equitable side equalization so that all teams are placed on each side of the topic at least once in the first three debates. Teams will flip for sides in finals unless they have previously debated. If they debated previously, they will switch sides in finals.

On teams of three, each speaker will give one speech.

On teams of two, each speaker will give one 6-minute speech, be cross-examined for 4 minutes, and cross-examine an opposing debater for 4 minutes. In addition, one speaker on each team will also give a 6-minute closing rebuttal. Over the course of the 3 preliminary rounds, rebuttal speaking should be divided between the speakers. One will give 2 and the other will give 1.

Thank you again for the generous commitment of your time to this program and the wonderful students involved in it!

Additional Instructions for Coach-Judges

While our ideal scenario is to have community/stakeholder judges adjudicating in every preliminary debate round, if we run short, we may need to have coach-judges from participating schools fill in for them. This section provides instructions primarily for this group.

The final round will be judged by panels of stakeholder judges who have some expertise related to the topic and who will be given the SJD topic, topic statement, and judge handbook provided here. This means that preliminary round judges are preparing

students to debate before topic experts who will be using the published topic, topic statement, and judge handbook to guide their decision-making process. Your most important task as a preliminary round judge is to judge in a manner that prepares the students advancing to finals to excel given these parameters. In short, circuit specific argumentative norms should not be emphasized in making or explaining your decisions.

References

- Kelly, D., & Roedder, E. (2008). Racial cognition and the ethics of implicit bias. *Philosophy Compass*, 3(3), 522-540.
- Tannen, D. (1998). *The argument culture: Moving from debate to dialogue*. Random House.