

Congress- Questioning

Much of a competitor's focus for Student Congress is on being the best speaker possible. Often times, competitors concentrate their efforts on drafting the best speeches they can for a three-minute timeslot. This is understandable considering the fact that speakers only receive points from speeches. Although speeches are the source of points, winning only comes from a strong performance in speech giving as well as from asking and answering questions. In this article, an overview of how and when to ask and answer questions will be given. By excelling in all areas of Congress, speakers offer well-rounded competitive skills which will beat-out the less multi-skilled opposition.

Knowing when to ask questions is more difficult than some might assume. It can really backfire if a question is mis-worded or if a speaker completely blanks. Another more common issue competitors face is asking weak questions. This would include questions that have already been answered by the speech or questions so tangential they do not accomplish anything. In order to avoid these mistakes, the first step is analyzing why ask a question. The main reason to ask a question is to clarify an uncertain point. For example, ask for statistical backing to verify a point that was merely stated. On many occasions speakers simply make an argument but provided no proof. If this is witnessed there is the opportunity to put the speaker without proof in the hot seat and make them substantiate their argument. Another time to ask a question is to attack a strong speaker and catch them off guard. The reason to do this is to level the playing field. Do not be callous. Simply ask a question that counters the reasoning of the

speaker to see how confident they are about their argument. If they have a solid point then this will not be an issue for them. If they do not possess confidence or thorough knowledge, this will become apparent through their answer. The last occasion when to ask a question is when lobbying for votes. Ask questions that build up the speaker. They will remember this, and it will help build a speaker's image.

Even if a speaker knows when to ask a question, it is important that they know how to ask one as well. First of all, do not ask longwinded questions. These are the types of questions that are so long the speaker cannot even remember the first words of what were asked. Keep questions simple and to one sentence. There is no need to ask complex questions. It will not accomplish anything aside from slowing down the pace of the session. Secondly, ask questions loudly, clearly, and stick to the topic at hand; do not try to be a showoff by asking lofty questions which are arbitrary.

Although asking questions can provide a challenge, nothing is harder than receiving questions. So when should a speaker receive questions? Always. If there is ever any time left over from a speech, a competitor has to accept queries. If questions are denied, speakers make themselves appear weak and unconfident. Never leave time to the chair. Step up and answer questions. It will not only provide more face time with the judge, it will also provide another opportunity to look smart and authoritative of the topic. And although it is unknown what is going to be asked, speakers must always be prepared. This can be very stressful, but there are ways to alleviate typical issues that accompany nervousness. The first is simple: know the topic, not the

speech. So many competitors make the mistake of knowing what they said and not the issue at large. Regardless of personal opinion, learn both sides of the argument. Know not only what the opposition thinks but what their argument is going to be (as based upon YOUR speech). Be ready to accept both positive and negative questions because both will be received. If a favorable question is received, agree with the person who asked and reiterate the major point stated in regard to their comment. If a negative question is given, there are a few things to remember. Mainly, practice professionalism. Even if someone is attacking the stance, a speaker cannot take it personally--no matter how personal the issue is. This will only result in acting upset, and a speaker that loses their composure will not leave a favorable impression upon the competitors and the judge. If someone does begin to irritate, take an extra second to answer and deliver a composed response that reiterates the stance and why it is stronger than that of the opposition.

This is how to handle asking and answering questions in Student Congress. Like anything else, preparation will alleviate most problems. It will not only give the confidence needed, but expand upon the facts which are necessary to present and answer questions. Although a speaker cannot receive points from asking or answering questions, it will work in their favor for making the board. Questions can even help win over crucial votes for national nominations.