HOW TO JUDGE LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATE

Judging in a nutshell

➤ You are the judge. The debaters’ job is to convince you. The activity is specifically designed for presentation to “lay” audiences; if a debater is too esoteric, or too fast, or too complicated, it is the debater who doesn’t know what he or she is doing, not the judge.

➤ Personal prejudices of the judge on the topic are to be set aside. You are judging their debate skills, not their ability to change your mind on a given subject.

➤ The best argument wins, not the best sounding speaker—this is a debate, not an interpretive event.

➤ Points—on a scale of 0-30 (the starting point actually being 22): 30 = The best you’ll hear today; 29 = Superior; 28 = Excellent; 27 = Very Good; 26 = Good; 25 = Decent; 24 = Okay; 23 = Fair; 22 = Improve

➤ Write constructive ballots. Give reasons for decisions based on the round ("aff's value of justice outweighed neg's value of home-cooking" or "aff dropped the argument about individual rights") rather than vague generalities ("aff was the better speaker" or "neg was more pursuasive.")
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Judging out of a nutshell

Since we often need to enlist parents and friends as LD judges, we've put together this guide to explain what LD is all about. It is not that hard to judge, and it's not that unusual for people to do it without a lot of prior experience. In fact, it is often parents from other schools who are judging our kids—that’s the way the activity works. In this guide we'll explain LD, discuss the mechanics of a round, explain what to do as a judge, how to pick a winner, and how to prepare a ballot. It is a lot to absorb at once, but it will get you started. The “in a nutshell” page will get you started and remind you of the key points. Dip into the later more detailed material when you’re more ready for it.

And this is the most important message for a beginning parent judge: Start now! If you begin judging a few times a year when your kid is a novice, you’ll judge mostly young, inexperienced debaters. They know less about what they’re doing than you do. They won’t talk fast or use any jargon, they won’t try to confuse you, and you won’t have much difficulty feeling confident about your decisions. As time goes by, the kids will get better and you’ll get better along with them, and before long you’ll feel confident judging just about anybody (and you will judge just about anybody). If you really believe that there is value in your child’s commitment to forensics, you have to be able to support it. And you support it by becoming a good, dependable parent judge. Without good, dependable parent judges, we simply cannot attend tournaments.

What is LD
Lincoln-Douglas is a one-on-one debate between two people affirming and negating a resolution. The resolutions change roughly every two months, and the topics are along the lines of, Which is Better, Anarchy or Tyranny? or, Is Multi-culturalism Good or Bad? or, Is the Death Penalty Just? What the topics usually boil down to is a conflict between the rights of one individual or group of individuals measured against the rights of some other individual or group, or, is a certain action right or wrong (i.e., moral). What the debaters offer in their cases is the greatest inherent value of either the affirmative or negative; they defend that value on their side, while attacking their opponent's value. (You’ll hear a lot about values in the LD world, and it’s good to understand early on what is meant by it. A value is an underlying goal, the reason one good action is preferable to another good action. We’ll cover more of this later.) And the thing is, there's no objectively right answer to the question posed by a resolution, which makes the topics eminently arguable.

In any tournament, the debaters are required to argue both sides of the resolution; the point is to be persuasive on either side, by acquiring and demonstrating the skills of reasoned argument. LD was specifically designed for lay audiences, as a response to the more technical and hard-to-follow Policy style of debate. The style of presentation and content is specifically defined as being analogous to a presentation in a community meeting; there should be nothing about it beyond the abilities of any student, or any judge.
What to do as a judge

There are three kinds of judges: coaches, parents/friends like you, and former debaters. The coaches and former debaters are experienced, and they'll probably be judging the toughest varsity rounds of the day, which gets you off the hook. But LD also draws a lot of less experienced judges precisely because not that much experience is necessary, and there are never enough coaches and former debaters. And this is a good thing, because if only the pros judged the activity, eventually only the pros would understand it. Any sentient adult who knows how to listen and who's willing to suspend his or her own prejudices for a half an hour can judge LD. And judge it well.

What follows here is an overview. We’ll come back to these points one at a time later, so don’t worry if it starts sounding a little overwhelming.

Prior to a round, schematics will be distributed, listing the names of the debaters, who's judging them, and where. It will be very clear when this is happening, because there will be an announcement and everyone in the room will flock to the distributor. Flock along with them. Most LD rounds consist of two flights, an A flight and a B flight, which simply means that each round is actually two rounds cleverly disguised as one, but at least they're usually both in the same room. After consulting the schematic and finding your name, go to the ballot table, check in and pick up your ballots. Then go to the correct room, where as judge you should take the most comfortable seat available, excluding the overstuffed La-Z-Boy at the teacher's desk—teachers are more territorial than grizzly bears, and any hint of disturbance at a teacher's desk can set the National Forensic League back a hundred years. The debaters when they arrive will logically take places where you can get a good look at them. Then everyone does a little bookkeeping. The debaters pre-flow, i.e., get organized (which will always make you wonder why they waited until the last minute, especially if it's B flight and they've been camped outside your door for the last forty-five minutes). What the judge should do is prepare a pad to flow the coming argument. Flow? The thing is, you've got to take notes if you really want to track what's going on, and what's going on in debate parlance is "the flow"—the flow of the arguments, the flow of the debate. We'll explain how to do a flow by showing it to you rather than writing it up here; it's mostly just taking notes on a legal pad in such a way that you can compare the contentions with the refutations.

When the debate begins, the judge has to time it. For beginning judges, this is usually the hardest thing to do because it distracts you from listening to the proceedings. It is best to bring a big kitchen timer along with you, to make life easier (but trust us, eventually timing becomes second nature). The timings are usually listed on the ballot (and they're explained later in this manual). Your job is to signal the debaters how much time they have used, as they are using it; this is done by a simple countdown. After the first minute has elapsed, raise your hand with the correct number of fingers showing the time remaining. ☯ is five, going down to ☥ as one. Then a big C to show thirty seconds, a flat hand like a shadow duck to show fifteen seconds, countdown the last five seconds with your fingers one at a time to a closed fist that means time up. They can complete the sentence they're in the middle of, but that's it. (If you are judging
experienced varsity debaters, and both of them have their own timers, which often happens, you might not have to give them signals. Ask them if they need them. If not, just set your timer along with them to keep them honest, and forget about it until the bells go off.

During the prep time—the gaps between the speeches when the debaters work on their arguments, adjusting to what the other debater has said—the judge will usually call out the elapsed time in thirty second intervals. Each debater usually takes prep time twice; the first time it makes sense to tell them—and you will call this out verbally—"30 seconds used," "Minute used," "Minute and a half used." Their second prep, it's probably better to count down. "Minute remaining," "Thirty seconds remaining," "Time."

Aside from timing, the judge is under no obligation to utter a word during the round. And when it's over, there is no rule that you must disclose your decision to the debaters, and they usually don't expect a verbal critique. The exception to this is the Mid-Hudson League (MHL) debates, which are learning debates for novices and junior varsity, so verbal critiques are actually encouraged, but if you're not comfortable giving one, you don't have to. Whatever you do, don't get involved in yet another debate! The judge's word is law. Make sure you don't end up starting up the argument again.

As soon as the debate is over, the kids will leave the room. Write up your ballot now, while it's still fresh in your mind. If the B flight comes into the room while you're writing up the A flight—and they will—tell them to cool their heels for two minutes. If B flight is over and people are trying to start a whole new round, leave the room yourself and find a quiet corner to write up your ballot. Occasionally a tournament will be running behind time and they'll ask you to "white sheet" a round—that is, give them the top white sheet of the ballot filled in with only the names of the winner and loser and the points awarded, after which you can write up your commentary immediately thereafter and submit it separately. In either case, ballots are returned to the ballot table where they'll check that all the information is accurate, and set you free for a much needed doughnut in the judges' lounge.

The mechanics of LD
The debate is a series of speeches on both sides. In order they are:

1) **The affirmative constructive (AC—6 minutes).** First up is the affirmative side, for a six minute speech. Usually the aff will begin with a quotation, then perhaps some definitions of key terms in the resolution, and perhaps an observation or two setting some boundaries to the discussion. The aff will then usually declare the value that he or she is going to defend, and perhaps a criterion through which to measure that value (we’ll explain that later). Then the aff will then go into its contentions, which are the meat of the argument: these are usually two or three areas of analysis explaining the affirmative position in detail.

2) **Cross-examination by negative (CX—3 minutes).** At the conclusion of the AC, the negative debater will directly question the affirmative for three minutes. There are no boundaries on CX, short of abusing your opponent; any question can and will be
asked. In CX, the best debaters both chisel away at the flaws in their opponent's case and set the framework for their own case.

3) **The negative constructive (NC—7 minutes).** Next up (after a couple of minutes preparation time) is the neg to make the opposing argument. Again, we'll probably start with a quote, then perhaps new definitions if for some reason neg feels that the aff's definitions are inadequate or misleading, followed perhaps by more observations. Then there's neg's value/criterion, which may be the same or different from aff's. Next neg presents two or three of its own contentions against the resolution (contentions, by the way, are also sometimes referred to as lines of analysis). When the neg is finished its contentions, neg then goes on to refute the aff case, point by point. In other words, now the debating really begins as neg attacks aff's contentions.

4) **Cross-examination by the affirmative (CX—3 minutes).** At the conclusion of the NC, the aff debater will grill the negative, just like aff was grilled by negative before. Same no-rules apply.

5) **First affirmative rebuttal (1AR—4 minutes).** From now on, it's all argument. Both sides have made their cases. Now they defend their side and attack their opponent's. The first affirmative rebuttal is a four-minute speech by aff, and it's not much time to cover everything, but covering everything is the order of the day. Usually aff begins by going point by point refuting the neg case, then defends against the neg's previous refutations of the aff case. It can get hectic, but it's one of the high points of the debate.

6) **Negative rebuttal (NR—6 minutes).** Neg is up again, to defend the neg case and once again refute the aff. But neg has six minutes, plenty of time to go into deep analysis of the issues. Usually neg will attempt to sum up or "crystallize" the round at the conclusion of the NR, urging you to deliver a negative ballot.

7) **The second affirmative rebuttal (2AR—3 minutes).** To make up for the apparent time imbalance, aff gets the last word in the 2AR. Aff usually uses the time to summarize the round, crystallizing the key voting points and, of course, urging an affirmative ballot.

8) **Note that both sides do have an allotment of preparation time,** usually a total of four minutes, which they will usually use prior to making their rebuttal speeches (although once in a blue moon a kid uses prep before a CX).

9) **Whew!**

**What to look for in a debate round in order to pick a winner**

Choosing in favor of a debater is called **picking up.** Choosing against them is called **dropping.** Regardless of your abilities as a judge, debaters you pick up will consider you an expert (provided your allotment of **speaker points** is commensurate with their normal expectations—we'll discuss speaker points later), while the debaters you drop will suspect that their pet ferret could have done a better job than you have. But that's to be expected.
Obviously, the person who makes the best argument(s) wins. If the subject is one on which you have a personal opinion (for example, the death penalty), it is still the person who makes the best argument in that round, and not what you happen to believe yourself. Personal prejudices of the judge must be set aside. You are here as a tabula rasa, to listen to what is said by the debaters, not to have a mindset of your own that needs to be changed. Just because you think that capital punishment is justified doesn’t mean that the debater who argued in favor of it automatically won the debate, or that the debater who argued against it automatically lost. If that were so, you wouldn’t have to listen to them at all! Judge their debating in a vacuum, not in relation to your opinions. Of course, usually the resolutions are (intentionally) so broad that either side could win, so you won't have to worry about your own prejudices.

**Crystallization points.** Often debaters wind up by offering crystallization points, or voting issues, at the end of their last speeches. These are the aspects of their side of the case that the debaters claim to have won. It is a good idea to use these voting issues as your own issues when making a decision, since these are the points the debaters think are the biggies, and they’re usually right (although whether they won those points or not is the question only you can answer). Newer debaters don’t often use crystallization points, but more experienced varsity debaters usually are adept at this part of the presentation, which is very helpful to any judge, no matter how experienced. Of course, you may not agree that the debater won a point that he or she claims he won, and you may rank the importance of the issues differently than the debaters, but that’s precisely why you earn the big bucks. But the debaters are trained to help you “write the ballot.” Give them a chance to do it.

**Values.** Each debater should uphold his value. The value is the reason the actions chosen by a side are preferable to the actions chosen by the other side. Values are an extremely important concept in LD, and they include such abstract ideas as justice, or freedom, or equality. Values are the underlying why for affirming or negating, the moral or ethical or philosophical or metaphysical or whatever you want to call it thrust of the debater’s case. Values can be different or the same for the two sides. If the value is justice for both sides, for instance, which case ultimately came across as the most just? If the values are different for the two sides, say justice for aff and individual rights for neg, you have to measure which value applies better to the resolution after you’ve heard their arguments. Which debater convinced you that he or she best supports his or her value? If it’s equal, which proved to have the “higher”—more important—value?

**Criteria.** If a debater establishes a criterion for a case, you should use the criterion to measure the value. (This is as complicated as debating gets, by the way.) A good analogy to understand values and criteria is that, let's say you want to buy a car because you need transportation. Transportation is your value. What are the criteria you use to buy the car? If you want speed and fashionability and fun, you might opt for a sports car, while if you want spaciousness and safety for a large family you might opt for a minivan. The end result is still a car, but it's a different kind of car, and your reasons—or criteria—for buying it are entirely different. Criteria in LD usually come into strongest play when the values are the same for both sides. However, there is no "rule" that a debater must have a
criterion (despite what some debaters might say to you during the round). Not having a value to uphold, however, means that the debater misses the point of LD in the first place (which doesn't mean they will, however. This is a marginally controversial area of LD, but as a rule, Northeastern debaters do clearly set out to uphold a value, with a criterion).

**Style.** LD debate is not an event where the style of speech comes into play, so it is not the best orator that wins but the best debater. You do not vote for the debater who sounds the best; it is what they say that is important. That's why you have to listen carefully and take notes. There has to be a clash, and someone has to win it. Essentially, each side defends two or three contentions of his or her own, and replies to the opponent’s two or three contentions. The best arguments are the ones that you found the most logically compelling. It’s as simple as that. Some arguments might sound entirely ridiculous to you. That means that, as far as the judge in this round is concerned, an argument is entirely ridiculous. **YOU ARE THE JUDGE.** Be open to what they’re saying, but don’t turn off your brain, only your prejudices. You want to be an impartial evaluator of their debating. Who outdebated whom?

**Interventionist vs non-interventionist judges.** An interventionist judge applies some of his or her own thinking on a topic, while a non-interventionist judge only evaluates what is said by the debaters. This is not as simple as it sounds. If a debater argues something that you know is wrong, but the opponent doesn’t know it, and concedes it, that means that the concession should stand, even though the concession is wrong. You would not want to intervene and give the point to the opponent who misguided conceded it. Similarly, if you hear a contention and can think of a great argument against it, but the opponent instead comes up with a pretty lousy argument, you have to follow what was actually said rather than what should have been said. That is simple non-intervention, and this is what you should be trying to do. Judge only what is said, not what was implied or meant, or what you would have preferred to have heard.

**Drops.** Intervention gets more complex, and controversial, with the issue of drops. As you go down the flow of a case, sometimes a debater will drop an issue; that is, the first debater contends that cows have wings, and the opposing debater never responds to it. That means that the second debater has dropped flying cows. If the original debater stands up in the next speech and points out the drop to the judge, I would suggest that this is a contention that must stand for the original debater; in other words, the debater who first made the statement wins that statement, no matter how cockamamie, if the opponent drops it. Having a point stand in this way is just as good as proving through argumentation that cows have wings. Anything the opponent subsequently says to this point in a later speech, after dropping it, is unacceptable. However, if the point is dropped and the original debater does not cite the drop, then it just disappears as an issue from the round. Neither debater can meaningfully bring up that subject again. If either of them do, all that discussion is wasted, because once a point has been dropped, it cannot be revived. I’m not saying a round should be won or lost on flying cows, but simply that this is how dropping points does work. Sometimes, especially with novice debaters, whole cases will be dropped left and right, and a debater will get a straightforward technical win as a result. You won't often see this at the varsity level. The interventionist issue can be very
sticky here. Usually dropped points are good points, but what if the dropped point is indeed that cows have wings? Use your judgment here. If the dropper made all good arguments and dropped some small stuff, go that way. If the round is close, and you need to evaluate on drops and extension, you just have to do it. I hate to think that a debater can win by responding to everything that is said, without having good arguments. Good arguments should win. That should be what debating is all about.

One last thing about drops. The 1AR is that four-minute rebuttal by affirmative, where everything has to be covered in a short amount of time. This is the place where it may appear that an aff is dropping issues, but keep in mind the reality of the time pressure. No matter how fast the aff speaks, he can't have that much depth of analysis, and there's going to be trade-offs in both directions. The aff should cover the main points of the contentions, but when the neg has 112 bitsy little subpoints all the aff has to do is address the meat, not every little detail.

**Ad hoc voting issues.** One interesting thing that might occur during a cross-examination is that both debaters can make an agreement that whoever wins this or that specific point wins the round. This is perfectly acceptable in LD and completely clarifies your job as a judge. You will now give the round to whomever does best what the two debaters agreed had to be done.

**Summary.** In the final analysis, you are the judge and what you say goes. Sometimes a round will be easy, when two opponents are mismatched and one clearly takes it from the other. In closer rounds, one little dropped point may make the difference. And in the best rounds, with equal opponents, you will simply listen to what they both have to say and award the win to the side that convinced you better that he or she was right. Because judging is complex and subjective no matter how you slice it, in elimination rounds there are panels of multiple judges, many of whom are extremely experienced and who totally disagree with each other. Don’t feel bad if you’re not sure of a decision. Many rounds are something of a toss-up, and good debaters will always eventually out in the end. If the best judges can disagree among themselves, how objective can this stuff be?

**How to prepare a ballot**

There are two parts to the ballot. There's picking the winner and loser and assigning them **speaker points**, and there's writing up the reasons for your decisions (often abbreviated **RFD**).

Speaker points usually range from 20 to 30, and are used by the tabulators to balance and seed rounds and to award trophies. In LD, ties are acceptable at some tournaments, so if you wish to tie the opponents, you might be able to do so. Check at the ballot table. And when awarding points, remember, **points are for the best debating, not the greater oratorical skill.** Rules of thumb: 20-21 is too stingy, so don’t; 22 is pretty much a disaster, a kid who drops a whole case, whose contentions didn't make any sense, that sort of thing; 23-24 is when they seemed to have the basics down but just didn't debate that well, they hemmed and hawed a lot where they should have been refuting, they repeated themselves over and over rather than adding new levels of analysis; 25-26
are pretty good but they didn't wow you, they dropped a bunch of stuff, they just weren’t solid; 27-29 are from really good to really really good to really really really excellent; and 30s are occasionally awarded, not because perfection has been reached, but because you feel this is about as close to as good as it gets. If you happen to judge an elimination round, speaker points are not necessary, as only the issue of winning or losing is important now. If you're worried about speaker points, it is better to err on the side of generosity. Giving a couple of extra points to a lesser debater won't hurt anybody, and will make the lesser debater feel good. Giving undeservedly low points to a solid debater, however, may be enough of a difference for them that day to lose a trophy. Try to be reasonable on a 2-10 scale, but if you're unsure, especially when you're new to this, err higher rather than lower. (The Whitman college scale should be helpful: 30 = Amazing; 29 = Superb; 28 = Excellent; 27 = Very Good; 26 = Good; 25 = Decent; 24 = Okay; 23 = Fair; 22 = Improve. Another aid for point assignment is to compare points to grades. 22-23 is a D, 25-25 is a C, 26-27 is a B, 28-30 is an A.)

Writing up the reasons for decision on your ballot is not an easy business. There are as many different styles of ballots as there are judges. Whatever you want to say is fine, but certainly more is better than less. In the case of newer debaters, anything you say to both of them will help them improve in the future. But be constructive: these are kids, after all: you want to give them tips for improvement, not traumas that will eventually turn them into serial killers. In the case of more experienced debaters, your decision will probably be pretty complicated and boil down to one or two debating issues from the round. Here you might try to recapitulate what you heard and the way you heard it, compare the arguments, and say what it worked or didn't work because of whatever. It's up to you. The biggest thing to keep in mind is that these ballots are torn into after a debate like they're the Dead Sea scrolls. Be fair, clear and constructive.