



**QUB LITERARY
AND SCIENTIFIC
SOCIETY**

**SCHOOLS
DEBATING
HANDOUT**
175TH SESSION (2023-24)

***EMPOWERING THE
NEXT
GENERATION***



FOREWORD

TOM BURNS

Hello!

This handout, written by the Council of the Literary and Scientific Society of Queen's University Belfast, is designed to be an accessible and insightful aid to teachers and students who are interested in debating, public speaking, presentation skills, or just or improving one's self-confidence.

The Literific was the first student society to be created in Queen's in 1850 and has been the hub of discourse and debate in the university since. Over these many years, the Literific has ebbed and flowed, once investigated for potential sedition, once split due to intense political factionalism, once disbanded for... well, the less said about that the better! But today, the Literific rises from strength to strength, with a thriving and vibrant membership, dealing with issues of politics, religion, literature, science and technology, the environment, pop culture, and everything in between. We welcome members of all stripes, believing firmly that a diverse and engaged membership provides for the best and strongest debates and the most rounded and capable graduates once their time at university ends.

Our continued engagement with our Alumni and Honorary Life Members (HLMs), as well as our Trust of academics, politicians, civic leaders and more, provides us with a wealth of experience and advice, and a network of talented, educated, and informed citizens who are proud of their time in the Literific.










But this handout isn't for those who have gone before, it's for those still to come. Northern Ireland is, of course, always full of areas of contention and debate, but often these debates feel out of reach of our young people, who, now more than ever, need their voices heard. We want to help channel these voices. The Literific nurtures confident, respectful, informed students, and this handout provides the building blocks of these, and many more, vital skills, which secondary school students can learn, develop, and hone, to help them become the leaders of the future.

Tom Burns

Schools Convenor of the 175th Session
QUB Literary and Scientific Society

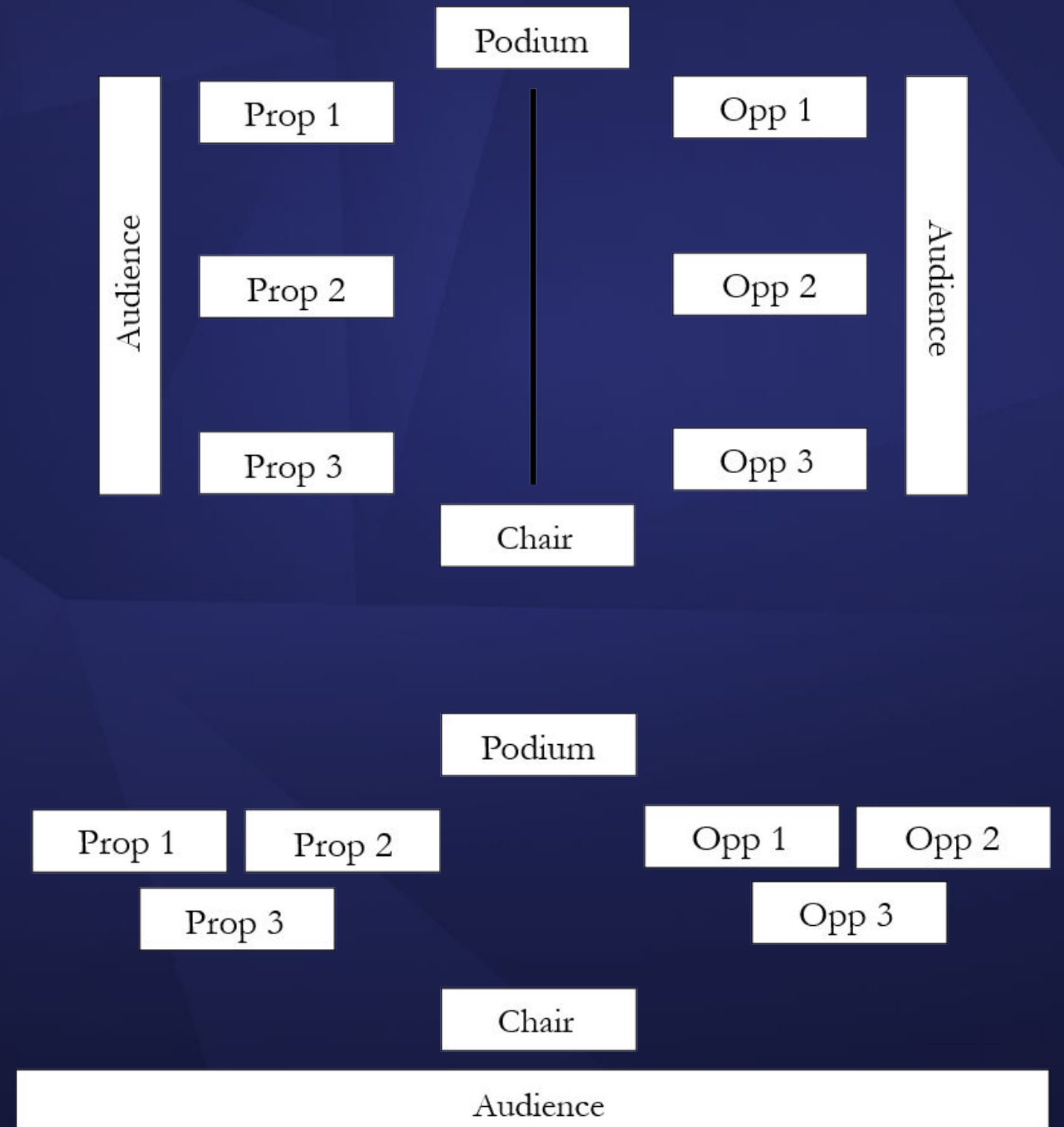
*“THE LITERIFIC NURTURES
CONFIDENT, RESPECTFUL
AND INFORMED STUDENTS”*

KEY TERMS

- 01  **ADJUDICATOR**
The judge of the debate.
- 02  **BARRACKING**
The act of asking too many Points of Information (POIs) in a row in quick succession.
- 03  **MOTION**
The topic to be debated, typically formatted as 'This House Believes/Supports/Regrets etc...'
- 04  **OPPOSITION**
Those who are not in favour of the motion.
- 05  **POINT OF INFORMATION (POI)**
A short question or interjection given by a member of the audience or the opposing team to the speaker. Often designed to undermine, question, or throw the speaker off their rhythm. Whether or not a POI is accepted is at the speaker's discretion.
- 06  **PROPOSITION**
Those who are in favour of the motion.
- 07  **PROTECTED TIME**
The first and last minute of each speech is protected time. In this time, POIs may not be offered to the speaker.
- 08  **THE CHAIR**
The person presiding over the debate.
- 09  **THE HOUSE**
As many debating styles have their roots in the British Parliamentary system, 'the House' is the place where the debate takes place. It also refers to the people present – i.e. – the audience (sometimes referred to as 'the Floor'), Chair, Proposition, Opposition etc.

WHAT DOES A DEBATE LOOK LIKE?

How a debate actually looks varies from place to place, depending on room size, number of people present, and, indeed, personal preference. Many debates occur in auditoriums, or in rooms more similar to traditional debating chambers, such as the House of Commons. Here are just some examples of how to lay out a debating chamber:





ARGUMENT

While a key part of debate is, indeed, arguing your point, and arguing against your opposing side's, it is important to make clear the distinction between debating and arguing. One of the core components of debating is the structured, respectful, and well-maintained order, as opposed to the chaotic, unstructured, and often disrespectful world of arguing. Below, the general rules of a Literific debate are set out, as an operational example.

- Following the introduction of the motion by the Chair, the Vote of Prior Opinion is held, which gauges the House's opinions on the motion before the debate occurs.
- The first member of the Proposition is then invited to open the debate.
- A Literific debate speech lasts seven minutes.
- The first minute of each speech is protected time, meaning POIs cannot be offered. Similarly, the final minute of each speech is also protected time.
- Following the lapse of the first minute of each speech, a bell is rung, to inform the speakers and the rest of the House that POIs can be offered.
- To offer a POI, one raises one's hand, saying clearly 'point of information', 'POI', or 'on that point'. It is up to the speaker whether or not to accept a POI.
- Once six minutes have elapsed, the bell is rung again to note that protected time again is in place.
- Once seven minutes have elapsed, the bell is rung to note the end of the allotted time. For every ten seconds the speaker goes over time, the bell is again rung.
- Questions from the floor are taken – one for the Proposition, one for the Opposition, and one 'Abstaining Question', fielded at neither side specifically, but both have an opportunity to respond. Each side also gets a response for the opposing question, i.e.- the Proposition can respond to the Opposition Question.
- Once every speaker has delivered their speech, the Vote of Speaker Ability is held, in which the House votes not on the strength of arguments alone, but on the best speakers.

Throughout this process, the Chair is in charge of maintaining decorum within the House and ensuring that the rules are followed. Fines can be imposed for crude language; the form they take, whether a time or points penalty etc, can be at the Chair's discretion.



POINTS OF ORDER, INFORMATION AND CLARIFICATION

POIs, if handled incorrectly, can very easily derail the entire proceedings of a debate. Their correct use, and efficient regulation, are central to a lively, informed, respectful debate.

Points of Information should be kept as brief as possible. The clock does not stop for a questioner to deliver their POI, and so eating unnecessarily into the speaker's time is disrespectful. If the speaker has been gracious enough to accept the POI, it is common decency to keep it short and to the point. It also teaches the person to be clear and concise, a key skill in debating.

Barracking is not allowed – if a POI request is denied, wait some time (10-15 seconds) before asking another. If it is accepted, wait until the speaker has responded fully before asking another. Do not hound the speaker.

Furthermore, 'back-and-forth' is frowned upon – the questioner is not entitled to a 'right of reply', so to speak. Once the speaker answers the POI, that is the end of the matter.

It is considered good practice to accept one or two POIs in a speech – it allows for effective interplay during the debate between the members, and also shows a level of confidence in your own argument that you are willing to take questions you may not be explicitly prepared for. However, it is up to the speaker to take as many or as few as they wish.

There are two other 'sub-categories' of POI – a 'Point of Order' and a 'Point of Clarification'. These will be explained below. Their operation differs slightly from a regular Point of Information, in that they are not at the speaker's discretion. If raised by a member of the House, they must be accepted. Similarly to a POI, the clock does not stop, so they, too, eat into the speaker's time, and should ideally be kept brief and dealt with as quickly as possible.

Point of Order

A Point of Order can be raised by any member, generally directed at the Chair, to raise a query regarding operational proceedings in the House. If a member feels that the rules of the House have been breached in some way, a Point of Order can be raised, at which point the Chair will decide on whether or not the rules have been broken, and how to rectify this and continue with the debate.

Point of Clarification

If a speaker feels they or their words have been grossly mischaracterised by the opposing team, they can raise a Point of Clarification, which must be accepted by the relevant speaker. They are given the chance to correct the person as to their point and can often provide a useful tool in derailing an opponent's speech or undermining their argument. Much like a regular POI, there is no back-and-forth, therefore once the speaker responds to the Point of Clarification, no follow-up question can be asked.



MOTIONS

One of the most common mistakes made by debaters of all stripes is to look at the motion's suffix, to see what the general topic is, and then form an argument and a speech around this. However, the beginning of the motion is every bit as important, and from a functional, mechanistic perspective, is vital to a proper debate. Each of the four main types will be discussed below.

'Would' motions: *This House Would ban capital punishment.*

In these debates, the Proposition should put forward a new 'policy', explain its implementation, and provide reasons why their policy is better than the opposition's or the status quo. The Opposition should defend the status quo or create an alternative policy with reasons why it is better for society. For example, in the above debate, the Proposition should explain implementation and what banning capital punishment would look like (the impacts of the policy – overcrowding in prisons etc). This is known as *mechanisation* and is very important to some styles of debate. This is an exercise in weighing up the benefits of your argument against your opposition.

'Believes' motions: *This House Believes that single-sex schools are good for education.*

Here, the Proposition and Opposition do not need to create a policy. Instead, they must analyse and explain why something is better/worse. It is important here to establish why an outcome is likely to happen and what the impacts would be on society. It is also important to weigh up your benefits against the opposition's – more often than not, both sides will have imperfect solutions to the problem, so a key skill is to balance both, and show how the other side has worse outcomes. In this debate, there are arguments for improved performance from boys, and also decreased performance in girls, as well as social, moral, and societal impacts for both sides. By weighing up the pros and cons, one can make informed arguments as well as engaging fully with the debate.

'Regrets' motions: *This House Regrets the emergence of China as a world superpower.*

The Proposition should outline a world in which the event in question didn't happen, what it would look like and how this world would have come to pass. Then, they should compare this alternate world with the current world and establish how their model is better. The Opposition's job is typically to defend the status quo. They should establish why the hypothetical scenario provided by the Proposition would be worse than the real world. Again, comparing the impacts of both sides' arguments is important here. Realistically, neither world will be a total Utopia, so the outcomes need to be weighed up. For example, in the motion here, if there would be economic improvements for the UK on both sides, then each side of the debate need to state why the improvements in their argument are greater or more beneficial than their opposition's.

Actor motions: *As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, This House Would be out and proud in the music industry.*

The most common mistake in these debates is not focusing on the 'actor' in the motion (here, an LGBTQ+ musician). Unlike the above motions, where the focus is more on society, these debates focus on how one's argument affects the individual actor. This isn't to say that wider society is ignored – in this case, an 'out' musician could make music that more people relate to, or that inspires other people to be themselves – but the focus should come back to the actor – the musician's fans would then buy tickets, merchandise, albums, making the singer more popular, for example. These can be tricky debates to spot, so make sure to read the motion carefully.



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PUTTING TOGETHER AN ARGUMENT

Now that the basics of debate structures have been covered, this section will cover the process of putting together an argument, developing it, preparing for a debate, and performing in front of an audience. From this, the real benefits of debate can be felt – thorough research, analytical skills, information and data handling, diligence, teamwork, communication, confidence, public speaking, thinking on your feet, and so much more. The soft and hard skills learned from debating are immensely valuable both in terms of personal development and in the professional environment. The ability to stand by a piece of work, in front of a room of one's peers, to deliver it calmly and confidently, is something that many employers and universities will admire in a prospective employee or student.

The key to any debate is preparation. Every debater will have their own individual style when it comes to delivery – some prepare a full written speech, some only write a few prompts; some will have grand sweeping rhetoric, others will have a more conversational or simpler style. But none of these matter unless coupled with preparation. Knowing the motion, knowing the facts to back up your argument, knowing your teammates' arguments, having an idea of what your opponents will say, being prepared for POIs. All of these things are the hallmarks of a winning speech.

This section of the handout will work through the process of debate preparation, from research right through to delivery, offering tips, tricks, and advice learned from years of experience.

*“THE KEY TO ANY DEBATE IS
PREPARATION”*



RESEARCH

Once you have the motion, write it down, word for word. As mentioned in the section above, the wording of the motion is hugely important. Make sure you know what is being asked of you, and most importantly, make sure you know what side of the motion you will be arguing!

Brainstorming, whether on your own, or with your teammates, provides an excellent opportunity to deconstruct the motion, figuring out the key points you will wish to address. For some people, spider diagrams, bullet points, lists, or using whiteboards, are the best ways of visualising the full scope of the motion. Find what works best for you and play to your strengths. Work with your team – many hands make light work, after all. Each person will likely have different information, different ways of viewing the motion, different points of view. All of these will help give you a wide base from which to work.

Once you have collected all the information you can, narrow it down. It can be very tempting to go into a debate and throw every fact and statistic you can at your opponents, but time constraints will limit you to the most significant information you have. A good way of working this out is to have an informal mini-debate among your team, put simply, talk through the motion and your points. The benefits of this are two-fold:

- (1) the strongest arguments you have will make themselves clear, and
- (2) it will give you an idea as to what your opponents will likely say when it comes to the real debate.

There's a saying in chess: the best move to make isn't the 'best move', but the one your opponent least expects you to make. By understanding the other side's arguments, by knowing what they will say before you hear it, you can prepare responses in advance, you can even deal with the issues before they arise and mitigate against them in your speeches. All of this helps build your confidence before you've even put pen to paper to write your speech. Finding the flaws in their argument puts you at an immediate advantage and will strengthen your convictions in your own points.

***“THE BEST MOVE ISN'T THE
BEST MOVE’, BUT THE ONE
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SPEECHWRITING

Many people panic at the thought of putting together a speech. Writing enough engaging content to fill 5, 6, 7 minutes can be nerve-racking for some. But it doesn't have to be this way. This step is very individualised and depends on the strengths and talents of each person. No matter what, the research done before this point will guide you. Thorough preparation will make this process much less daunting.

The strongest speeches have three clear sections – an introduction, a main body, and a conclusion. Within this framework, your individuality and skills will guide you and will shine through the speech. Here is a brief example of how to work within this structure to make a stand-out impactful speech. Imagine you are the Proposition speaker for the motion:

This House Would abolish the Monarchy.

a. *Have a gripping opener which sets you apart from the other speakers.*

'Good evening, members of the House. The people of Britain today are being forced into subservience by paying their time and money to an unelected family in London. How can we continue to call ourselves democratic when this is happening right under our noses?'

b. *Clearly define your first point.*

'Firstly, I would like to talk about how our hard-earned money, our taxes, are lining the deep, deep pockets of the Royal Family. We are paying for their fancy balls, garden parties, and coronations. If some unelected prince wants a new house in the country, we are the ones who fork out for it. While our quality of life gets worse, while our schools crumble, while NHS waiting lists get longer, we pay for their luxury.'

c. *Exemplify your point.*

'The Sovereign Grant stands at £86 million a year and go up to as much as £369 million. During this cost-of-living crisis can we really allow for so much of our money to go to people who simply don't need it?'

d. *Offer rebuttal.*

'The Opposition may argue that we make this money back through tourism the Royal Family brings, that this boosts the economy more than it harms it. Well, I ask the Opposition, where is this economic boom seen here, in Northern Ireland? Nowhere. Maybe in the already wealthy London they might see the benefits, but we are left to suffer.'

e. *Loop back to the terminology of the debate and the original point.*

'So, we can clearly see that the Monarchy is a waste of hard-earned tax payers' money, and by abolishing it, we would have so much more to spend on housing, healthcare, and education.'

In many ways, a good debate speech is similar to an English Literature essay – one which clearly answers the question, is persuasive, informed, and has a solid structure that is easy to follow. Each one will be individual to the writer, but each is as valid and valuable as the others.



PRACTICE

Once you have your points written out, whether as a full speech or just as some prompts, practice is key. By speaking out loud, either in private or in front of your friends or family, you will find the parts of your argument that are strongest, and ones which need refined or reworked.

Make sure to time yourself. In a formal debate setting, each speech will have a time limit, and in competitive debates, judges will often simply stop listening (and marking) after a certain amount of time has elapsed over the limit. The first and last minutes of your speech will be protected time, so you will be able to make points here which cannot be POI'd. Make this time count. Know roughly when in your speech the first and last minute will arise, and factor this into your argument.

By practising your speech, you will be able to hone in on certain things, and refine the points you make, in terms of delivery. Again, similarly to an English Literature essay, the use of metaphors, the rule of three, repetition, alliteration, and other literary devices help make your speech more memorable. The delivery of your points can be as important as the substance of them, so using these tricks will help you greatly to deliver a memorable, persuasive speech.

In debates, humour can be your friend. Even in heavier topics, a bit of brevity and lightness can help. It shouldn't be a stand-up comedy routine, but humour makes a speech memorable, more engaging, and more likely to be convincing. When rehearsing your speech, try adding some jokes, see how they flow with the rest of the speech. Sometimes humour just doesn't fit, and that's ok, too. But where possible, try to add some humour in. Revise and rework it as needed. This is when practise can be very beneficial, a joke that falls flat can knock the wind out of your sails and impact your overall delivery. Use humour that works and that will 'land', use it sparsely, and use it effectively.

Practise will also help with your confidence. The more you practice, the better you'll know your arguments, the more confidence you'll have in delivering them. Eye contact is important in debates, connecting with the House or the judges will make your speech seem that much more impressive, and you will be more prone to doing so if you aren't relying heavily on your notes.

Eye contact, however, doesn't necessarily mean looking each person in the room dead in the eye. That can be daunting for many people, and also can sometimes make everyone involved slightly uncomfortable. If you are nervous about speaking in front of people, but want to improve your confidence in this way, find a point along the back wall, and look up at that, thus creating the illusion of eye contact, and making you seem much more confidence and assured. Or, find a friend you trust in the audience, and look at them. These things may be difficult at first, but they will get easier and easier with practise.

If you can, practise in front of people, or in front of a mirror. Confidence is also expressed in your stature, your gestures, your posture. If you can improve on these, standing up straight, looking comfortable in your own skin, moving naturally, your speech will again seem that much more convincing.

Finally, don't forget to breathe. Take a deep breath before you start and breathe throughout the speech. Many people panic and get breathless, so they panic more. Take a bottle of water with you as well, take a sip when you need it. It can even help buy you some time, for example, when thinking of a POI response.



CONCLUSION

Debating is a dynamic, active, enjoyable activity which provides so many skills which will hold you in good stead going into the future. But these skills will only be gained through debating, reading this handout won't be enough. Take the information here, work it to your own abilities, and make the leap. It can be daunting and nerve-wracking but channel those nerves into a productive energy. Being able to effectively use your nerves to your own benefit is another skill debating teaches you, and, when done properly, can make you sharper, think faster, answer better, and can give you an important edge against your competitors.

Speaking of competitors, although debating is, by its nature, adversarial – one side is put against another in often heated motions – it is vital that everyone involved maintains a standard of respect. A debate without rules and regulations which are followed becomes nothing more than an argument. Debates facilitate civil conversation, discourse, and discussion in a way that can take an emotive topic, or an issue that many people feel strongly about, and gives people a platform to work through it in a way that maintains dignity and will likely produce a more appropriate outcome. There is a reason that universities, workplaces, businesses, charities, governments operate via discussion of ideas and coming to a reasonable conclusion rather than the people in charge having a brawl in a car park.

Being part of debating allows you to be a part of this culture, a culture of changing things for the better. You won't win every debate, but no matter what, you provided something unique and personal which can leave an indelible mark on those around you. Debating is, despite often being a group enterprise, and something done in conjunction with others, a deeply personal thing. Your own style, your own beliefs, your own voice will grow and develop the more you do it, and, as a person, you will grow too. You will become more confident, assured, and informed, and will meet friends that may last a lifetime.

As Schools Convenor, and on behalf of the Literific Council, I hope this handout has been helpful. I hope that the strong culture in Northern Ireland of discourse can be strengthened further by the voices of the young people here. And I hope that, within your schools, and you go to university in the future, you will join or start a debating society, and become a part of the wider conversation.

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