

Guide to Hosting Your Own Debate

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Thinking About Organizing a Debate?

Debates are an effective way to inform and involve voters in the political process. The Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) compiled the following guidelines for sponsoring debates of any kind, including those in political races, issue forums, and student debates.

This guide was prepared to answer the questions most commonly asked by the educational, civic and media organizations that host debates. It will introduce you to the steps necessary to organize such an event and serve as a checklist for planning. Remember there's no single right way to proceed; this guide will simply outline some options.

Checklist

This guide uses the following checklist to help you prepare for your debate. Each item is addressed in detail farther down the page and can be jumped to by clicking on the topic.

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Budget

How much will a debate cost? The answer depends on the size of the production, promotion, security, rental of a debate hall, and dozens of other things. Think ahead about the budget and how to finance the event. You may wish to identify sponsors who can help underwrite the costs and acknowledge their assistance in printed materials and on your website.

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Debate Hall

Can you use a facility that will be provided free of charge, or will it have to be rented? There are many locations that you might be able to use without incurring major expenses. These sites may include school auditoriums and civic centers. You should consider the size of the audience, as well as lighting and acoustics in order to select the best setting for the event. If it will be broadcast on television or radio, one option is to hold it in a production studio. Although such a site may solve some logistical problems, it limits the size of the audience and the opportunity for broad community participation. Finally, pick a debate site that is as neutral as possible.

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Furniture/Stage

Do you need to provide a raised platform and lecterns for the speakers, desks and tables for the moderator/panelists, carpeting for better acoustics, or chairs for the audience?

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Electrical

Will you need to obtain microphones, additional lights, or extra power sources? If your event is to be broadcast, decide what equipment you will provide and what media representatives will bring.

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Printed Materials

Will you print programs, posters, media credentials, or audience tickets? These items will not only be helpful in promoting the debate, but credentials and tickets help with security and logistics. They will also serve as souvenirs and as a means to give credit to those organizations that have supported the event.

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Labor

Will you require professional help to handle equipment, particularly specialized broadcasting or electrical items? For most tasks, volunteers can provide invaluable help at no cost. Remember to identify plenty of workers to help before, during, and after the debate. Think about involving students, particularly those who are studying government, media, or political communications. Consider soliciting volunteers through your website.

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Security

You may need to provide security if you are using a facility after its normal business hours or if the event is highly publicized. Make sure that areas where debate-related equipment and materials are stored can be locked.

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Videos/Transcripts

If you plan to offer videotapes, audiocassettes, or written transcripts of the debate, figure in these expenses ahead of time. If necessary, you can charge for tapes or transcripts to cover the cost of producing them. To make these items most useful, they should be available as quickly as possible after the debate. You may wish to post a written transcript of the debate on your website.

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Internet

Think about the Internet when planning the debate. A website can be used to promote the date and location of your debate, solicit volunteers and donors, handle ticket requests, acknowledge sponsors, and receive post-debate feedback. You may save money by inviting a local university, business, or civic group to post your information on its website. You might consider webcasting the debate or hosting an Internet debate.

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Debate Site

Where will you hold the debate? If it will be broadcast on television or radio, one option is to hold it in a production studio. That takes care of several logistical problems, but limits the size of the audience. The alternative is suitable space in a civic auditorium, theater, school, or hotel. Here are some factors to consider when selecting a site:

Broadcasting

If you're going to televise the debate, find a site that is well suited to the necessary technical equipment. Depending on how complex the production will be, you can solicit advice from a freelance producer or someone from a local television or radio station. Obtaining advice in advance from an expert will save you headaches and expenses later.

Audience Size

When deciding on a site, remember that a stage for the candidates, broadcasting equipment, and room for journalists will take up significant space. For instance, usable seating was reduced by more than 50 percent during the 1996 town hall meeting debate between President Clinton and Senator Bob Dole, because staging, risers, cameras, and media platforms occupied so much space in the room.

Media Center

Depending on the size of your debate, you may consider selecting a debate hall that offers space nearby for a separate media center. This center provides a location for journalists to work before and after the debate. For those journalists who are unable to be in the debate hall, the media center can serve as a viewing area. It also provides room for post-debate interviews and commentary. In the past, debates sponsored by the CPD have attracted well over 2,000 journalists, making a media center essential.

Traffic

If possible, choose a site that can handle increased traffic without making all travel grind to a halt. The local police department can be helpful in this matter. Consider providing bus transportation to the debate site from alternate parking areas. You also need to make sure that the site is easily accessible to the participants, the public, and the media.

Neutrality

Pick a debate hall that is neutral. Make sure that it is easily accessible to the candidates, public, and the press.

For more information on debates, contact the CPD at (202) 872-1020.

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Candidate Negotiation

The debate sponsor and the participants must agree on the details and terms of the debate. If you are sponsoring a political debate, ask each candidate to name a representative who has the power to speak for him or her. Find out how to contact those representatives quickly, including when they are on the road. In handling negotiations, you need to be a firm and fair facilitator. Candidates will be particularly interested in the format issues which follow.

Each point is discussed in greater detail in the format section.

- [Selection of questioners](#)
- [Debate topics](#)
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Format

Different formats have been used in presidential debates over the years. These styles include the town hall meeting (when the audience asks the questions), the panel approach (when the debate participants answer questions from a number of people), and the single moderator (when one person asks questions). A single moderator tends to focus the audience's attention more on the candidates and less on panel participants. Regardless of which format you select, you will have to consider the following issues.

Selection of Questioners

Pick a person/persons who are familiar with the issues and candidates in the election being debated. Journalists are likely to be more experienced and comfortable with handling the technical requirements of a broadcast setting. Above all, choose a moderator or panelists whom you and the debate participants trust to be professional and fair.

If you decide to organize the debate as a town meeting, select an unbiased audience. Consider asking a neutral, independent organization, such as a polling or research group, to identify impartial individuals to serve as members of the audience.

Debate Topics

What will the debate be about? It can be wide-ranging or confined to just a few issues. If you are sponsoring a series of debates, you might consider organizing each debate around a particular theme or topic.

Debate Length

How long should the debate be? The answer to this question will depend on a variety of factors, including whether

it will be broadcast, the number of participants, and how many debates there will be. The presidential debates, organized by the CPD, have each lasted 90 minutes.

Opening and Closing Statements

Will the candidates have opening and closing statements? Prepared statements reduce the amount of time for questions, so consider limiting them to two or three minutes. The presidential debates have included two-minute closing statements.

Questions and Answers

Consider setting time limits for both questions and answers. Questions in the 1996 presidential debates were limited to 20 seconds in length. Citizen questioners in the 1992 and 1996 town hall debates were asked to keep their questions short and limited to one topic. Candidates in the presidential debates were given two minutes for answers and one minute for rebuttals. Remember that the length of the questions and answers will determine how many topics can be addressed during the debate.

Timing the Debate

Properly timing the opening/closing statements, answers, and rebuttals is important, especially in a broadcast debate. It is not a job to give to the moderator, who will be occupied with many other responsibilities. Select a responsible person to keep time and establish an easy system to let the moderator and the participants know when their time is up. The presidential debates use a series of traffic lights within clear view of the candidates to inform them of how much time they have left. Remember that mistakes in timing can lead to claims of unfairness - the last thing a sponsor needs after the debate.

Order of Speakers

Who speaks first and who finishes up? Sporting events offer a good way to decide - flip a coin. If you have more than two participants, draw straws or use another easy selection process.

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Audience

If you're going to have a live audience for your debate, deciding who attends the debate is important. Establish a ticket policy early and enforce rules of audience conduct during the debate. Remember that time taken up with audience reaction is time taken away from the debate participants and their views.

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Noise

The nature of your debate hall can greatly affect how noisy things might get. Uncarpeted cement floors, for instance, will magnify every audience move from applause to sneezes. The larger the audience, the greater the potential for noise. Consider adequate security if you anticipate heckling or other disruptive behavior.

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Community Interest

As soon as a debate is announced, many people will want tickets. Decide on audience size and ticket distribution early, and stick to those guidelines. One way to increase community/student involvement is to have volunteers serve as ushers or ticket-takers. If the debate is televised, you can also host a community-wide debate viewing at a separate location. See the information about DebateWatch for further ideas.

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Cameras

In advance, make it clear to ticket-holders whether they can bring cameras or other electronic equipment. Flash devices can be distracting to candidates and to TV camera crews.

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Safety

Make sure the size of the audience and the seating plan are consistent with safe use of the hall, and that all relevant fire and building codes are met.

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Media

Political debates are news events, and you must consider the media in your planning. Will you need to credential the journalists who want to cover the debate? This allows you to identify and control the number of journalists who have access to the debate hall and other areas, and to fairly allocate space.

Consider the needs of different types of media. Is the debate going to be televised? Consider getting help from a TV producer who can assist with issues such as camera placement, lighting, and power sources.

Will still photographers be in the hall? If so, designate where they should be, and make sure their equipment is not distracting either because of noise or flashes. Are you providing closed-captioning or sign language interpreting of the debate? If so, make arrangements ahead of time.

After the debate, many journalists will want to question the debate participants. The media center described earlier can become the area where this exchange takes place. Post-debate commentary can be lengthy, so it is important to find a location where it does not interfere with the process of cleaning up the hall.

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Post-Debate Activities

Once the debate is over, make sure the hall is restored to its normal configuration and that borrowed or rented equipment is returned. If you decide to make transcripts or tapes of the debate available, establish a method of distribution. Consider soliciting feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of the debate. Finally, thank the supporters and volunteers who helped.

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