

Student Congress: Student Instructions

What is Student Congress?

- Student Congress is modeled after the United States Congress; therefore, all legislation deals with national—not state or local—issues.
- Bills and resolutions, which you will receive before a tournament, are debated in “houses” or “chambers” of about twenty competitors. For all practical purposes, it doesn’t matter at local tournaments whether you are in a house or a senate chamber.
- You will be addressed as “Representative” or “Senator,” not by your first name, and you should similarly address the other members of your chamber.
- Parliamentary procedure is followed, and a student chairperson known as a “presiding officer” leads the proceedings. The presiding officer is addressed as “Mister Chairman” or “Madame Chairman.”
- After debating a bill or resolution, you and the other members of your chamber will take a vote to decide if the bill or resolution should be passed. Ironically, the final disposition of a bill is not important: what is important is the quality of the debate that preceded the vote.

What is Parliamentary Procedure?

- The US Congress, state legislatures, city councils, and many businesses and clubs follow parliamentary procedure or Roberts’s Rules of Order to increase the efficiency of meetings.
- Parliamentary procedure helps to:
 - Guarantee that the minority opinion is heard.
 - Make sure that the majority opinion prevails.
 - Provide orderly procedures for conducting business and debate on important issues.
 - Further the debate, not intrude upon the debate. (Speakers are required to make “motions” or recommendations to move the discussion in the meeting along.)

What is a bill? What is a resolution?

- A bill is basically the wording for a law or piece of legislation.
- A resolution is a generalized statement expressing a conviction or sentiment.

What happens in Student Congress?

- Some—but not all—Congresses begin with the taking of the Congressional oath of office.
- The first order of business is setting the “order of the day,” or the order in which the bill/resolutions will be debated. At local tournaments, designated students will write the numbers and the tag lines of the bills/resolutions on the board and number them; then the members of the chamber vote. The bill or resolution receiving the most votes is debated first, the bill or resolution receiving the next highest number of votes is debated second, and so on.
- The second order of business is the election of the presiding officers. Candidates are nominated by members of the chamber and may be asked to make a brief statement explaining their qualifications. The person receiving the highest number of votes chooses the session over which he or she would like to preside, the person receiving the second-highest number of votes then chooses his or her session, and so on.
- The third order of business is the introduction of the first bill/resolution for debate.
 - All speeches in Student Congress are three minutes in length.
 - The first speech is always an affirmative speech in support of the bill or resolution. If the person who wrote the bill or resolution is present in the chamber, he or she gives a sponsorship or authorship speech, which is followed by a two-minute questioning period. If the author is not present in the house, the speech of affirmation is followed by a one-minute questioning period.
 - Unlike other speeches made in Student Congress, the first speech made on a bill or resolution may be a prepared speech.
 - The second speech is a negative speech followed by a one-minute questioning period.
 - Subsequent speeches are delivered extempore (although notes and prepared material are allowed in delivering all speeches). Speakers should strive to speak for the entire three minutes.
 - These subsequent speeches should either “clash” with the arguments presented in a previous speech or provide additional reasons to support the arguments given in a previous speech.
 - Motions may be made after each questioning period.

Order of the debate:

- Affirmative speech—3 minutes
- Cross-examination –1 minute (2 minutes for sponsorship speeches)
- Motions may be made
- Negative speech—3 minutes
- Cross-examination—1 minute
- Motions may be made

What about questioning during Cross-Examination?

- Questions should add value to the debate. The presiding officer or parliamentarian may call leading questions “out of order” because students who ask them may be trying to provide new evidence in the guise of a question. Such questions often begin with the words: “Isn’t it true that...?” “Are you aware that...?” “Do you know that...?”
- A speaker’s response to questions during cross-examination should be to the point.

What if I do not like the way a bill/resolution is worded?

- Germane amendments that do not alter the intent of the legislation must be submitted in writing to the presiding officer in advance of obtaining the floor.
- The presiding officer then decides whether or not to read the amendment to the house.
- A 1/3 vote is required to consider an amendment. Any member can speak to the amendment. The house then debates the amendment. A simple majority will pass it.

How do I get recognized to speak?

- It is the presiding officer’s job to maximize the number of speeches and questions on the bill/resolution under consideration in the house and be fair and equitable in giving each representative the opportunity to deliver speeches and ask questions.
- Priority to deliver a speech and ask a question is based on “frequency” and “recency.”
- At the start of some tournaments, you may receive a packet of “priority cards.” These help the presiding officer quickly “eyeball” who has made the fewest speeches. Each time you deliver a speech, you will surrender your highest priority card.
- Do not be discouraged if you are not immediately called upon. The presiding officer is keeping track of how many attempts you have made, and also how long it has been since you last spoke.
- The presiding officer has discretion when recognizing representatives who wish to make a motion.

Priority Rules for Speeches

- Highest priority goes to representatives who have delivered the fewest speeches. There is no rule for recognizing the very first speaker.
- Representatives who have stood up the most number of times to be recognized since the last time they have delivered a speech should be given priority over those with fewer attempts. Once representatives have spoken, their standing time resets to zero.
- When choosing between representatives who have delivered the same number of speeches and have equal standing time, the presiding officer will give priority to the ones who have asked the most questions (those who have advanced the debate).
- All other things being equal, the presiding officer will take into consideration how long it has been since the speaker first spoke. Priority is given to representatives whose last speeches occurred earlier in the session.

Priority Rules for Cross-Examination Questioners

- Highest priority for asking a question during cross-examination goes to the representative first standing.
- If equal, representatives who have asked fewer questions have greater priority.
- When choosing among representatives who have asked the same number of questions, the presiding officer gives priority to the one standing the most often.

How do I make a motion?

- Motions have very specific wording. Familiarize yourself with the “Table of the Most Frequently Used Parliamentary Procedures,” which was prepared by the National Forensic League.
- Motions are made at specific points in time during Student Congress: At the beginning of the first session, following the cross-examination of an “affirmative” or “negative” speaker, and at the end of a session to recess or adjourn the session. The presiding officer may ask for motions at these times, or may not. The one exception is that you may “rise to a question of privilege” at any time (even when a speaker is speaking) if you cannot hear the speaker, if you have a legitimate emergency, or if you must use the restroom (in this last instance, you should wait until a speaker has finished).
- To be recognized by the presiding officer to make a motion, you simply stand up. The presiding officer has the discretion to recognize you. If you are not recognized, you sit down until it is time again for a motion.
- Use this wording to make a motion: “I move that (state the motion). However, you can say, “I rise for to a question of privilege,” if you need to make a personal request, such as ask to be excused to use the restroom.
- Certain motions need to be “seconded” before they will be considered. Some are debatable and amendable. And, the required vote varies depending on the motion. You may be asked to stand when you vote or to raise your placard.
- Be aware that it is considered abusive to call for “previous question” if there are still speakers who want to speak on the bill or resolution or to move to table a piece of legislation if a motion for previous question fails.

Suppose I think the presiding officer made a mistake?

- You may make a motion by saying, “I rise to a point of order,” if you believe the presiding officer has not followed parliamentary procedure. The presiding officer will ask you to “state your point,” and may confer with the parliamentarian before responding. No one else may speak until the presiding officer responds to you.
- If you are not satisfied with the presiding officer’s response and believes a wrong must be corrected, you may “appeal a decision of the chair.” A second is required for this motion, and a majority vote.
- **Beware!** If you are wrong in your challenge, you may be judged as demonstrating poor decorum and knowledge of parliamentary procedure.
- **Remember:** The presiding officer is in charge of running the session and deserves your respect. You will be called “out of order” if you speak without being recognized, ask a leading question, ask nuisance questions, make inappropriate motions, act discourteously to anyone, or talk, whisper, and distract others. The parliamentarian is the “adult in charge” in the house and will step in if necessary.

How does the debate on a bill/resolution come to an end?

- When the debate becomes repetitive, or when there are not sufficient speakers who wish to present an opposing viewpoint on a bill or resolution, a representative should make a previous question motion: “I move the previous question.”
- If the motion is seconded (it is not debatable), the members in the chamber will vote on whether or not they should stop debate to vote on the bill/resolution. If 2/3 of the house votes “yes”, then the house will vote on the bill/resolution.
 - Following the vote, the next bill/resolution in the list is debated.
 - Refrain from moving the previous question too early in the debate. It is considered abusive for a member to move “previous question” while there are still speakers waiting to debate, especially if the purpose of the motion is simply to advance to that member’s piece of legislation.

How will I be judged?

- The judges are here to see a debate! They are looking for “clash,” as well as good speaking skills.
- The judges will use these criteria to score your speech:
 1. **Delivery**—communicative and persuasive manner.
 2. **Analysis**—logical examination of the issues.
 3. **Clash**—directly responds to the issues presented by previous speakers.
 4. **Original arguments**—new and innovative views on the issue backed up by evidence.
 5. **Answers to Questions**—incisive, knowledgeable, and direct answers during the questioning period.

Average Score for Each Speech	
“6” for <i>outstanding</i>	6
“5” for <i>superior</i>	5
“4” for <i>excellent</i>	4
“3” for <i>good</i>	3

- In determining your final rank in your chamber, the judges will also take into consideration your overall decorum and knowledge of parliamentary procedure, and your skill in asking appropriate and direct cross-examination questions.
- Student who receive high ranks typically deliver three or four speech on two or more bills or resolutions, and they ask at least two cross-examination questions. Keep in mind that the judges have been told, “Active participation should be taken into consideration, but several mediocre speeches and questions are not better than few high quality ones.”
- You should not speak on both the affirmative as well as the negative side of a bill or resolution.
- After the final session is adjourned, you will be asked to vote for the “best PO” if there were two or more presiding officers in your chamber.
- Presiding Officers may receive up to 6 NFL points for every hour of service, if they are elected the best PO. Otherwise, they may receive up to 5 NFL points for every hour of service.

What is the structure of an excellent Student Congress Speech?

1. **Introduction** (15-20 seconds)
 - a. Attention-getter (usually a quote, analogy, or evidence)
 - b. Purpose (“I rise to affirm—or stand to negate—the bill/resolution under discussion...”)
 - c. Preview (“...for the following reason--or reasons...”)
2. **Body** (2 minutes)
 - a. Clash
 - i. State the issue on the floor. (SIGNPOST)
 - ii. State your point in conflict. (ANSWER)
 - iii. Prove your point with evidence or logic. (REASON)
 - iv. Tell the assembly the impact of your point and how it should affect their vote. (COMPARE)
 - b. Present a challenge to the opposition. Challenge them to answer an issue or state what the opposition must prove in order to overwhelm your points or your

perspective.

3. **Conclusion** (30 Seconds)
 - a. Summarize your key issues of clash
 - b. Summarize your key points
 - c. Come full circle
4. **Open yourself up to cross-examination** (*"I am now open for cross-examination"*)

How should I prepare?

- Prepare two speech outlines per bill/resolution—one affirmative, one negative.
- Prepare refutation evidence (both affirmative and negative) on all bills and resolutions.
- Prepare affirmative and negative talking points (a brainstormed list) regarding all of the bills and resolutions.
- Prepare cross-examination questions for the affirmative and negative sides.
- Study and understand the "Table of the Most Frequently Used Parliamentary Procedures."

Source: <http://www.coastfl.org/CongressStudentInstructionsforLeague.pdf>