

# **WITS & WORDS 2019**

## **INTER-SCHOOL DEBATE CHAMPIONSHIP**



**JOINTLY ORGANISED BY**  
**THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION**  
**&**  
**DEBATE ASSOCIATION (SINGAPORE)**

## **Tournament Handbook**

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## About Debate

Debate is an exciting and interesting activity for talented young students. Exposing students to debate at a young age, with proper training and guidance, can help them develop a passion for the sport which will help them develop confidence and critical thinking skills.

A debate basically consists of four things: a topic (the “Motion”), a team arguing in favour of the topic (the “Proposition”), a team arguing against the topic (the “Opposition”), and a judge (the “Adjudicator”). The objective of a debate is to convince the Adjudicator(s) that your team’s case is more believable, and thus should win.

The rules, format, and score system for the Wits & Words: Inter-school Debate Championship for primary schools are shown below for your reference. It is important to read through the rules and understand how the debate is scored/marked from the adjudicators’ perspective. Knowing how they evaluate a team will help you understand what to emphasise during your debate training sessions with your students.

Debate Association (Singapore) has uploaded motions used in previous years of Wits & Words on our website (<http://www.debates.org.sg>).

**Since 2015, Wits & Words has moved to a division system. Schools will be placed into either Division I or Division II. This is to (i) ensure that each debate round is a meaningful learning opportunity; and (ii) allow more students to be recognised. You may wish to refer to the Division System FAQ in Annex B if you need further clarification.**

## Rules & Format of the Competition

The competition will be a scaled down version of the current Secondary and Junior College national debate competitions. All members of the audience as well as competing schools will be considered as members of the House. At every debate, the proceedings of the House will be subjected to the announcements and rules of the Chairman, who in turn will be guided by the adjudicators present.

### Format

Each team will comprise of a minimum of 3 and a maximum of 5 registered members. Only registered members of the team may speak for the debates. Teams found to have non-registered members speaking for any of the rounds face disqualification or other penalties.

Only 3 speakers will speak at each round (3 minutes each for the preliminary rounds; 4 mins each for break rounds). The remaining 2 reserve speakers will sit in the audience and may assist in timing the speeches made by their team mates. Reply speeches will last for 2 minutes. **All forms of communication (whether verbal, written or in the form of gesture) between speakers (including reserve speakers) and any member of the audience are not permitted during the course of the debate.** Speakers are also not allowed to use visual aids or props during their speeches.

Here is a summary of the order of speeches given during each preliminary round:

- 1) 1<sup>st</sup> Proposition (3 mins)
- 2) 1<sup>st</sup> Opposition (3 mins)
- 3) 2<sup>nd</sup> Proposition (3 mins)
- 4) 2<sup>nd</sup> Opposition (3 mins)
- 5) 3<sup>rd</sup> Proposition (3 mins)
- 6) 3<sup>rd</sup> Opposition (3 mins)

After the end of 6 x 3-minute speeches from both sides of the house, one speaker from each team speaks again for 2 minutes to summarise the debate from their team's perspective in the reply speech. Teams will be given 2 minutes to confer with their reserve speakers before the reply speeches are made. The reply speaker can only be the 1st or 2nd speaker of each team.

- 7) Opposition Reply (2 mins)
- 8) Proposition Reply (2 mins)

Points of information (POIs) are expected from both sides of the house during the debate for this format of debating. To offer a POI, speakers must stand up and say "Point of information" or any other derivative. The speaker holding the floor will then choose whether or not to accept the POI offered. POIs are to be concise and take no longer than 15 seconds so as not to unfairly take up the time of the speaker holding the floor. Adjudicators may choose to penalise teams and speakers who offer or accept too few or too many POIs. POIs may be offered at any point except for the first and last 30 seconds of each speech. No POIs are to be offered during reply speeches.

Speakers are advised to refrain from distracting the speaker on the floor by offering too many POIs in succession. Speakers on the floor are advised to be wary about accepting too many POIs as they might then not enough time to cover the original material they had prepared. This might

hurt their overall content score if they do not have enough time to properly communicate their arguments.

While POIs are encouraged, they are not compulsory during the preliminary rounds. Debates who do not offer or take any POIs during the preliminary rounds will not face any penalty. However, any debater who gives a good POI and answers it well may be credited for it.

**From the break rounds (i.e. Quarter Finals onwards), it will be a requirement for each debater to offer POIs regularly and to accept at least one POI during their speech.**

All teams will debate in 3 preliminary rounds. The top 8 teams will advance to the Quarter-Finals. From the Quarter-Finals, only the top 4 teams will qualify to break into the Semi-Finals. The losing teams of the Semi-Finals will then compete in the 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> Placing round, and the winners of the Semi-Finals will compete in the Grand Final.

Teams advancing to the **Quarter-Finals, Semi-Finals, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> placing and Grand Final** will have **increased speech timings of 4 minutes** (reply speeches will remain at 2 minutes).

### Roles of Each Side

The role of the Proposition is to present a case that directly advocates or addresses the motion in question. The role of the Opposition is to actively engage the Proposition.

It is possible for an Opposition team to lose to a substantially weaker Proposition team if they have not fulfilled their onus as an Opposition by consistently engaging and taking down the Proposition's points.

Here are the specific roles for each speaker:

	<b>PROPOSITION</b>	<b>OPPOSITION</b>
<b>1st Speaker</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Define the motion</li> <li>2. Explain the Prop's team case</li> <li>3. Summarise how each speaker will add to the team case</li> <li>4. Start the Prop's case with one or two arguments</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Rebut the definition or Prop's case (only if required)</li> <li>2. Rebut major points raised by 1<sup>st</sup> Prop</li> <li>3. Explain the Opp's team case</li> <li>4. Summarise how each speaker will add to the team case</li> <li>5. Start the Opp's case with one or two arguments</li> </ol>
<b>2nd Speaker</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Defend 1<sup>st</sup> Prop's case</li> <li>2. Rebut 1<sup>st</sup> Opp's case</li> <li>3. Further the Prop's case with one or two new arguments</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Defend 1<sup>st</sup> Opp's case</li> <li>2. Rebut 2<sup>nd</sup> Prop's new arguments</li> <li>3. Further the Opp's case with one or two new arguments</li> </ol>
<b>3rd Speaker</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Rebut everything the Opp speakers have said</li> <li>2. Defend Prop's case</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Rebut everything the Prop speakers have said</li> <li>2. Defend Opp's case</li> </ol> <p><i>[Note: As the last speaker before the reply speakers, any new arguments made by this speaker will be partially discounted. This is because the Proposition will not have a chance to respond.]</i></p>

<b>Reply Speaker</b>	<p>1. Summarise the key reasons why the Proposition should win.</p> <p><i>[Note: No new information/arguments can be presented in Reply]</i></p>	<p>1. Summarise the key reasons why the Opposition should win.</p> <p><i>[Note: No new information/arguments can be presented in Reply]</i></p>
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## Score system

Individual speakers will be scored upon 25 and the reply speech will be scored upon 15. The team score will be out of 90 points (25 + 25 + 25 + 15 points per speaker).

Points will be awarded based on the following guide:

### **STYLE**

- Level of fluency and delivery
- Clarity in speech and appropriate volume
- Level of engagement with the audience via markers such as eye contact and the speaker's dependency on notes

### **CONTENT**

- Level of analysis and understanding
- Structure in arguments made
- Examples given to support argument
- Quality of rebuttals made

### **STRATEGY**

- Consistency in clashing with opponents' arguments
- Fulfilment of speaker roles
- Whether arguments supported team members' arguments
- Timing

## **THE MARKING STANDARD**

### **Substantive Speeches:**

Standard	Overall (/25)	Style (/10)	Content (/10)	Strategy (/5)
Excellent	20	8	8	4
Very Good	17	7	7	3
Average	14	6	6	2
Below Average	11.5	5	5	1.5
Weak	9	4	4	1

### Reply Speeches:

Standard	Overall (/15)	Style (/6)	Content (/6)	Strategy (/3)
Very Good	10	4	4	2
Average	7.5	3	3	1.5
Below Average	5	2	2	1

Adjudicators cannot award a debate win on superior style alone *if the fundamental premise of a debate (clash and engagement) is not fulfilled.*

If adjudicators give verdicts solely based on style, then Wits & Words cannot be considered a debate competition; it will instead be a public speaking and oratorical competition.

### **The Verdict**

At the end of the debate, a best speaker and a winning team will be decided, based on the scores of individual speakers and teams.

***The verdict of the adjudicator is final.*** All other queries, disputes or questions should be directed to the Chief Adjudicator or Tournament Convenor immediately after the round. Please be timely with these queries since it will be hard for the Chief Adjudicator or Tournament Convenor to address such queries if they are only raised after the tournament has ended for the day.

Teams and coaches are strongly encouraged to approach the adjudicators after the debate has concluded and ask them for feedback and advice to improve.

### **Decorum**

Speakers who make racist/sexist/generally offensive comments will have a penalty applied to their scores. In extreme cases, a walkover win for the opposing team will be declared. Speakers are also expected to show respect by being quiet when their opponents are speaking.

To ensure a level playing field, debaters are not allowed to communicate with members of the audience at any point during the debate. Teachers and coaches cannot communicate (verbally or non-verbally, e.g. via hand gestures, mouthing, written notes etc.) with speakers or reserve speakers. **This communication includes gestures to indicate to the speaker that they should speed up/slow down/conclude their point.** The only hand gestures/signals permitted are time signals to aid the current speaker on the debate floor with keeping time. **This can only be done by the reserve speaker(s).**

Reserve speakers may use timing devices such as a stopwatch, mobile phone, or iPad. However, timing on the devices may not be shown directly to the speaker on the floor. Reserve speakers must communicate time signals only via hand gestures/signals to the speaker on the floor. If there are no reserve speakers present, an exception can be made for a student volunteer from the team's school to perform the role of giving time signals. Seek permission from the organiser **PRIOR** to the start of the debate for such substitutions.

Similarly, reserve speakers are meant to support the main speakers by timing their speeches and sharing points or notes that they have personally taken throughout the debate. This exchange of points and notes by the reserve speakers **can only occur during the 2-minute conference segment**, which takes place after the 6 main substantive speeches and before the reply speeches. Reserve speakers are not allowed to communicate (verbally or non-verbally, e.g. via hand gestures, mouthing, written notes etc.) with the main speakers at any other time.

Failure to comply with the rules stated above will lead to an investigation by the Tournament Convener and might result in any of the following for the offending team: (i) a formal warning; (ii) point deduction; or (iii) a walkover for the opposing team for the specific round.

*[Note: You may also wish to read the FAQ on Debating in Annex A, which further expounds on the issues above.]*

### **Speaker Awards**

In order to encourage debaters who have performed well at Wits & Words, the top speakers of the tournament will be recognised with Speaker Awards. To qualify, debaters will **need to speak for at least 2 out of 3 of the preliminary rounds**. This allows teams to exercise some flexibility in choosing which debaters to field as speakers and encourages more debaters to try their hand at speaking in a round.

Note that speaker awards are awarded based on the speakers' performance in the preliminary rounds only.

The organisers will award certificates of participation for all participants officially registered for the competition. Participants who participate in the 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> Placing Round as well as the Finals will also receive the corresponding certificates of recognition. The Best Speaker of the Grand Finals will also receive a certificate.

**No other certificates will be awarded for participants or best speakers of other Break Rounds.**

## Annex A: FAQs on Debating

### 1. What is the role of the reserve speaker? Must the same 3 speakers be fielded for all of the debates?

The role of reserve speakers in a debate is to support the main speakers by timing their speeches and sharing with them points or notes that they have personally taken throughout the debate. However, this exchange of points/notes may only occur during the 2-minute conference segment of the debate, which takes place after the 6 main substantive speeches and before the reply speeches. The reserve speakers also generally contribute in the preparation of the team before each debate by helping to research, write speeches, and spar with the main speakers.

Teams are free to rotate between different members to speak or sit out for each round. However, note that **only debaters who have spoken in at least 2 out of 3 preliminary rounds will be considered for Speaker Awards** for the tournament.

### 2. Why can't a debate be won on the basis of style alone, especially if my team was clearly superior stylistically?

One of the aims of Wits & Words is to improve the stylistic speaking competency of Singaporean youth and provide a platform for them to learn and grow through debate. That said, Wits & Words is still a debate competition. Thus the other two criteria for evaluation — content and strategy — are also relevant.

Here are examples of a few circumstances where no matter how compelling the standard of style displayed by a team, a win cannot be awarded to the team:

- (i) The case presented by the team is disjointed.
- (ii) The team case or argument does not respond to the motion.
- (iii) The team does not fulfil their onus as the Proposition or Opposition.
- (iv) The team does not respond to arguments fielded by the opposing side (**Arguments are taken as valid until proven otherwise**, i.e., *even a weak argument that is argued is considered valid until the opposing side attempts to rebut it.*)

For the circumstances listed above, it is very difficult to award a team a win on the basis of style alone if the team's content and strategy do not measure up. Adjudicators cannot give debates on superior style alone if the fundamental premise of a debate (*clash and engagement*) is not fulfilled. If adjudicators were to give verdicts solely based on style, then Wits & Words would not be considered a debate competition; instead it would be a public speaking and oratorical competition.

### 3. Can a team win ONLY based on a very strong 3rd speaker who suddenly comes up with all the right rebuttals and issues?

Generally, no. This will often cause the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> speakers of the same team to be penalised for poor team strategy, as the most likely circumstance for such a situation to arise would be when the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> speakers did not make any substantive arguments, such that they are all left to the 3<sup>rd</sup> speaker.

**4. What's the appropriate burden of the Opposition? Do they need to have a counter-proposal/counter-policy?**

Not necessarily. In most cases, the burden of the Opposition is merely to *cast sufficient doubt on the Proposition's case*. They need not necessarily propose an alternative of their own.

**5. My team gave more POIs than the other team, who gave little or no POIs throughout the entire debate. Yet the other team won. Why?**

POIs are strongly encouraged as they are a means of showing engagement by your side. That said, speakers are not penalised if they do not offer any POIs. Debates cannot be won on POIs alone and it is at the discretion of the adjudicator to decide if POIs are a decisive factor in determining the outcome of the debate.

A decision on the verdict encompasses elements from the entire debate — the team content, their engagement, how the arguments panned out, how the team worked together and the consistency and solidity of arguments.

**6. What if the other team offers a poor/bad definition and my team can't further the debate?**

Teams are urged to offer fair, accessible definitions to the motion that provide sufficient ground for both teams to engage in debate. Otherwise, the team that does not do so will be guilty of 'squirrelling' (or making mockery of) the motion and this would in turn affect the quality of the debate on the whole.

A simple way to ensure that your definitions are fair would be to ask yourself how a random person on the street would interpret what you are trying to define.

In the few instances where the Opposition team feels a definition cannot be debated, they can propose a new definition. This must be done by the 1<sup>st</sup> speaker (i.e. at the start of the debate), and accompanied with the

- (i) reasons why the Proposition's definition cannot be debated;
- (ii) reasons why Opposition's proposed definition is better;
- (iii) arguments they would make if they accepted the Proposition's definition;
- (iv) arguments they would make under their proposed definition.

This is called a definitional challenge. Mounting such a challenge is generally not advised as it is a difficult undertaking which requires high debate skills to successfully pull it off.

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## Annex B: FAQs on Division System

### **1. Why do we need a Division System?**

Wits & Words serves as an educational platform for students to gain exposure and confidence in critical thinking and oratorical skills.

The divisional system was implemented in order to help manage the growing number of schools that were keen to participate in Wits & Words. Over the years, we have grown from strength to strength and currently work with around 80 schools every year.

Typically, schools that have a history of participation and familiarity with debate or have done particularly well in recent history, will be moved to/remain in the higher division so as to allow newer schools to join us in Division 2 which is ever-growing.

This mirrors the practice in the secondary school debate circuit, which has three divisions. It also stems from the belief that each debate should be a valuable learning opportunity for each student. If a highly experienced team is paired against a new inexperienced team, there tends to be little learning value generated for both sides.

By dividing schools into 2 divisions, each school can look forward to facing teams who are roughly around their skill level. This ensures a more even playing field for all schools and ensures that each debate is meaningful.

Beyond this, more students will have an opportunity to have their talents recognised – there will be a Quarter-Finals, Semi-Finals and Finals for each division.

### **2. How will schools be allocated their divisions?**

The division system was first implemented in 2015. At that point, schools were classified into divisions based on their historical performance, with an emphasis on their most recent performance (i.e. Wits & Words 2014). Factors which were taken into consideration include:

- (i) Advancement to the Quarter-Finals, Semi-Finals or Grand Final;
- (ii) Number of wins;
- (iii) Speaker scores; and
- (iv) Other relevant factors such as their length of participation in W&Ws.

Since then, schools new to Wits & Words have been allocated to Division II.

### **3. Is there any difference between Division I and Division II?**

The only difference between both divisions will be that of the schools registered in each division.

Teams will be subjected to the same rules, same motions and same judging standards. Students in either division will not be treated any differently.

### **4. Can my school voluntarily move to Division I even though we have not won/consistently made it to the Semi-Finals / Finals of Division II?**

Schools which request to move from Division II to Division I will be allowed to do so, so long as they have shown that they have given it serious consideration.

**5. Can I request for my school to be placed in Division I instead of Division II? Likewise, can I request for my school to be placed in Division II instead of Division I?**

Schools may appeal to have their allocated division status reviewed. MOE and Debate Association (Singapore) will evaluate all appeals based on the following principles:

- (i) An even playing field should be preserved within each Division;
- (ii) Historical performance is the fairest indicator of a school's ability in debate.

We will consider other factors which may be relevant on a case-by-case basis.

**6. Why do teams which consistently advance to the Semi-Finals or Finals of Division II have to move to Division I? Does the system 'penalise' winners?**

It is important for teams which do exceptionally well at Division II to move to Division I as they have proven their ability to debate at a fairly high level.

Moving to Division I will ensure that their students will continue to be sufficiently challenged — this is key to their development as debaters. In addition, this will ensure new schools which enter Division II have an even playing field.

Nonetheless, schools may appeal against the move to Division I, and all appeals will be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

**7. Can my school move from Division I to Division II?**

Schools will not be allowed to voluntarily move from Division I to Division II, unless they consistently ranked near the bottom of Division I. This is to ensure a level playing field for both divisions. Again, they may appeal to do so, and the appeal will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

**8. Although my school is in Division I, my team and the teacher-in-charge of debate are entirely new. Can my school move to Division II?**

Schools may request to change divisions should they feel they have justifiable extenuating circumstances which warrant consideration. All requests will be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

**9. What if my school is new or had taken a short hiatus from Wits & Words?**

Such schools will start in Division II. They can move to Division I in time to come if they win or consistently advance to the Semi-Finals/Finals of Division II.

This notwithstanding, the Ministry of Education and the Debate Association (Singapore) reserve the right to allocate schools which have taken a break from Wits & Words to Division I. For example, this could be the decision if a winning school of Division I takes a break from Wits & Words for one year.

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