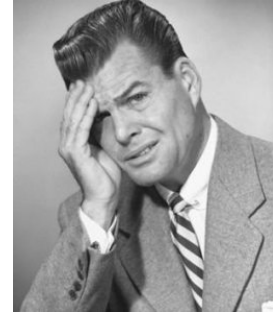


## So You Want to Judge Public Forum

Actually, probably the last thing in the world you want to do is judge Public Forum, but one way or the other your kid has talked you into it, and now here you are, facing what seems to be the biggest single challenge of parenthood since toilet training. Then again, given that your kid is in high school, you may not have noticed the high cost of a college education yet. Compared to that, this is a breeze.



### What Is Public Forum Debate?

Public Forum Debate was created as an event where students would present arguments to general-public, non-debate adjudicators: in other words, you. The point was to keep it simple. The other forms of debate at the time were getting progressively more complicated, becoming closed systems of speed and often arcane argumentation. The intention with Public Forum was to create an activity that would be more open and accessible to a wider group of students. The resounding popularity of PF since its inception has proven this to be the case. The use of lay judges, i.e., parents, combined with the short life span of the topics, virtually guarantees that the event remains what it was intended to be. It is a great educational opportunity for students of all abilities and levels of dedication. It's even spread into Middle Schools.



The topics in PF usually concern current events, and what we should do to solve a specific problem. **The most important thing to remember when listening to a debate is that you must not bring your own opinions on a topic into the round.** Often you won't have an opinion, but there are times when you might feel strongly that one side or another of a resolution is correct before the students even open their mouths. You need to put that aside. The debaters' job is not to change your mind, which would be an unfair burden for the team on the "wrong" side. Their job is simply to convince you for the next half hour or so that they are right and that their opponents are wrong. Your job is to judge the debate in front of you as if it were the first time you had ever heard of the subject. Tabula rasa is the name of the game.

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## What Goes on at a Tournament?

Tournaments range from small one-day affairs at a local high school to ginormous three-day events sprawling over an entire university campus. Some things are fairly constant, though. Your team arrives and registers, which means alerting the hosts that you're there and paying any fees. After that, you wait around.



And wait.

And wait.

We strongly recommend that you bring a book to read. *War and Peace* should get you through at least the first couple of rounds. After that, *Infinite Jest* ought to take you through the elims.

As a general rule there will be a judges' lounge off somewhere to the side where you're segregated from the students—good for them, better for you—where you can get coffee and snacks and maybe even meals, peace and quiet, and a comfy chair. But don't go counting on the comfy chair. There's usually a college student sleeping in it for three days straight. Still, any judges' lounge is better than no judges' lounge, and you should avail yourself of it. It can become problematic if you locate yourself somewhere other than the lounge, and people need to find you,



**Curiously, this judge has been at every tournament, and in every judges' lounge, since 1983.**

## How Does It Work?

Rounds will be announced, usually electronically. In other words, you'll get a text. It is, after all, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Therefore, it behooves you at the very least to have a smartphone; better still, have a smartphone and either a tablet or a laptop. We repeat: it is, after all, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

When rounds are announced and you have an assignment, you go where you're supposed to go. Most rounds comprise two flights; that is, most rounds are actually two rounds back-to-back, and you will usually judge both of them.

Normally you judge the first flight, watch those kids leave and get replaced by the second flight, and then you judge that one. **This is important: Enter your ballot for the first flight before starting the second flight.**

Otherwise, you will confuse who's who and what's what so badly that you won't know if the sun rises in the east and if spaghetti really doesn't grow on trees. The kids in the second flight can wait until you're finished. (With e-ballots, all you have to do is enter the decision. You have until the end of the day to enter any comments.)



Judging obligations vary from tournament to tournament, but the longstanding tradition is that judges are obligated one round past their school's participation in



the tournament. That is, tournaments need judges to stay one round past the point their students are eliminated, otherwise there won't be any judges left in the elimination rounds. This may not be the case at the tournament you're attending, but make sure you know what your obligation is and that you fulfill it. Schools whose judges don't show up for rounds can suffer penalties including fines and, in the worst-case scenario, inability to sign up for future tournaments.

## The Round Itself

Some tournaments decree that PF teams flip a coin at the beginning of the round. Lately this is not so much the case. If there is a flip, the winners of the flip get to decide either which side they wish to be on, or whether they wish to go first or second. The losers of the flip get to decide whichever the winners of the flip didn't decide. This will take a couple of minutes to sort out before anything gets started.

It is strongly recommended that once the flip is done and sides are chosen—or if there is no flip, pretty much as soon as everyone is in the room—that you take careful note of who is who and on which side. Find out this information from the students and write down all their names in your notes in such a way that you’ll remember which speaker is which, from which school. You might write down: “Bill = red tie, Fred = eyeglasses, from Benjamin Harrison High School, Becky = good hair”—anything so that you’ll know, as they are speaking, who’s who, since you will need to evaluate them separately, including assigning individual points to each speaker. It is easy to get the who’s who in PF wrong; even seasoned coaches can screw this up. You can’t be too careful.

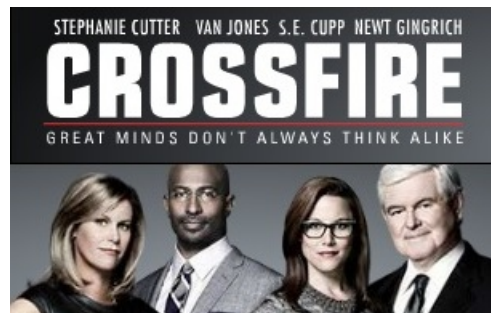


You should take notes throughout the round, as thoroughly as you can. This is called flowing, and if you can do it on your computer or tablet, go for it. Using paper to take notes is perfectly acceptable if you prefer it (even if the tournament is using e-ballots). In either case, it is recommended that you use two different colors, black for pro and red for con (or whatever), so that when you’re evaluating your notes, you’ll know which side said what.



Most PF rounds concentrate on a couple of main lines of argumentation. Teams might start with a whole slew of contentions in their cases, but what matters is how they argue things throughout the round. By the end, they may have whittled things down to just one or two big areas. You’re going to vote on their debating, and what they said when they clashed, and how the arguments they made developed throughout the round. If something was simply said at the beginning in a case and never mentioned again, it really doesn’t matter anymore. What matters is what stayed alive for the whole debate.

Originally the paradigm for making a decision in a round was the idea of evaluating newscasters. The activity was called “Controversy,” and you were expected to evaluate it on the level of which arguing newscaster made the most believable, persuasive arguments. (At one point it was even called Ted Turner Debate, as a result of Turner’s sponsorship, hence the Crossfire/newscaster connection.) There is use of evidence to support arguments, but there is only so much evidence one can



present in the short speech times, not to mention that the topic changing regularly prevents teams from amassing overwhelming amounts of evidence (as they might with the year-long topic in the Policy debate event). When it comes to making your decision, the real question is, who convinced you that they were right? That is the side you vote for.

After the round ends, you write up a ballot. You can offer advice to either side, or various notes that you think might be helpful to them, but the most important thing you will put into your ballot is your Reason For Decision, or RFD. Why did you vote for this side and not that side? Answer that question. That is what the teams and their coaches are really looking for.

You also need to assign points, usually to each individual debater (which is why it was important to sort out who was who). There is usually a scale and a range on the ballot. Follow that. (If there isn't a scale/range—30 is likely to win the tournament, 29 should get a trophy definitely, 28 probably will get a trophy, 27 you doubt it they'll get a trophy, 26 needs work, 25 or less is rude or unacceptable behavior, which you'll clearly explain on your ballot. More often than not, you can modify your number assignments with half points.) The assigning of points is terribly arbitrary, but thinking of it in terms of your prediction of where the teams will be at the end of the tournament at least ties it to something.



By the way, the less you say to the debaters before and after the round, the better. And, of course, you say nothing during the round. It's up to the debaters to do the talking. You should announce your decision in the round after you have written up or submitted your ballot (it's going to be posted online anyhow in a few minutes), and you are strongly urged to discourage any further discussion about the round from the debaters. Sometimes students will want to change your mind about something you've already decided. Don't let that get started. Also, in general, it is a good idea not to express too many opinions aside from your evaluation of the round that you just saw. If you comment, say, that you think "it's hard for the pro to win on this topic," the pro team will go straight to their coach and claim you have a con bias. Things like that happen, and you don't want to get caught in them.



**A zen-like approach to judging is the best policy.**

## Evidence Violations

In the normal flow of a good round, teams will throw evidence at one another, and some evidence will be better than the opposing evidence (as in more convincing, more detailed, more...anything) and that evidence will win the point.

But what if the evidence is somehow tainted? According to the NSDA rules, teams have an obligation to be ethical. But that doesn't always happen. And sometimes even ethical students inadvertently do something questionable. Actual evidence violations do not happen often, but they happen often enough that you should be prepared for them.



First of all, if there is a question about evidence, this NDSA rule applies:

*In all debate events, ... any material ... that is presented during the round must be made available to the opponent and/or judge during the round if requested. When requested, the original source or copy of the relevant ... pages of evidence ... must be available ...*

In other words, if there's a question, you get to see the evidence. And not just the printout of the team's case where they've typed it themselves, but the evidence in its original source, with full citation.

So what exactly are the evidence violations?

- Distortion: Altering the evidence in some way, like adding or deleting the word "not" to change the point of it
- Non-existence: Making it up, perhaps, or not being able to supply it as noted above
- Clipping: Essentially, saying you read evidence that you didn't read
- Straw arguments: Sometimes an author posits a hypothetical position in order to refute it. A violation would occur if a team claims that the hypothetical position is, in fact, supported by the original author.

The thing is, it's up to the teams to point out a violation in the round. And when they do, they must go all in on that call. The round stops, and nothing else



matters except whether or not a violation (distortion, non-existence, clipping, straw argument) has occurred. It is the judge's job to make that determination, after careful study of the situation. You need to look at the evidence and decide if a violation has occurred. It is entirely up to you. If you think it is a violation, the team who made the violation loses the round. If not, the team who made the indictment loses the round. Either

way, you should note this on your ballot, and more importantly, report it in person to the tab room. It's a big deal.

The tab room cannot on its own overturn or in any way dispute the judge's decision except in certain extremely rare circumstances. The tab room can hear appeals if the judge misinterpret, misapplies, or ignores the rule, or in any situation involving distortion or non-existent evidence.

### One More Thing, Or, What's your ~~sign~~-paradigm?

Not only are you being dragged to this tournament kicking and screaming every inch of the way, but they are asking for—nay, *demanding*—you post your paradigm?

What fresh hell is this?

One of the most important thing a debater (or any public speaker) can learn is to adjust to the audience. In debate, we call that judge adaptation. Knowing something



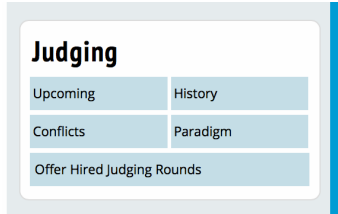
**No two audiences are alike. Sometimes even one audience isn't alike.**

about their judge theoretically allows teams to adjust accordingly. Increasingly at tournaments, there will be an expectation that judges will have posted a paradigm on [tabroom.com](http://tabroom.com). But if you're just starting out, or only judge occasionally, you probably don't have any hard and fast rules and ideas that you want to communicate to the teams.

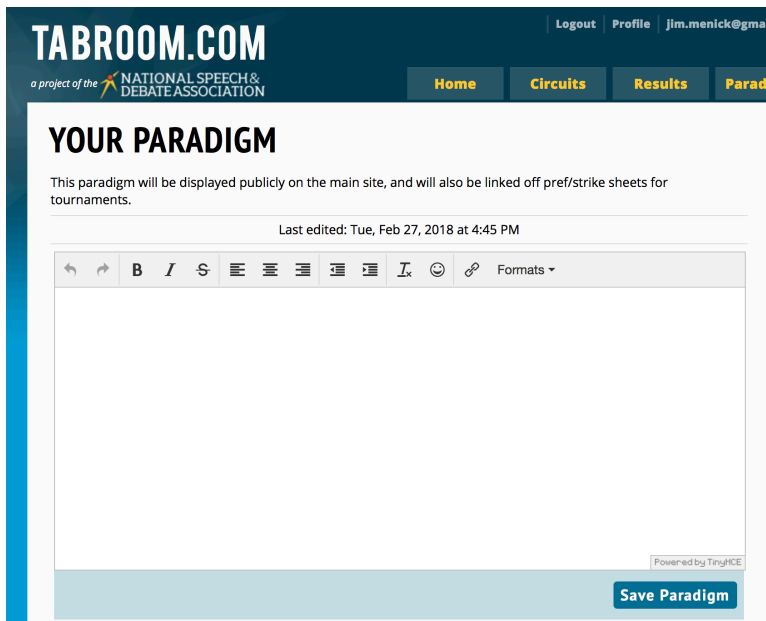
Nevertheless, you *are* a certain kind of judge, and this indeed can be communicated.

## How to Create a Paradigm

Once you've created a tabroom.com account, clicking on your email address at the top will bring up a screen with this on the lower right:



Clicking on **Paradigm** will bring up this page:



Fill it out and save it, and there you are.