



points of information

All debaters have surely sat listening to their opponents and thought, “That is *so* wrong!” – impatient at waiting until their speech, and frustrated by not being able to intervene immediately. Points of information go some way towards easing that frustration, by allowing a speaker’s opponents a limited right of interjection.

If done well, points of information can greatly improve the standard and spectacle of debate – they make a debate more dynamic and exciting to watch, they reward debaters who can think on their feet, and they generally make speakers more accountable. Many debaters fear doing points of information for the first time, but this is misplaced – the vast majority of debaters learn to master points of information quickly, by following a few simple techniques.

What are points of information?

Points of information are interjections by a speaker’s opponents. They are allowed in the ‘middle part’ of speeches. For example, in an eight-minute speech with points of information, a bell is rung at one minute and at seven minutes – between these bells, points of information may be offered. (Of course, there would also be a double bell at eight minutes, to signal the end of the allocated speaking time.)

Debaters offer points of information by standing in their place and saying, “Point of information”. The speaker may then either accept or decline the point. If the speaker accepts, the offeror asks a question or makes a statement relating to the speaker’s argument; if the speaker declines, the offeror simply sits down.

Offering points of information

How many points should you offer?

As a general rule, *each* speaker of a team should offer two, three or four points of information to *each* speaker of the opposition. You should keep a tally of the number of points that you have offered during each speech in order to keep track of this.

The minimum requirement (two points) is a strict one – if you offer one point, or don't offer any points, an adjudicator will be entitled to deduct marks. You *must* offer at least two points of information, therefore. This is one reason that many debaters time every speech in the debate – by timing their opponents' speeches, they know how much time remains to offer points of information. Many debaters who do not offer at least two points of information see this as a sign of “not having anything to say”. Usually, this is far from the truth – every debater has something to say! Instead, it is usually the result of not having the confidence to stand up and have a say. This can be overcome with a little experience and a determination to show the flaws in your opponents' arguments.

The maximum requirement (four points) is not strict. You may offer more than four points without necessarily having marks deducted. In this case, the overall context is the key. Specifically, it is important not to use points of information to ‘badger’ your opponents. For example, if your team-mates have offered two points of information each, there would hardly be a problem with you offering six points. However, if everybody on your team offers six points, this may be viewed as badgering.

This does not necessarily mean that there is a *team maximum* for the number of points to be offered – whether or not you are ‘badgering’ depends on the context of the debate. If you offer many points politely to a confident speaker, you are less likely to be penalised for ‘badgering’. If your team offers the same number of points in a loud and aggressive manner to a timid and struggling speaker, you are more likely to be penalised. This does not mean that you should ‘go easy’ on weak speakers: each member of your team is still rightly entitled to offer four points of information. However, it does mean that context is important in determining if you should offer any more than four.

When should you offer points of information?

The general answer to this question is simple: when you have something to say! Even by standing and offering a point, you are showing disagreement with what the speaker is saying. This is important: there are few things more complimentary to a speaker than for his or her opposition to sit mute for a significant period of time. It is vital, therefore, to offer points throughout your opponents' rebuttal and substantive arguments.

That said, you should *never* give points with the intention of being rejected. Some debaters do this by offering points at times when they are unlikely to be accepted (for example, just after the one minute bell, or just before the seven minute bell), or by offering in a particularly confident and aggressive manner. It may be true that these techniques *reduce* your chance of being accepted, but they don't *eliminate* it. Therefore, offering points throughout your opponents' rebuttal and substantive

arguments means thinking hard to find flaws in your opponents' rebuttal and substantive arguments, then offering points of information with those flaws in mind.

There are a few times when you definitely should *not* offer points. You should not offer points during a speaker's set-up (for example, when a first affirmative is presenting the definition, theme and split, or when any speaker is presenting his or her outline). This is because it is generally difficult to disagree with a set-up on its own, and if you *do* disagree (for example, because the opposition's definition is unreasonable), your concern will usually be too detailed and important to be reduced to a single point. You should not offer a point if you or a team-mate has just had a point rejected – it is unlikely that the speaker will accept your point, and this is the easiest way to give the impression of badgering.

How should you offer points of information?

The simplest way of offering points is the best – stand in your place and politely say, “point of information”. There is no need to be aggressive – you are unlikely to have your point accepted, or achieve anything, by rising in a flurry of noise while throwing your pen onto the desk! Similarly, some debaters (particularly at intervarsity level) offer points by placing one hand on their head and outstretching the other towards the speaker. There is no need to do this – for the uninitiated audience member, this is likely to cause confusion, distraction and, occasionally, no end of mirth!

Some debaters offer points by saying something other than “point of information”. For example, some speakers say, “point of contradiction”, “point of misrepresentation” or “point of factual inaccuracy”. This approach is unsporting and wrong – by saying this, you have effectively *had* your point of information. It is the speaker's right to accept or decline a point, not the offeror's right to impose an idea on the debate. What's more, it will hardly endear you to your audience and adjudicator, who will likely see you as short-cutting the rules of debate for an easy advantage.

Occasionally, more than one member of your team may offer a point simultaneously. In that situation, it is best to quickly and quietly decide who should offer the point and leave only that person standing. For example, one speaker may not have offered enough points, or may have a particularly strong point. This avoids the confusion of the speaker saying, “Yes?”, and your team fumbling around as it decides who will speak!

How should you deliver a point when you are accepted?

There are a number of important techniques for delivering a point of information.

- Despite their name, there is no requirement for ‘points of information’ to be about giving information at all – you can mention facts, statistics, the logic of your opposition’s case, or anything else that is relevant.
- The point should be relevant to what the speaker is saying at the time that the point is offered, or just prior to that. Some debaters and coaches consider it good technique to ask a point relating to something much earlier in the speaker’s speech, with the aim of confusing the speaker’s timing and method. However, this approach risks confusing the debate unnecessarily and harming your credibility – it can give the impression that you haven’t been following!
- Where possible, phrase your point as a question. This demands a response from the speaker and it can help to clarify your point. For example, suppose that a speaker is discussing the great benefits that the Internet can bring to the developing world.
One point of information might be, “Approximately 80% of the world’s population has never used a telephone.”
However, a more effective point would be, “You say that the Internet is bringing significant benefits to the people of the developing world. How is this consistent with the fact that approximately 80% of the world’s population has never used a telephone?”
- Try not to ask ‘Dorothy Dixier’ questions – questions that allow the speaker to expound the virtues of your opposition’s case. This usually occurs if your point is too general. For example, asking, “How can you prove that assertion?” simply invites your opponent to explain exactly how he or she plans to prove that assertion!
- Keep your points as short as possible. A point of information can be as long as fifteen seconds before the chairperson or adjudicator will call the offeror to order. However, it is far more effective to offer a simple and concise five-second point than an intricate and rambling fifteen-second one. If your point is particularly intricate or subtle, it may be best saved for rebuttal.
- Delivering a point of information is *not* the start of a conversation. You should deliver your point and sit down – don’t remain standing while the speaker answers, and don’t engage in any further exchange with the speaker.
- Your point should attack your opposition’s case, not defend your own case. In some circumstances (for example, extreme misrepresentation), you may find it

necessary to defend your case by emphatically clarifying your argument. However, this is a rare situation – on the whole, points are better used to attack.

- Don't offer points of clarification. This is a wasted opportunity to attack, and any clarification provided will only really help your opposition.
- Many debaters find it helpful to run over the opening words of their point during the time between offering the point and being accepted. This can help to deliver the point in a concise and hard-hitting way.
- Some ideas are too controversial and complex to be raised effectively in a point of information. We have already considered the strategic advantage (in some circumstances) of arguing controversial cases. We also noted that such cases need a clear and careful explanation. Clearly, points of information – which must be short, and which give an immediate right of reply – are a very weak way of raising such an idea.
- Be willing to refer back to a point of information later. For example, in your rebuttal, you may find it effective to say something like, “Now, I asked the first speaker about this on a point of information, and she said [X]. However, even this doesn't really explain things...”.
- Use points of information to identify problems with your opposition's *case*, not reasons that your opposition might *lose*. For example, if your opposition has forgotten to rebut the main argument of your case, leave it that way – you can always remind the audience and adjudicator of this fact in a reply speech or at third negative (if you are negative, of course). For example, it would be a massive strategic mistake to offer a point of information saying, “You haven't rebutted our major argument, which is [X]”. This simply ‘gives the game away’ – a wise opposition speaker will address the issue immediately, so that it is no longer a problem for your opposition!

Responding to points of information

How many points of information should you accept?

Two. It's that simple! Adjudicators will expect you to accept *at least* two points, and will be entitled to deduct marks if you don't. However, strategically, there is no reason to take any more than two points – this is simply giving your opposition additional opportunity to speak!

When should you accept points of information?

The most important principle in accepting and dealing with points of information is that you, the speaker, are in control. Your opposition is trying to interject in *your* speech, so they will do it on *your* terms. Merely because your opposition is aggressive or frustrated does not mean that you have any greater responsibility to accept a point of information – you should accept a point of information if and when it suits you.

As a general rule, you should aim to accept points of information when you are established and clear in what you are saying. For example, the ‘middle’ or ‘end’ of an argument is often an excellent time to accept a point, because you have explained what the argument is about. The ‘set-up’ of an argument, or of your speech as a whole, is generally a very poor time to accept a point of information – you should clarify the foundations of your case or argument before allowing your opposition to confuse matters. Similarly, you should not accept points of information during rebuttal. Rebuttal should be about attacking your opposition’s case – accepting points of information can make your rebuttal seem confusing and defensive. Finally, on the small chance that you might be making a weak argument – don’t accept a point! Hopefully, you should never find yourself in this position, but if you do, you will only compound your problems by giving your opposition a say.

How should you decline a point of information?

As with offering points, the simplest approach is the best.

Always be polite in declining a point of information – just say, “No thank you”. There is no need to be abrupt (“No!”) or rude (“No – this is *your* fault!”). It is generally not a good idea to decline a point simply by gesturing at the offeror – this can seem discourteous, and he or she may not understand the gesture anyway!

Do not waste time declining points of information. For example, if you say, “No thank you, please sit down” or “No thank you, you’ve had your turn” every time you decline a point, you will quickly lose momentum and time in delivering your speech. The simplest approach is the best!

How should you accept a point of information and respond?

So you’ve decided to accept the point of information that you’ve just been offered. What should you do next? First, you should finish your sentence! This is unquestionably one of the most underrated debating techniques – it seems trite and simple, but is very important. Debaters who ‘drop everything’ to answer a point give the impression of being flustered and of allowing their opponents to dictate terms. By finishing your sentence, you maintain control of your speech – and give the impression that you are doing so!

You can accept a point simply by turning to the offeror and saying, “Yes?”, or something to this effect. It is generally considered rude and inappropriate to put pressure on the offeror, for example by saying, “And what do you think of [one of the finer points of the example being presented]?”. Similarly, it is not acceptable to ask the offeror what the point is about before deciding to accept or decline.

If more than one member of your opposition has offered a point simultaneously, you should never choose which opponent you will accept. This gives the impression (whether accurate or not) that you are deliberately picking what you think will be the weakest point offered.

It is important to listen carefully to what the offeror has to say. Many debaters view responding to points of information as a kind of ‘time out’ – they take the opportunity to check where they are up to in their palm cards, or to see how much longer they have to spend on a given argument. Other debaters interrupt the point before it is complete, saying something like, “Yes, yes, I understand, but the problem is...”. If this does occur, the offeror is obliged to sit down – after all, the speaker on the floor has the right to control the speech. However, unless the offeror is waffling badly, interrupting seems very weak. Rather than appearing as though you *know* what your opponent is saying, you give the impression that you *don’t want to know*!

Occasionally, you will not have understood the offeror’s point. For example, the offeror may have explained things in a particularly oblique way or, at an international competition, you may have trouble understanding the offeror’s accent. In that case, it is entirely acceptable to politely ask the offeror to repeat the point. Alternatively, if repeating the point is unlikely to help, you may respond with something like, “I understand you to be saying [X]. In that case, my response is [Y].”

Usually, however, this will not occur – the offeror will deliver a perfectly good point of information that demands a good response. It is important to answer the point that was delivered. Many debaters respond to points of information by answering a point *similar* to that which was delivered, or simply by restating their initial argument. Although this is better than simply ignoring the point, it is far inferior to listening carefully and actually responding to the point that was delivered. Although it is important to give a *good* answer, this need not be a *long* answer. On the contrary, it is important not to get carried away when answering a point – you should aim to give an effective but concise answer that allows you to return to your prepared material.

When you do return to your prepared material, it is important to finish whatever you were up to. For example, you may have said something like, “This is true for two reasons”, but only presented one reason when you accepted the point. It is important to return to where you were, and to make this clear. For example, you might continue, “I said there were two reasons – the second reason is...”.

Sometimes, your opposition will deliver a point of information that relates to an argument that you have already presented, or an argument that you or a subsequent speaker will present. Rather than waste time arguing the point twice, the strategic approach is to refer to the other argument, then briefly answer the point. For example, you could say, “My second speaker will be dealing with that in depth. Essentially, he will show you that [X]...”. This is much better than simply saying, “Um...my second speaker will deal with that” – this gives the impression that you are ‘running scared’ from answering the point!

Finally, you will occasionally receive points that you simply can’t answer. Usually, this is because the point relates to a very specific example, beyond your general knowledge. For example, an opponent may ask, “How does this relate to the Dabhol Power Corporation and its activities in the Indian state of Maharashtra?”. Obviously, the best response is to explain exactly how your point relates (or doesn’t relate) to that example. However, if you cannot answer the point, the best response is to put the onus back on your opponents, by saying something like, “I don’t see how the Dabhol Power Corporation has any direct relevance. If our opposition would like to explain what elements of that example are so important for us, we will be happy to answer them later.”