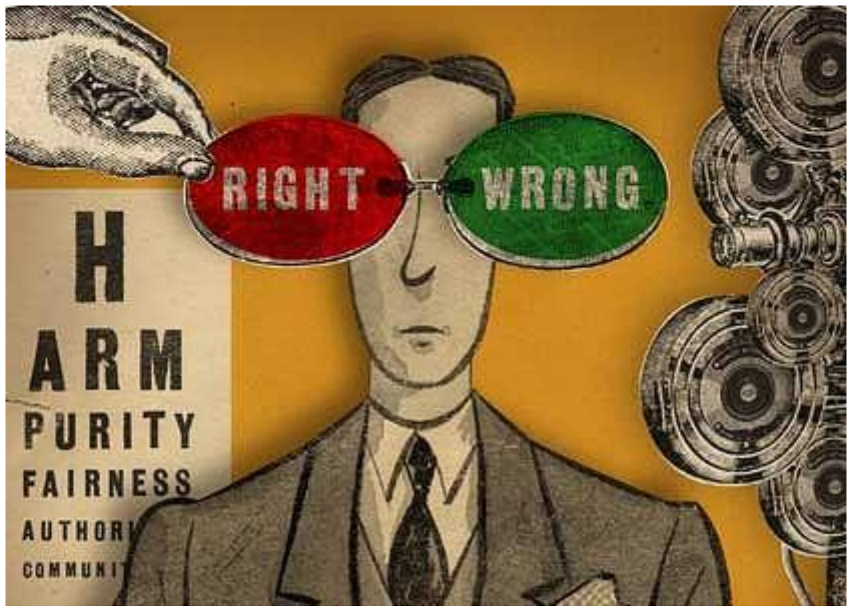
A Guide to Preparing for the National High School Ethics Bowl

By Gabriel Espinosa

WHAT IS ETHICS?

- What kind of life should I lead?
- What kind of person should I be?
- Should I do the right thing?
- What is the right thing?
- Why should I care about my community?
- Should I care about the earth?
- Are there unethical laws?

What is Ethics Bowl?



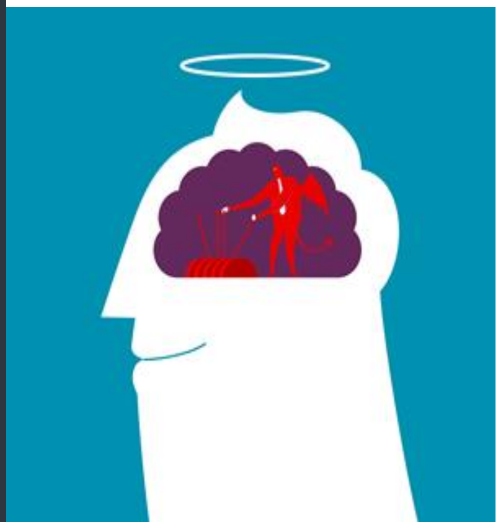
The National High School Ethics Bowl (NHSEB) promotes ethical awareness nationwide by inviting high school students to immerse themselves in ethical issues. The NHSEB gives high school students the opportunity to learn about applied ethics through the analysis, research, and critical discussion of ethical case studies that incorporate real world ethical conflicts from politics, business, international affairs, popular culture, and their personal lives.

It is a competitive event formatted around collaborative moral reasoning and critical thinking rather than "winning" through the use of rhetorically effective argumentation.

The Ethics Bowl sets a unique stage for thinking about ethical concepts, beliefs, and actions by introducing students to tough situations where "hard ethical thinking" can find an obvious practical use for collaborative problem solving. This packet offers some tips and strategies to help teams build ethical awareness while also successfully preparing for the ethics bowl.

Portland State UNIVERSITY

What is Ethics and What Does It Have to Do with Ethics Bowl?



For the purposes of the guide and the task of the Ethics Bowl, "Ethics" can most easily be understood as a branch of philosophical thought that studies what is morally right and wrong, good and bad, praiseworthy and blameworthy, and what people ought and ought not do. Ethics[1] is usually divided into four branches:

- *Normative ethics* attempts to determine moral standards and procedures that allow for the evaluation of ethical beliefs, actions, and positions. Often philosophers do this by constructing and justifying ethical theories. Normative ethical questions include: Do ends justify means? Should we blame or praise the actions or intentions of the individuals? Is one moral theory better than another moral theory? What is the greatest good in life?

- *Applied ethics* analyzes specific moral issues. Applied ethicists may draw on normative ethical theories to support their analysis or may instead rely on analysis, intuitions, and widely accepted ethical norms. Applied ethical questions include: Was it right for the doctor to euthanize the patient? Did the investigation infringe on the rights of the president? Was it permissible for government funding to be provided to the clinics that perform abortions? Because of the medical breakthrough, was vivisection justifiable?

- *Descriptive Ethics* describes existing moral language, concepts, beliefs and practices. It is carried out by social scientists such as anthropologists concerned about the ethical beliefs that people *do* have, not the ethical beliefs *ought* to have. Descriptive ethical questions include: What do people think is moral and immoral? How does moral psychology develop? Are there biological explanations for the development of moral and ethical practices? What do people value?

- *Metaethics* is the inquiry into the nature of ethics and often involves analyzing the meaning of moral language and concepts. Metaethical questions include: Are there objective moral standards? If so, what is their source? Does it make sense to say that ethical claims are true or false? Are people capable of altruism?

[1] Some people find it useful to mark a difference in topic or approach with these words, but in this guide, "ethics" and "morality" are treated as synonyms.

TEAMS

Teams preparing for the Ethics Bowl will mostly be concerned with *Normative Ethics* and *Applied Ethics*[1].

In the Ethics Bowl, teams are expected to construct and present their own well-reasoned ethical positions and to evaluate the reasoning and justifications of certain ethical positions and judgments represented in the cases, as well as evaluate the positions presented by other teams.

Disagreement at the applied and normative ethical level typically results from conflicting beliefs about (i) moral values and principles, (ii) moral obligations and duties, (iii) rights, (iv) morally-relevant consequences of actions, (v) virtues, (vi) conceptions of justice, and (vii) how such beliefs apply to real world situations. Teams will have to learn how to pick out which moral "Goods" are relevant to the conflicts described in the cases and how they apply to conflicting positions.

Preparing for the National High School Ethics Bowl

The Task of the Ethics Bowl

Your task is to analyze, research, and create five minute presentations for the cases by supporting and evaluating positions regarding moral value and principles, obligations and duties, rights, etc. You also need to prepare responses to teams and judges in a manner that respects the other team and promotes a collaborative climate.

What skills are required? Critical thinking, moral reasoning, creative problem-solving, close reading, collaboration and team building, public speaking, active listening, time management.

What is needed to prepare effectively? Interest in ethical issues; willingness to think past first responses and "knee-jerk reactions" regarding ethical issues; willingness to collaborate to accept criticism and objections from others; open-mindedness to different positions, opinions, and points of view; tenacity and patience with complex and difficult subjects; humility; compassion; and empathy. You should also be comfortable with not "winning".

Strategies for Preparing for the Ethics Bowl

Preparing for the Ethics Bowl requires teams to analyze, research, and create presentations on the cases chosen for the event. How can we approach these cases and put together positions?

- **A consistent method**: Systematically go through the cases by applying a consistent method for analysis, research, and constructing presentations. Because of likely time constraints that teams may face when preparing for the Ethics Bowl, having a consistent method can ensure clearly defined expectations, deadlines, and outputs from members of a team.

- **Scheduling dates, agendas, and expectations for team meeting**: Along with a method for analysis, research, and constructing presentations, we recommend filling out a calendar for determining which meeting dates will cover which cases and a tentative schedule for those meetings.

- **Create tangible outputs that are organized and accessible**: It is essential that teams document their progress as they work through the cases. The collection of work can be helpful for teams to remind them of their positions and to have something that can later be built upon when revisiting cases. Teams should gather their work in a binder, online database, or other repository that is easily organized and accessible to each member. We offer worksheets that mirror the steps of our method to help assist this process.

- **Schedule time for group work as well as time for individuals to do outside work**:
    - Alternate "roles and responsibilities" between members of teams so all members can build their skills together and share the burden of the workload;
    - Connect with other teams from the same school or other schools in the district, state, or region;
    - Connect with a college philosophy department to see if graduate or undergraduate students can help assist with coaching;
    - Familiarize team members with introductory ethics literature[1].

[1] Matt Deaton's *Ethics in a Nutshell* is a good starting point. https://nhseb.unc.edu/files/2013/10/Ethics-in-a-Nutshell-an-Intro-for-Ethics-Bowl-Participants.pdf

An Iterative Method for Analyzing Cases and Creating Presentations

Step 1: *Close reading and answering the study questions*

One of the most important skills for the Ethics Bowl is close reading to determine what is at stake, which details are important, what assumptions are implied, and what the description of the case studies omits.

Each case for the Ethics Bowl comes with some study questions. You should use the study questions as a way of guiding your analysis of the case. When approaching cases, it is also important to document your "ethical intuitions" by putting down your initial reactions without worrying too much at this stage about offering support and to analyze the study questions themselves. Both strategies will be useful towards framing the important moral dimensions of the case as your team continues analysis.

- THINGS TO CONSIDER:
  - ***Initial reactions, "ethical intuitions"***: It's important to get your initial response down when dealing with complex ethical situations. We can call these initial reactions your "ethical intuitions," which should be articulated as a first step in analyzing these cases. It's helpful to do so in order to have something personal to organize your thoughts about the case. The case will become more complex the more you inquire into it, and you should be ready to revise your initial reactions.

  - Keeping tabs on intuitions can also help you to identify personal biases and hidden presuppositions or dispositions that might unduly determine your ethical position.

  - ***The role of widely-shared intuitions***. Personal intuitions regarding what is good and bad, right and wrong, etc. may also reflect more commonly shared moral beliefs that span political, cultural, and historical differences. By identifying which intuitions happen to be widely-shared, teams will also be highlighting some of the more salient moral dimensions of the case that will most likely be brought up at the Ethics Bowl and therefore should be considered. Utilizing which intuitions map on to commonly shared moral beliefs, and those that do not, to anchor and morally frame further analysis of the case can help strengthen teams presentations and help teams prepare to respond to other teams and judges' questions.

    Caution! Just because ethical intuitions are widely-shared does not make them morally right! *Appealing to intuitions alone, even when widely-shared, is not sufficient enough evidence to justify moral judgments and positions.*

  - ***Ask your own "what if" questions***. Based on the study questions and your "ethical intuitions," consider what factual changes made to the case study would also change your responses to the question and how so. What if you, or someone you're close to, were directly involved in the case? What if some elements of the case were left out? Asking such hypothetical questions can help highlight important elements of the case and how those elements might trigger certain "ethical intuitions." Try to use "what if" questions to identify which conditions, facts, events, etc. determine whether you believe that something, someone, or some act is right or wrong, good or bad, praiseworthy or blameworthy, ought to be or ought not to be done.

  - ***Why these questions***? After answering the questions and articulating your "ethical intuitions," you should then "question the questions." Think about why those specific study questions are being asked in relation to what you have read from the case study. What do the questions presuppose or assume about the case? Think about how the questions presume certain topics, draw out conflicts, articulate certain positions, and lead you towards certain answers. Are there certain repeated phrases, words, or key terms? Do you agree with the presuppositions, assumptions, and the general direction of the question? Do the questions help reshape your understanding of the case? Are there other questions that you might also ask – or ask instead?

Step 2: *Analyzing Facts, Values, Stakeholders, Conflict, and World Views*

- Gather the relevant **factual information** that helps to describe, explain, and elucidate the context and existing conflicts. This could include historical facts, economic conditions, the different array of people directly or indirectly involved in the conflict, statistical data, scientific explanation, predictions, and causal relationships, etc.

  Statements about facts are either true or false (though there may be disputes about their truth and falsity) and are usually supported by methods used in the sciences and social sciences.

- Gather the relevant information regarding existing moral **values,** principles, obligations, duties, rights, good or bad consequences, and virtues. Statements of value, or “value judgments,” typically assign a positive or negative judgment to actions, policies, and institutions and/or prescribe or express obligations of what *someone ought to do*.

- Pick out the salient **stakeholders** who have **interests** that are affected by the situation and conflicts of the case. Stakeholders typically include individuals or group of people, though they may also include animals or even the natural world.

  You can take the values gathered from their facts/values list and assign them to stakeholders to begin building “stakeholder profiles.” It is important to make stakeholder profiles in order to understand and appreciate all the relevant positions involved.

THINGS TO CONSIDER:

To clarify stakeholder profiles, describe particular aspects of their *world views* (if any) that pertain to the case, clearly define what their *interests and needs* are regarding the case that help explain what they believe to be at stake, identify or infer the *value statements* they make regarding the case, and narrow down the specific things that they value as *“good.”*

A quick tip when filling out stakeholders’ “goods” is to be on the look out for both moral and non-moral goods, e.g., *honesty*, *community*, *fairness*, and *autonomy* are potential examples of moral “goods” that differ from such non-moral “goods” as, money, food, entertainment, and shelter.

A **world view** is comprised of deeply held beliefs, attitudes, or values which come from ones national culture, ethnic culture or religion, gender, race, age, class and economic/socio placement, personal or life experience. Not all cases will involve clearly defined worldviews.

Identify **conflicts**: where do conflicts arise? Are they between individuals or groups? Between conflicting values, interests, worldviews, or goods?

Step 3: *Research and “bridging questions”*

Once you have completed your analysis, you may find that you need to know more information in order to determine your position. At this stage, you should conduct research.

Keep in mind that the amount of information regarding certain cases can seem endless, lead into many disparate directions of inquiry, and potentially throw the researcher off with overwhelming amounts of irrelevant information. *Research must be directed!*

A good way of directing research is to start from well-thought-out and relevant questions relating to your specific task. Building a list of “bridging questions” while working on the prior steps is a helpful strategy for directing research. Make a list of these questions and try to answer them using reliable sources. Some reliable sources include newspapers, encyclopedias, and governmental agencies. If unsure about the reliability of a source, ask your coach.

Step 4: *Begin to prepare your presentation*

After teams have finished researching and filling in the necessary information regarding the case, teams will need to start thinking about preparing their five minute presentations. Presentations should consist of a clearly stated claim, supporting argument(s), and considerations to potential objections other teams and judges may have to your team's presentation. Once again, revisit the study questions and pick which questions you want to build your presentations from is a recommended strategy towards building presentations.

- *Building a presentation based on each study question would be ideal!* By using all questions as anchors for analysis, research, and construction presentations, teams will have a chance to move through the case from multiple directions and orientations and bring out different subtleties and topics of interest that may be found in the case.

- *Realistically*, teams will most likely be under time constraints and might be forced to either focus on specific study questions that arguably get to the most salient points of the case or try to build one cohesive presentation that responds to all study questions as best as possible.

After picking the question(s) you want to base your presentation(s) on, teams should make a list of the viable answers to the chosen question(s). Do this by considering the different answers team members offer. Also, imagine how the different stakeholders would respond to the question(s). What other responses and points of view are missing? Other questions to ask would be how your team might restate the question differently to better get at what is morally at stake or accurately takes into account the facts and values, stakeholders, and the actual and potential conflict of the case?

After pooling together the answers, try to narrow down which answers are worth considering. Try to eliminate the number of answers to a manageable amount. Make sure that they are polished and clearly stated. The left over pool of answers will be considered the different "claims" from which you will construct arguments from and test whether those arguments are well-reasoned.

Step 5: *Constructing arguments and making a claim*

This step focuses on constructing arguments from the pool of selected claims. It is important to construct arguments for claims that you or your team may not intuitively agree with in order (i) to better understand and respect the different stakeholders' interests and positions, (ii) to be prepared to respond to potential considerations and objections that other teams and judges might bring up, and (iii) to use such considerations to strengthen your overall position by presenting those considerations and objections charitably and then responding to them.

***What the purpose of argumentation is*:** The purpose of argumentation is to give a rational justification for believing in the truth of the claim and, one hopes, convince others. The assumption behind the Ethics Bowl is that teams, coaches, and judges are willing to be open-minded and willing to be persuaded by well-constructed arguments and good reasons.

What an argument is: An argument can be understood as group of statements comprised of one or more ***premises*** and a ***conclusion***. Premises are statements that offer reasons and supporting evidence used to prove the truth, or likely truth, of a conclusion. Conclusions are statements arguers seek to prove through the use of supporting premises. Arguments must have at least one or more premises to be an argument and those premises must be logically linked to the conclusion by an ***inference***. Inferences are acts of deriving the truth, or likely truth, of the conclusion from premises that are either true or assumed to be true. Different kinds of inferences can be used to demonstrate how true premises lead to the arguments conclusion.

When analyzing, evaluating, and constructing arguments, be sure to make a claim that states a conclusion and give supporting reasons and evidence by offer premises that infer the truth, or likely truth, of the conclusion.

Tips for picking out arguments:

One trick that can be helpful for identifying premises and conclusions is by looking for indicator words.

> Common premise indicators: “since,” “for,” “for the reason that,” “seeing that,” “in that,” “suggested by,” “inasmuch as,” “in view of the fact that,” “judging from,” “because,” “given that,” “considering that,” “as,” “as indicated by,” “may be inferred from,” “that being the case.”
>
> Common conclusion indicators: “therefore,” “hence,” “so,” “it follows that,” “entails that,” “that is why,” “wherefore,” “as a result,” “this being so,” “thus,” “consequently,” “accordingly,” “for this reason,” “which show that,” “implies that,” “we may infer that,” “this suggests that.”

Not all premises and conclusions will have these sorts of indicators.

Another trick that can be helpful for spotting arguments is to know what arguments are not:

> **Emotionally charged verbal fights!** A common usage of the word “argument” is thought to refer broadly to verbal disputes and emotionally charged attacks between individuals or groups. This usage tends to pick out instances when people stop talking to one another in a calm manner and begin yelling about “who did what,” “who hurt who,” and “who’s to blame for this-and-that.” This is *not* what we mean by “argument.”
>
> **Unsupported assertions (or just opinions).** Asserting that something or other is the case, or is true, without offering any supporting evidence or reason to believe in the truth of the assertion is not an argument.
>
> **Reports.** Sometimes we are interested in how the five Ws describe an event: who’s it about, what happened, when did it take place, where did it take place, and why did it take place? By itself, a report that answers these questions is not an argument because it is not trying to give evidence to establish the truth of a conclusion.

Tips for constructing and evaluating argument:

Argument Checklist

- **Accuracy**: Are the premises true (or likely true)? Are they based on accurate or false information? Can the information be verified or tested?

- **Relevance**: Are premises relevant to the case? Is the conclusion relevant to the case? Are the premises and conclusion relevant to each other?

- **Logical correctness and consistency**: Does the conclusion logically follow from the premises? In other words, if the premises are true, can we infer that the conclusion is also true? Are there *logical inconsistencies* in the argument? For example, does the argument hold something to be both true and false at the same time or does it claim two things that are mutually exclusive?

- **Clarity**: Is there anything in the premises or conclusion that is ambiguous (have more than one meaning) or vague (have no clear meaning)? Could certain terms or premises be clarified further?

- **Precision**: Are the premises and conclusion specific enough to capture what is at stake? Is there anything left out? Are there premises that might be implied or missing that should be explicitly brought out? Can you qualify the argument?

- **Fairness**: Are there any biases/prejudices that influence the information or the inference?

- **Matching complexity and completeness**: Does the complexity of your distinctions, terms and concepts, and premises and conclusions match the complexity of the issue at hand? Have you omitted important details or failed to address the issue completely? Are all the relevant positions and stakeholders being noticed? Are all interests and values included? Are there multiple sides, positions, and potential solutions that are taken into account? Are you unfairly describing the case and the conflicts as being a "yes-or-no" matter, "black and white" picture, or an either/or kind of dilemma?

After constructing and evaluating arguments for the different claims, you must decide what claim your team is willing to make based on the arguments that you find the most reasonable. If there's trouble deciding on which claim and supporting arguments your team is willing to present, you can use the "argument checklist" again to test claims and supporting arguments you and your team are ambivalent about. You can also check which claims and supporting arguments align with your current (and more informed!) ethical intuitions while heavily scrutinizing those that go directly against widely-shared moral beliefs and those that fail to recognize important facts, values, or the interests of most of the stakeholders.

Step 6: *Preparing for responding teams and judges' questions*

After your team has decided on a claim and supporting argument(s), you need to step back and look at it critically. Ask yourself these questions:

- In what ways might other teams object to our position?
- Are there any flaws or weaknesses in our analysis?
- What questions would we ask if someone else presented this position?
- What are we leaving out of our analysis?
- Are there any places where further research would be helpful?

After you have completed this process, you will want to go back to your presentation and anticipate possible questions and objections. Even if you are not providing an answer to these questions and objections, you should show that you are aware of them so that you are prepared to discuss them further in the question period.

Step 7: Get together with other teams and coaches and practice following the rules of the Ethics Bowl.

As early as possible, start conducting "mock bowls." This is necessary for building confidence and communication skills, as well as practicing the collegial attitude for respectful dialogue among competitors. It is also useful for identifying weaknesses in one's arguments and presentations, as well as getting an honest sense about how well your team is prepared to answer judges' questions.

Dos

- ***Start preparation early***: Get familiar with cases and start analyzing them, and start building positions in response to the study questions, potential questions, and objections from other teams and judges.

- ***Get familiar with the rules and format of the Ethics Bowl***: Learning about the rules[2] and spirit of the Ethics Bowl will help you focus your preparation.

- ***Include simulated "mock bowls"***: The best way to learn is usually by doing. Practice early and frequently so that by the time the competition starts, your presentations are second nature.

- ***Try to reframe conflicts away from false dilemmas***: Most of the issues encountered in the case studies are complex. Beware of simple either/or responses and keep in mind that a convincing analysis will most likely be nuanced.

[2] Here is a link to the NHSEB rules: http://nhseb.unc.edu/nhseb-rules/

- ***Go back and revisit prior steps***: the steps offered in our method are iterative in the sense that revisiting or rearranging steps is encouraged. After making stakeholder profiles, revisit the facts of the case. Maybe teams will pick up new information or have a clearer picture of which facts are relevant and which aren't. Certain tips and strategies found in one step could apply to other steps of the method. For example: when "questioning the questions," you could test the study questions accuracy, precision, clarity, etc., much in the same way you did with the "argument checklist."

- ***Try to practice well-structured presentations***. Just like well-organized theses papers, Ethics Bowl presentations can benefit from sharing a similar structure: an *introduction* that clearly establishes the teams claim, a *body* that supports the claim with reasons as well as considers objections and responses others may have, and a *conclusion* that summarizes the points argued for in the presentation and potentially adds extra thoughts, comments, or questions, etc.

- ***Work on etiquette:*** **When presenting and responding to other teams and to judges speak to their arguments, reasoning, and presentations and not the speakers.** Clarify your position before jumping into your objections. Only comment on things in the other team's position that you feel you understand; otherwise, ask for clarification. Use language like "As we understood…" or "If I followed your argument correctly…" to avoid being confrontational and to qualify your responses responsibly. Work on setting a cordial, professional, and non-combative tone and mentality, and keep in mind that the Ethics Bowl is not a debate.

- ***Have fun***

Don'ts

- ***Descriptive ethics***: Relying on descriptions alone will not lend sufficient support for conclusions that assign value or ascribe duties. Just because some people *believe* that assisted suicide is an act of murder and that murder is morally wrong is not enough to establish that assisted suicide is wrong. You need to ask whether their beliefs are justified by arguments and evidence.

- ***Metaethics***: Generally, it is best to avoid metaethical questions in presenting cases in Ethics Bowl. It gets teams off track by moving conversations to an abstract level of reasoning away from the particular case. Also, we need to assume some degree of metaethical "givens" to allow for Ethics Bowl to move forward. Discussion assumes that teams can meaningfully give reasons regarding what is right and wrong, good and bad, and what ought and ought not to be done that are specific enough and apply to the cases at hand.

- ***Be careful when using normative theories***: Normative theories such as utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics can be useful resources for thinking about the case studies. Nonetheless, normative theories rarely provide an easy answer to controversial moral issues (they wouldn't be controversial if this were the case). Relying too much on moral theories can also filter out or distort relevant information. If you do appeal to a moral theory, ask if doing so actually adds to your argument. Finally, make sure that you fully understand it to avoid difficult questions about the theory itself from judges who may be professional ethicists.

- ***Be careful when appealing to philosophers' published arguments***: It is potentially dangerous to rely on what professional philosophers have written about an issue since doing so might come across as appealing to an authority and may distract from the details of the case. If you do decide to rely on what philosophers have written, make sure you fully understand the nuances of their arguments and how they apply to the case at hand. Though you should attribute the source of your arguments, your focus should be on the arguments, not the fact that a professional philosopher presented them.

- ***Be careful using examples, analogies, and personal anecdotes*:** On occasion, a well-chosen example, analogy, or personal experience can help emphasize a point. Make sure, though, that these details are relevant and support your purpose and position. Analogies are particularly double-edged: a well-chosen analogy can be a powerful argumentative tool, but also provides opportunities for other teams to show how your analogy isn't really analogous.

- ***Don't object to or rebut teams or single out individuals***: Speak to the arguments, not the people presenting them.
- ***Don't be dogmatic***: Constantly ask yourself what someone who disagrees with you might say and regularly reevaluate your beliefs and reexamine your arguments.