

English-Speaking Union

Public Speaking Competition

Guidelines for Chairpersons

The skills being taught in the ESU Competition are broadly modelled on those you would be expected to use if you had invited a guest speaker to attend the meeting. Everyone looks to you to set the tone and run an efficient meeting. Make sure you know the rules, especially about timing, and have a watch.

You are in charge from the start

If the competition organiser asks you to take your team onto the stage as soon as the previous team has finished and while the judges are still doing their assessment, you may be left sitting there for two or three minutes. You can act as host to the other two with you by offering them water and engaging them in quiet conversation, while keeping an eye on the judges/organiser to know when they are ready to start. Check that fresh water is on the table before you take your places.

Set the tone with your first word

Set the tone with the first word you say. The way you say “Good ...” in “Good afternoon” or “Good evening” will tell the audience whether this is going to be a well-organised meeting or not. So smile and hit that first word.

Introductions

Start your watch. You haven't much time. The audience only really needs the basic information: who? and what? First introduce the Speaker by name. And it is the audience who needs to know the name, not the Speaker! Do not turn to the Speaker as you say the name: give it to the audience. Then give the topic.

Next, the audience need to know the Speaker's qualifications for speaking on this topic. They do not need a lot of irrelevant biographical detail. Find time before the speech to ask the Speaker.

You do not need to outline the procedure for the meeting. If you have time you can say a few words about the topic if you are confident that you can make a relevant and even handed comment. If not, make a passing reference to the topic, hand over pleasantly to the Speaker - and sit down.

You are still in charge during the speech. You cannot relax now. Your job is to keep order in the meeting (not usually a problem) and to support the Speaker by paying close and polite attention to the speech. Perfect the art of looking at the Speaker and the audience at the same time. React to jokes with a smile. If the

Speaker overruns wait for about fifteen seconds and then find a pause to stay seated but murmur quietly to the Speaker “Could you finish off now?” (or point subtly to your watch!)

Questions

Invite the Questioner to question the Speaker. This is the most difficult part to control. Some Questioners try to ask long and involved questions either to use up the time or to make their own speech. Don't let them. You are in charge. Whether the question comes from the Questioner or the audience, rise to your feet after 15 to 30 seconds and ask them firmly but politely to state their question briefly. Similarly, the Speaker should be given about thirty seconds or so to answer or there will be no time for further questions. You have to use your judgement here. You also have to use your judgement to decide whether to rephrase a question or repeat it. If you do, do it as briefly as you can. Keep your eye on your watch. Have a question ready in case of silence from the audience.

Conclusion

Finally you are asked to sum up the Speaker's main arguments and some of the points raised by the Questioner and the audience. You should have noted key themes in the speech as it was delivered and any important points raised in the questions, particularly any that were not fully answered or left in dispute. Give yourself a minute or more to remind the audience of these and then thank the Speaker and Questioner. You may lead the applause and only conduct the Speaker and Questioner from the stage as this dies down.

Skills Summary

You should now know how to:

- set up the meeting
- introduce the Speaker and Questioner
- support the Speaker in an even handed manner
- encourage and control questions
- summarise the meeting and end things tidily.

And you should know who is in charge!