

Student Congress TIPS

You've been given the opportunity to compete in Student Congress, and have received the resolutions/bills from your coach. Now what?

Read them. Determine if there are any structural errors in the bill, e.g. the Federal government infringing on States' rights, violations of the Bill of Rights. (It helps if you know a little about our Constitution, beyond the Bill of Rights!)

START RESEARCHING EACH TOPIC. This will take some time, so start early, work in teams, etc. In order to be successful in Congress you must have a grasp of both sides of the issue so that you can move debate forward. It's okay to take the unpopular viewpoint. No one will think ill of you. Your job is to move the debate forward so that all viewpoints can be examined. Your judges are looking for "clash." (See Judges' Instructions to learn more about what the judges are looking for.)

RESEARCH & EVIDENCE is what helps you understand the topics, helps you formulate meaningful 3-minute speeches, helps you counter other viewpoints and defend your own. With evidence, you can make a clear position statement, give your reasoning and support it.

WHERE TO LOOK FOR INFORMATION:

- Read the newspaper.
- Look up information online.
- Visit libraries (large buildings with books and other informative stuff).
- Call your actual congressman.
- If it's an election year, see if there are ballot measures about the topic, then contact the pro and con offices. They have LOADS of information and have formulated compelling arguments for and against the proposed legislation.

As with everything, there's good evidence and bad evidence. Good evidence wins debates, bad evidence loses them or ranks you lower.

GOOD EVIDENCE:

- University Studies (e.g. Columbia, Yale, Harvard, Stanford, UCLA)
- Trade and Professional Journals (e.g. Journal of the American Medical Assn.—“JAMA”)
- Government Agencies (e.g. Centers for Disease Control, Dept. of Justice, etc.)
- Sources cited by Major News Outlets—for example, if *Time* or CNN cites Dr. Smith's study, cite the study, not *Time* magazine or the CNN.
- Current! Get the latest information you can find. It will trump dated info. For example, Census data from 2010 is more relevant to today's debate than census data from 1990, unless you're using it for comparison.

BAD EVIDENCE:

- Unreliable internet research. Anyone can start a website.
- Dated data
- Mom, dad, sister's boyfriend. Unless your acquaintance is an expert in their field, don't cite them. If your acquaintance is an expert, use his or her title and credentials so that the rest of us understand the significance of the evidence. These are examples, not evidence.

ORGANIZING YOUR THOUGHTS: Here is a template to help speakers organize their

thoughts, arguments, rebuttals, etc. If you complete the sheet, you can take either side of the topic and have sufficient "ammo" for a Congress competition.

TOPIC: _____

Position Statement or thesis: (Write why this resolution should be upheld, or why this bill should be amended or voted down. Look for faults in the resolution e.g. jurisdiction, US Constitutional violation, etc.)

CONTENTION #1 (first reason to support or negate)

Evidence 1a.

Evidence 1b.

Evidence 1c.

Possible Counters To Contention 1 (how will the other side clash with you? don't bring it up in your speech but prepare rebuttals for it so you can respond in CX)

CONTENTION #2 (second reason to support or negate)

Evidence 2a.

Evidence 2b.

Evidence 2c.

Possible Counters To Contention 2 (remember to prepare your rebuttals!)

Repeat as necessary.

PRACTICE: Now that you've researched and organized your thoughts, test them out by staging a mock Congress setting with your team, coach, teachers, friends, family, etc. You need to be able to clearly articulate your position and handle cross-examination questions from the floor. Practice will help polish your delivery, identify weaknesses in your delivery or argument so that you can fix them PRIOR to competition. **Good luck!**