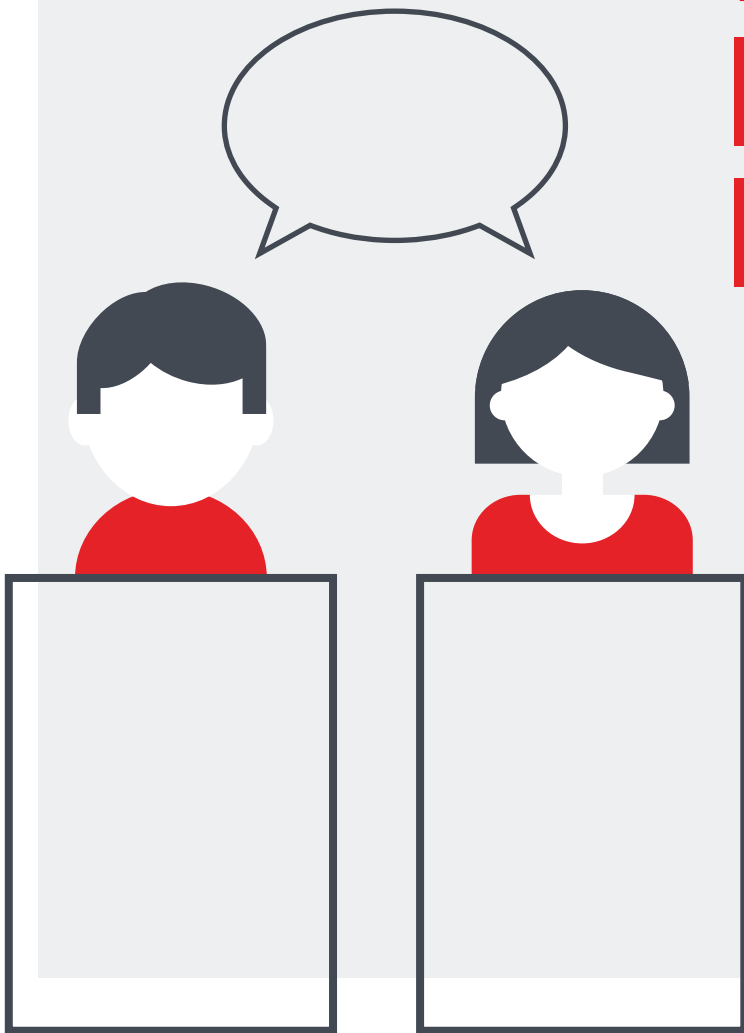




# Guide For Creating Your Own Debate Program



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## Introduction

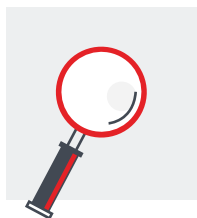


During the 2015–16 academic year, FIRE hosted a series of debates. The topics explored during the **FIRE Debates** series ranged from the Second Amendment to whether college athletes should be allowed to be paid. The goal of the FIRE Debates series was to bring debates directly to students and show that debate can be healthy, productive, and even fun. More importantly, each debate showed students—who are increasingly being told that there are certain unmentionable, unquestionable issues on campus—that no issue should be considered to be outside the scope of thoughtful discussion. Debates allow the complexity of an array of topics to be examined and, hopefully, help attendees develop a healthy respect and appreciation for “hearing out the other side.” Being exposed to a variety of viewpoints also leads to a more balanced understanding of the issue. You may even change your mind!

This guide is intended to give you, students, the tips and tools to host a debate or debate series at your school. This guide is in no way exhaustive. Because each campus operates differently, there are components of event planning specific to your school of which you should be aware. If you’ve never hosted an event at your school, think about reaching out to those who regularly do. Students and faculty, especially leaders of organizations on campus, can give you great insight about how to navigate your campus’ bureaucracy.

## Choosing the “Motion”

An effective way to help set the terms of a debate is not simply to say that the debate will be about, for example, climate change, but to put it in terms of a motion to be debated and which could potentially be voted upon, such as “Climate change demands a political solution.” It may also be put in negative terms, such as “There is no political solution for climate change.” A debate’s topic or motion drives the other elements of debate planning, so establishing this element is the first step for planning a successful debate. The motions debated in the FIRE Debates series covered diverse topics because each institution—each campus—has its own interests and priorities. When thinking about what topic will be debated, take into consideration characteristics specific to your school. It’s important to try to understand these elements before moving forward in your planning:



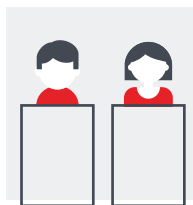
### RESEARCH.

Investigate the hotly contested issues on your campus. Talk to your peers and campus leaders. Listen closely to what students are talking about in the dining hall. Keep up with what is being covered in the student newspaper. From your research, make a list of all the topics that you could use as the basis of the debate motion and narrow it down from there.



### TIMING.

Brainstorm with your student group, an academic department, or the coordinators of a speakers forum at your school to determine the best time to host the debate. Think about whether a specific topic would coincide nicely with an awareness week or initiative on campus. Factor in midterms, finals, and campus breaks. You don’t want people to skip your event simply because they’re busy. Events taking place at the beginning of the semester tend to have the best turnouts because as the semester continues, students get busier and busier. To maximize attendance, aim to host your debate during the early months of the semester: September and October for fall semester; January and February for spring.



### DEBATE FORMAT.

There are many different types of debates, all of which have different timing constraints and formats. FIRE Debates used a **modified Oxford-style debate**, with two debaters: one arguing for the motion and the other arguing against the motion. A clear structure for the debate helps to organize the arguments presented on both sides of an issue. Do research and evaluate which forum best fits your needs and resources.



### FLEXIBILITY.

The speakers you will be reaching out to are experts on the topic, so they may have suggestions for how to adjust the debate motion. It is often the case that a speaker requests that debate motion language be tweaked a bit to reflect their position more accurately. Be prepared for this by anticipating other possible debate motions. It’s important to have an open conversation with both debaters to make sure they are comfortable with the motion language going forward. Do not advertise the debate motion before the language has been finalized and approved in writing (an email is sufficient) by all parties involved.

## Speakers

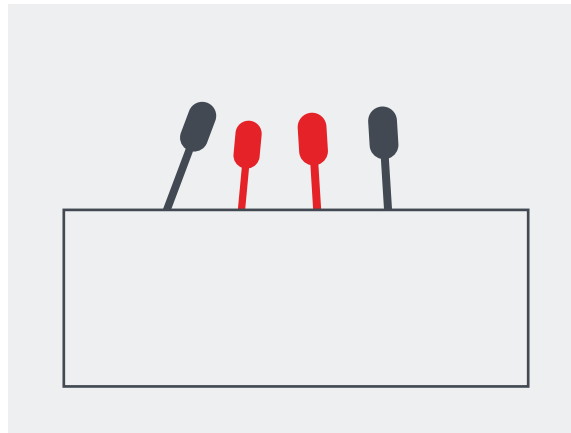
Once you have narrowed down the topic, it's time to do research on what speakers would be best to debate. Be open to contacting a speaker with whom you have an existing relationship, such as a professor whose course you have taken or an expert that you met at an event. Be sure to look into what the potential debater has published and investigate other forums at which they have spoken. It's also important to investigate how the speaker fares in different forums. Seek out videos of previous speaking engagements—these will give you a good sense of their speaking style.

Seeking advice from experts who know the issue being debated will help with research and, ultimately, allow you to compile a larger pool of potential debaters. Be sure to speak with faculty, students, or administrators that have specialized knowledge on the subject. You'll want to create a list or spreadsheet of potential debaters. You should include their position on the topic and any relevant publications.

It's important to send invitations well in advance of the debate (four to eight weeks before the proposed date) to give the speaker time to organize their schedule and prepare. Don't be discouraged if the first speaker you have reached out to isn't able to participate. In fact, count on there being some complications. Because of scheduling conflicts and other issues, you may have to send invitations to other speakers. It is extremely important that you reach out to only one speaker at a time. If your final deadline for booking a speaker is fast approaching and you haven't gotten a response from the latest

speaker you approached, send him or her an email clearly stating that you need to rescind your invitation. This is rarely necessary, as speakers are usually prompt to reply; however, it is necessary to avoid having two standing invitations out to speakers for the same side of the debate.

You may need to contact potential speakers through a speakers bureau or some kind of agent, although it's not always necessary. It is often possible to get directly in touch with a speaker through a nonprofit organization or university with whom they are affiliated. Do not be afraid to reach out to the organization or university—by an email or phone call—if you cannot find the contact information for the speaker you wish to participate in your event.



Speakers bureaus, which represent professional speakers, are useful for obtaining speakers for whom you have no contacts or who are high-profile. Examples of speakers bureaus include the [Washington Speakers Bureau](#)

and [American Program Bureau](#). Be on the lookout for nonprofit organizations—like FIRE—that [have their own speakers bureau](#). Keep in mind that, through a speakers bureau, you may need to pay a hefty speaking fee, otherwise known as an honorarium. When working with a speakers bureau, it is likely that you will not be in direct contact with the speaker but, rather, with their agent, so budget extra time for reaching out, planning, and correspondence.

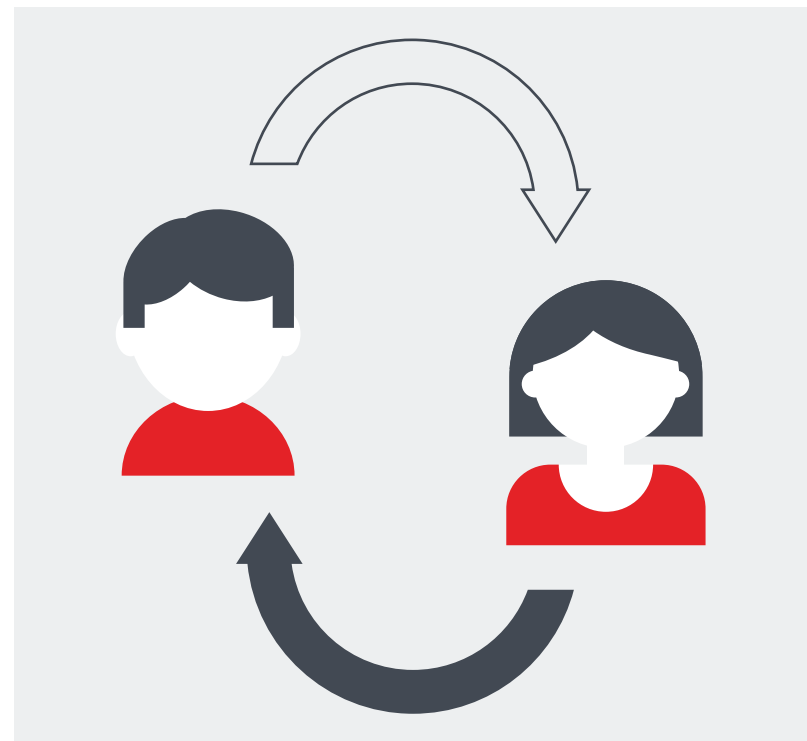
Speakers bureaus require some sort of contract, or a speaking agreement, so make sure you read it closely and have someone you trust read the agreement as well. Many of these agreements are “boilerplate” (just a generic form), so if something is not included, put your request in writing. For example, if an agreement prohibits recording of the event but you would like to record the event and put it on your organization’s YouTube page, express your desire to do so by writing it into the agreement (and crossing out parts that contradict it). Be sure to note the change to the other parties before the final agreement is signed. Just because something isn’t included in the agreement doesn’t mean that it is off the table, though there may be some negotiation. Lastly, do not sign anything until you have read and agree to all the terms. This may seem like common sense, but you do not want to be caught in a situation where you want to do something that is expressly prohibited in the document you signed.

Your speaking request should include the following information about the debate: the date, the time, the location, whether you will provide transportation and lodging, information about honoraria (payment), the debate topic and motion, and contact information for the person in charge of correspondence with the speaker. Take a look at an email template for reaching out to speakers in **Appendix A**. You’ll want to attach a formal invitation to your email including all relevant details of the event. You can find a template for the formal invitation in **Appendix B**.

When communicating with a speaker, you must be very clear about expectations for the event. Having a speaker sign a speaking agreement is the best way to ensure that everyone is aware of and agrees to your offer and the specifics of the event. If the speaker has a boilerplate contract, make sure to read it carefully. If your

speaker does not have an agreement, you should send him or her your own agreement. An example agreement can be found in **Appendix C**.

Once both debaters have accepted their invitation to speak, it is helpful to put the speakers in contact with one another or have a conference call with all parties to hash out the boundaries of the topic. You may be worried that the two sides will be hostile to one another (since, after all, they disagree!), but this is rarely the case on a personal level, and they will usually welcome the opportunity to hammer out what they will be debating.



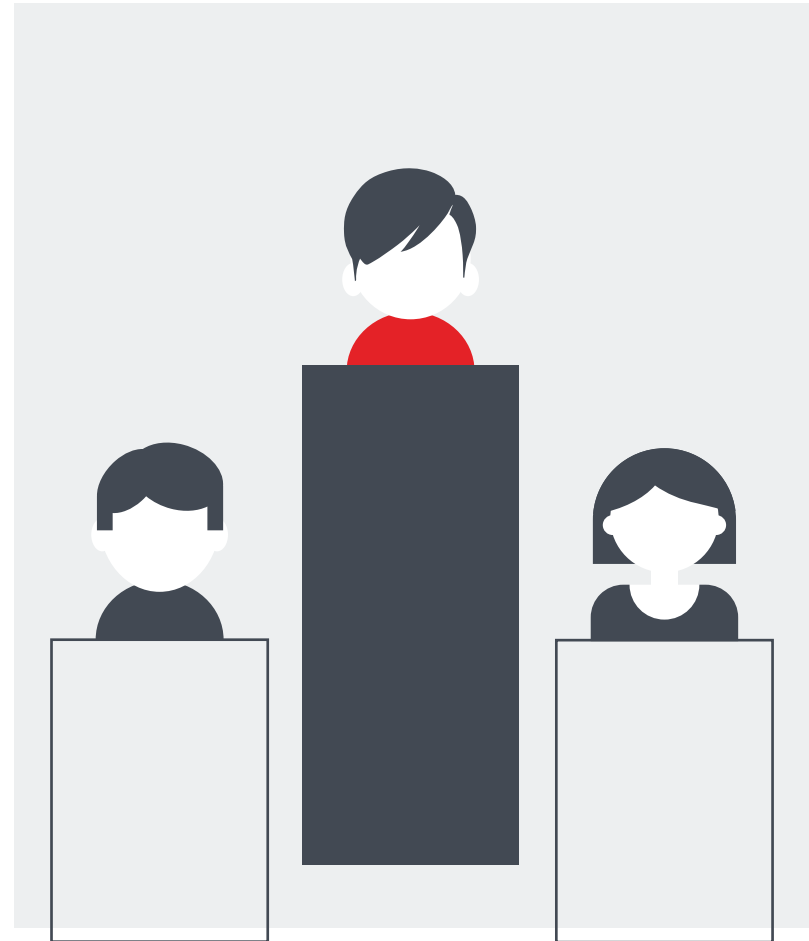
## Moderator

A successful debate requires a capable moderator. A debate moderator acts as a neutral participant that keeps the debate structured and orderly. Though the moderator's duties may vary depending on the style of the debate, the moderator generally introduces the participants, poses questions for the debaters, holds participants to designated time limits, and maintains general decorum. Moderators may also help keep the debate on-topic and solicit questions from the audience.

Moderating a debate requires preparation, active listening, and participation. A faculty member or ranking member of your organization may be a good fit for moderating your debate. Seek out individuals who have background knowledge on the subject or experience moderating. They do not necessarily need to be experts on the topic being debated, but they should be able to pick up on nuances of the arguments with ease and confidence and have more than a passing interest in the subject matter.

When reaching out to a potential moderator, be very clear about the expectations for their role. Your moderator needs to know the logistics of the event, who will be debating, the topic and motion, and the structure of the debate. This information will help them prepare for the debate more effectively. Offering to help assist the moderator in preparing for the debate may ease some of the burden and stress involved in this role—both for you and them. It may be helpful to send along materials you have already catalogued as well as any particularly good primers for the topic.

Just in case, have someone prepare questions that a moderator might ask on the topic. It is likely they will not be used, but it is always best to err on the side of caution.



## Funding

To secure funding for the debate, submit a funding request to your school's administration, its student government, or your organization's national office. Funding requests often require you to provide the proposed date, time, and location of the event, so be sure to have these logistical details solidified before you submit the request. Speakers' fees, among other costs, can make hosting a debate cost prohibitive for some student groups, so make sure you include them in your funding request. A great way to combat cost issues is to work with academic departments, administrators, other student groups, or outside funding sources to defray costs. In many instances, academic departments are looking to help facilitate speaking programs, so pitching a debate to a department can get the ball rolling on the event.

When you begin planning, be sure to take into account the following costs, particularly when requesting funds from your school or organization:



### RENTAL FEES.

The cost for renting or reserving space on campus nearly always dramatically decreases (and may be totally eliminated) if your event is sponsored by a student group or academic department. Always have a conversation with event services at your school to see how much renting the space will cost. If your event requires audio/visual (AV) equipment (it probably will), inquire how this will impact costs. You may need to budget for renting lecterns, depending on how many the venue has available.



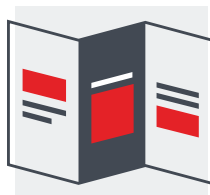
### SPEAKER HONORARIA.

Be sure to figure out—in advance of reaching out to the speaker—how much you are able to offer for speaking. If you are set on having a specific speaker debate, look into how much they usually charge. You should be prepared to be able to offer the same amount to both speakers. It is not unheard of for a speaker to ask you if his or her opponent is being paid equally.



### SPEAKER TRAVEL AND LODGING.

Many speakers require travel and lodging to be paid in addition to honoraria. This often includes the cost of meals during the trip, so be sure to account for these costs. Remember, a local speaker will likely not require such cost be covered.



### MARKETING AND PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS.

Strategies for promoting and marketing your event will be discussed later in this guide, but it's important that you have a marketing plan when requesting funding. While marketing can be done electronically, some campuses have traditions of advertising events using things like sandwich boards and banners—think huge signs on the most trafficked part of campus. Ultimately, you'll want to have as many people attend your event as possible, so maximizing the visibility of your event is crucial. Refreshments or a post-debate reception may attract more people to the event. Food often sways students who otherwise may not fully commit to the event.

Keeping track of costs and planning a budget is important for ensuring that you have not exceeded the amount allocated for the event. Be sure to keep a spreadsheet of all costs incurred in the process and carefully record and keep all receipts, which are important for reimbursement. Some costs can be unforeseen or last-minute, so you'll want to closely keep track of these purchases and ensure that your funding proposal is comprehensive.



## Logistics

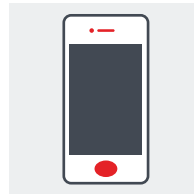
It is crucial to stay organized when planning any event on campus. Because there are many different moving pieces when planning a debate, you'll want to make sure that you have a comprehensive checklist and delegate tasks clearly.

It's important to have a team of people responsible for the event. Think about dividing duties based on the following tasks:



### **SPEAKER POINT OF CONTACT.**

This team member is in touch with the speakers from the point of initial contact and invitation to the follow-up after the event. Having one person handle all of the speakers' questions, concerns, and requests is extremely beneficial for clear communication.



### **VENUE CONTACT AND SET-UP.**

This team member sets up all things venue-related, including reserving the venue and making sure that AV (which includes lighting and sound) are ready for the event. This role is crucial on event day and for making sure the event runs smoothly.



### **REGISTRATION.**

This team member is in charge of registering attendees for the event, whether it's through setting up an [Eventbrite](#) page or coordinating with a box office. It's also important that this member send event reminders to registered attendees or ticket holders. People will most certainly forget about the event if you don't remind them.



### **MARKETING AND ADVERTISING.**

This team is the go-to group for getting seats filled on event day. They'll be in charge of making sure that your campus knows about the event. This team should be reaching out to ally organizations or posting flyers around campus, for example. The marketing team will make sure that your event is highly visible on campus and should be a creative group who's ready to get the word out.

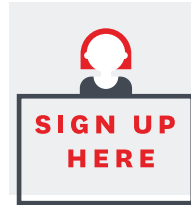
## Marketing

Effective marketing will help ensure a widely-attended event. Do your best to make sure that your marketing is descriptive, engaging, and appealing to a wide audience.



### **BRANDING.**

Make sure that your event is recognizable across promotional mediums. Think about creating a logo or signature graphic that embodies the event and is immediately recognizable.



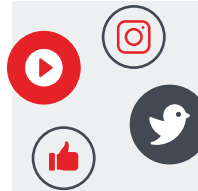
### **TABLING.**

Gather volunteers and resources, and set up a table in a high-traffic area to promote your event. Have registration ready so that students can sign up for the event immediately.



### **POSTINGS.**

Design flyers and strive to have a cohesive, neutrally positioned theme. At least two sides of an issue will be represented at your debate, so you want to make sure that your advertising will attract audience members from all sides, or at least not alienate them. Post flyers strategically on campus. Look into whether your school has screens throughout campus where information about your event can be advertised electronically. If the topic has a lean towards a particular department or discipline, post heavily in that area. Post flyers around the student center or student union to capitalize on heavily trafficked areas on campus.



### **SOCIAL MEDIA.**

Use Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms to advertise and promote your event. Invite as many friends to attend as possible and encourage other students in your group, faculty, and supporters to invite theirs as well. As the debate gets closer, send messages to those who plan to attend and post on the event page as a reminder. Plan to have a big push within the week before the debate. If the event is advertised too long before the event, people may forget about it. Note: While Facebook can be a tremendous promotional tool, it is seldom a good measure of actual event attendance. The number is likely artificially high.



### **PLACING AN OP-ED.**

Write an op-ed or announcement in student publications to get people excited about the event and explain why debate is important for your campus.



### **INVITING LOCAL REPORTERS.**

Reach out to the school newspaper and local reporters to see if they would be interested in covering the debate. This is a great way to reach a wider audience, get people interested in attending, and spark a conversation on campus.



### **TARGETED OUTREACH.**

Coordinating with other organizations is crucial for having a large pool of students to advertise your event. You'll want to reach out to organizations that will have heightened interest in the topic. Ask if they would be willing to co-sponsor the event. If not, ask if you can stop by their meeting and make an announcement. If the topic is inherently political, reach out to College Democrats, College Republicans, College Libertarians, and other political groups on campus. If there is an environmental element, seek out the organizations that work with these issues regularly. Many universities have listservs, event pages, and other internal methods of advertising that students can utilize as well, so feel free to take advantage of these resources. Similarly, it can be helpful to reach out to faculty and staff. If you aren't already working with a department or faculty members for the event, you'll want to send a personalized email inviting them to attend. It's also advantageous to ask a department if they can share the invitation or flyer with their listserv and ask faculty to advertise it in class. Reach out to key faculty members and ask if you can stop by and make an announcement before or after their class. Better yet, ask if they might be willing to offer extra credit to students who attend your event. You'd be surprised how often they will do so.

## Day of the Debate

Almost all of the planning should be done well before the day of the event.

The team in charge of registering students should send a reminder to all those who have committed to or expressed interest in attending. They should also stand ready, prior to doors opening, to check people in and answer questions that attendees may have.

Those in charge of venue set-up should arrive at the venue early to ensure that all is set up and ready to go. Test all audio and visual services a couple hours in advance, and know how to contact the AV folks if something goes wrong (usually by cell phone). If you are recording the event, ensure that cameras are set up and tested well in advance of the audience's and speakers' arrival.

The point of contact for the speakers should make sure that the speakers can reach them throughout the day. They should arrange a precise time and location to meet the speakers, allowing plenty of time for them to get settled before the debate begins. If the debaters will be using lavalier microphones (which clip onto clothing), their mics should be put on about eight minutes before the start of the debate. Make sure that the debaters are taken to the areas where they will be entering the stage. Be very clear in explaining to the debaters how they will enter onstage and what will happen when the debate is over.

During the debate, make sure that someone is responsible for being a back-up timer. Often, the moderator will keep time on their own, but it's always good to have someone with printed cards keeping track of the time during each round. This person should have printed cards that clearly show the moderator and speakers how much time is left, when time is almost finished,

and when time has run out. Large, printed cards are less intrusive than having the moderator give time warnings while debaters are speaking. One or two time warnings is sufficient. For instance, if a speaker has ten minutes to speak, a card labeled "2 minutes" and a card labeled "30 seconds" is helpful.

Most of all, have fun! You've put in the hard work, so enjoy watching the debate.

## Follow Up and Follow Through

A debate can continue to have an impact on campus after it has taken place. Consider writing an op-ed about the debate or debate series, describing some of the highlights and reflecting on the importance of the event on your particular campus. Be sure to follow up with those in attendance, thanking them for coming and supporting your event. Reach out to the debaters to ask if there are any loose ends that need to be tied up regarding honoraria, travel, or other costs. Make sure you send them a thank you note for their participation as well!

If you are a leader on campus or plan on hosting future debates, think about writing down your thoughts about the experience you had of planning the event, and share that insight with younger leaders. This can help prevent any issues or concerns that came up during planning or at the debate from happening in the future. Your valuable insight might also inspire other students to host their own events.

# APPENDIX

## A: Email to Reach Out to Speaker

Subject: Invitation to speak at [SCHOOL] on [DATE]

Hello Mr./Ms./Mrs. [LAST NAME OF SPEAKER],

I hope you are doing well. I am the president of [CLUB/ ORGANIZATION] at [SCHOOL]. I am writing to invite you to join us for a debate tentatively titled “[DEBATE MOTION]” on [DAY], [DATE] at [LOCATION].

I have attached a letter of invitation that provides more information about the event and [THE SERIES/SPONSORING CLUB, OTHER OPTIONAL DETAILS].

Many thanks for your consideration!

Best,

## B: Letter of Invitation

[CURRENT DATE]

Dear Mr./Ms./Mrs. [LAST NAME OF SPEAKER],

I am writing on behalf of [SCHOOL AND/OR ORGANIZATION] to cordially invite you to participate in a debate at [SCHOOL]. The tentative motion for the debate is “[DEBATE MOTION].” This debate is brought to [SCHOOL] in proud partnership with [COOPERATING ORGANIZATION AND/OR DEPARTMENTS].

The debate will take place on [DAY, DATE] at [TIME]. We are happy to offer a \$[AMOUNT] honorarium as well as travel expenses and accommodation in [CITY] should you accept.

Our goal is [DESCRIPTION OF THE TENOR OF THE DEBATE AND UNDERLYING ISSUES OF THE TOPIC THAT YOU WISH THEM TO DISCUSS].

The anticipated audience size is [NUMBER] people, and the event will be free and open to the public, though the primary audience members will be students at [SCHOOL] and other community members in the [CITY] area.

[OPTIONAL DESCRIPTION OF YOUR ORGANIZATION AND/OR SERIES]

We would be honored to have you as our guest for what promises to be an important debate.

Please do not hesitate to contact [NAME], [TITLE], with any questions you may have. [HE/SHE] can be reached at [EMAIL] or [PHONE NUMBER].

Best,

### Speaker Engagement Contract

This contract is made and entered into on [CURRENT DATE] by the parties named below as Client and Speaker.

#### **SPEAKER'S INFORMATION**

Speaker's Name or Business Name:

Address (City, State, ZIP Code):

Phone number:

Email:

#### **CLIENT'S INFORMATION**

Client's Name or Business Name:

Address (City, State, ZIP Code):

Phone number:

Email:

#### **PROGRAM INFORMATION**

Topic: [DEBATE MOTION]

Name and address of event venue:

Contact person at event: (name, title, phone, email):

Anticipated number of attendees:

Date of Event: [DATE]

Start time:

End time:

Reception details (if applicable):

#### **SPEAKER'S FEE**

Client shall pay to Speaker an honorarium of \$[AMOUNT].

Client shall pay to Speaker the Speaker's fee within [NUMBER] days of the event.

Speaker cannot be paid until a W-9 has been given to Client.

#### **EXPENSES**

Speaker shall submit receipts for expenses to Client within [NUMBER] days of the event's end date. Client shall reimburse Speaker within [NUMBER] days of receiving receipts and invoice.

In witness to their understanding and agreement to these terms and conditions, the parties hereby affix their signatures below.

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Client's Signature, Date

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Speaker's Signature, Date

---

Printed Name

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Printed Name