



Perspectives Guide: Applying Debate to College Applications



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I. Applying Debate to College Applications: General Tips

Every year, thousands of debaters will apply to college. Some will have local circuit experience, some will have national experience, and some will have both. There will be policy debaters, LD debaters, public forum debaters, and tons of kids who weren't ever really sure what sort of debate they did. But they will all have one common advantage: college admissions officers tend to look highly upon debate. There is, however, one small catch. What separates the debaters who get into the top colleges from those who do not is often not the number of wins and losses they accumulated, but rather how well they explained and presented debate on their college applications.

While this entire handbook attempts to show how to present debate, this chapter provides a brief overview of several tips for applying debate to college applications. While there are many ways to incorporate debate into your application, everyone should take heed of these tips, as they represent some of the most common mistakes debaters make when applying debate to their applications:

I. Explain the format of debate you did: Although college admissions officers are usually familiar with debate, they may not be familiar with the types of debate, especially now that new forms (Public Forum, for example) are being created. Accordingly, explain the type of debate you did and what it entailed. If it meant you had to research public policy constantly (policy), then say so! If you had to delve into philosophy to win (LD), make sure to put that to! Overall, make sure to tell the admissions officers exactly what "doing Lincoln-Douglas debate" means, especially if you did not compete on the national circuit, as there are vast differences between regional debate norms.

II. Explain the meaning of results: Admissions officers aren't going to be compelled by your claim that you "made it to quarterfinals of the Villager tournament." Why? Well, for one, they have no idea how prestigious quarterfinals is at Villager. Maybe there were only sixteen competitors, in which case quarters wouldn't mean much at all. Moreover, how good was the competition at Villager? Was there a national draw? A regional draw? No admissions officer is going to know any of this! Therefore, your results should be explained. Instead of saying "I made it to quarterfinals of the Villager tournament", say "I came in the top 8 out of 120 competitors from five states at the Villager Debate Tournament." Note: At the very top college and universities where they commonly receive applications from debaters, college admissions officers are likely to be familiar with Tournament of Champions (TOC) and round robins. However, even in these cases, you should be very clear about your accomplishments, since even terms like "Triple-Octofinalist" may be unnecessarily confusing, and Top 64 should be substituted instead.

III. Do not write your essays like a debate argument: This is one of the biggest mistakes that debaters, particularly policy debaters, make. While you are making an argument for your admission in your essays, they don't need to be conceived as a debate brief or something like that. Rather, they should be personal and your personal experience about something (perhaps debate) does not need to be as structured or as devoid of emotion as a debate argument. Additionally, if you are a very top national debater, consider writing your essay on a subject other than debate. Since admissions officers will already know that debate is meaningful from



your short essay on activities, your resume and activities list, and your recommendations, use the essay to show another aspect of your personality that may not be evident from other parts of your recommendation.

IV. Highlight the skills you learned from debate: While success is important, there are many debaters who are admitted to fantastic colleges who never even broke at a tournament. Why? Because these debaters were savvy enough to tell their admissions officers not about their wins and losses but rather what they learned from the activity.

V. Be careful when writing essays about debate: Essays about debate can be great, but remember that admissions officers do not have the grasp of “debate jargon” that we all do. Therefore, writing an essay about how you made a sweet turn to your opponent’s argument is probably not the best idea.

These are just some general tips on college applications, so keep reading for more in-depth pointers.

II. Presenting Results

As was previously discussed, debate results need to be presented in a very specific format on college applications. Here are some tips for compiling and presenting your results.

I. “At every tournament you go to, be sure to note how many competitors there were, how many states were represented, how many schools attended, and your specific placement in out-rounds. Also, if you received a speaker award, be sure to take note of this as well. I used to keep a document on my computer with all of this information that I updated after each and every tournament. Then, when it came time to apply to colleges, I was able to compile my results very quickly. If you need to retroactively find out this information, it is usually available on the tournament website or on www.victorybriefsdaily.com (for national tournaments). But the easiest thing to do is take down the information right after the tournament!” - Ali Huberlie

II. “For my college applications, I took my results and found out how many competitors there were. So, take Wake my senior year for example...there were roughly 120 competitors, and I made it to semifinals, so I stressed that I was in the top four of 120 competitors from around the nation. I also focused a lot more on state competitions rather than TOC tournaments because I thought it would be really hard to explain to an admissions board in a concise way the level the TOC is at. So, for example, I put a lot of emphasis in my application on winning a local Tennessee tournament where a lot of the top TN competition was. Overall, stress the numbers a lot and focus on both local and national competition. They are equally important in admissions officers’ eyes.” - Alok Choksi

III. “If I have a student who has made debate a big part of her life, I have her put together a separate debate resume to supplement their application and the other extracurricular stuff they have done. I have them organize their results in a way that serves their record best. For example, [with one of my national circuit debaters], we had three sections: national success, regional and state success and city success. Under national success, we included her accomplishments at tournaments like the TOC, Greenhill, Stanford, Harvard, etc. Anything that



is either outside Texas or inside Texas but draws kids from a lot of states. For regional and state success, we included Texas State, UT-Austin, Grapevine, etc. Any tournament that drew from several cities, even if technically in Dallas. For city success, we included any tournament that was primarily attended by Dallas-Fort Worth area students.”-Stacy Thomas

IV. Sample Debate Results Presentation:

- ⇒ Reached Elimination Rounds (Top 32 out of 150+ National Competitors) and Received Speaker Awards at: Yale National Invitational (3rd/240 in 2005), Greenhill Fall Classic (2005, 2006), Lexington Winter Classic (2005, 2006), Harvard National Invitational (5th/350 in 2005 and 2006), The Glenbrooks (2005)
- ⇒ Received eleven career bids to the Tournament of Champions (tournament for the top 75 debaters in the nation); qualified sophomore, junior, and senior years.
- ⇒ Junior Varsity National Champion, Atlanta, GA, 2005 (out of 75 sophomores)

III. Putting Together a “Debate Brag Sheet”

I. “If you have made debate a significant part of your high school career, then you should either highlight it on your resume (give it a pretty sizeable portion) or attach a separate debate resume. This debate resume should showcase not only your debate results, but also your awards, honors, and leadership in debate. For example, I showed college admissions officers that I was significantly involved in coaching novice students and even included a tournament I helped a novice to win. Additionally, I explained to the college admissions board why debate took up so much of my time and why it was important to me. Finally, I used resources like the National Debate Rankings, where I was ranked very highly, to make my debate accomplishments seem more impressive. I put all this information in my resume, under a section I labeled ‘Most Important Activities.’ Debate was the first activity I listed in this section and it was given the most space.”-Ali Huberlie

SAMPLE “BRAG SHEET” (Portion of Resume)

- ⇒ #1 Nationally ranked high school debater (out of roughly 500); ranked #1 junior debater in nation (2005-2006) and #1 sophomore debater in the nation (2004-2005)
- ⇒ Team Captain, grades 11, 12; head coach, grades 11, 12
- ⇒ Received fourteen career bids to the Tournament of Champions (tournament for the top 75 debaters in the nation); qualified sophomore, junior, and senior years.
- ⇒ Junior Varsity National Champion, Atlanta, GA, 2005 (out of 75 sophomores)
- ⇒ Head novice coach at Bishop Guertin High School, coached a student to a Novice National Championship Title (2005)
- ⇒ Reached Elimination Rounds (top 32 out of 150+ National Competitors) and Received Speaker Awards at: Yale National Invitational (3rd/240 in 2005), Greenhill Fall Classic (2005, 2006), Lexington Winter Classic (2005, 2006), Harvard National Invitational (5th/350 in 2005 and 2006, 1/350 in 2007), The Glenbrooks (2005)
- ⇒ Senior Fellow (teacher) at the Philadelphia Debate Institute (debate institute for underserved students).
- ⇒ Debate requires a great deal of my time to research, write arguments, and read philosophy to bolster my understanding of the topics.



II. “If I have a student who has made debate a big part of her life, I have her put together a separate debate resume to supplement their application and the other extracurricular stuff they have done. In addition to explaining their results, we had a section for other stuff, called service or ‘other honors.’ This section included her NFL membership and status earned (like degree of special distinction) and her leadership roles on the team. She had also won a team spirit award. I encourage programs to set up officers for their debate team and maybe even establish some internal team awards, like most improved. We have service awards at the end of the year for girls who have gone above and beyond in assisting our program and their peers. These are nice recognitions to add to the college resume. We also have a section for summer involvement to brag about camp. You should sell camp! I think it is important that kids don’t just list off every debate award they have ever won, but try to find a way to organize this information to tell a story about themselves.” –Stacy Thomas

SAMPLE “BRAG SHEET” (Separate Attached Debate Resume)

Lincoln-Douglas Debate Participation (9th-12th grades)

National and State Championships

Tournament	Grade Level	Awards
National Forensic League’s National Championship	11	Placed in Top 18 in the United States
NFL District Championship	11	One of two debaters to qualify for NFL Nationals from the North Texas Longhorns District
Tournament of Champions	11	Two-time qualifier, finished with a winning record (4-3) my junior year
Texas Forensic Association State Championship	10, 11	Two-time qualifier
Round Robins	10-12	<p>These tournaments are invitationals that usually bring 12-24 students together from across the country to compete against each other. Students are invited based on an assessment of national talent by the tournament directors. Debaters are often grouped into “pods” of 6-10 students who debate every student in that pod. I’ve been invited to the following of these competitions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bronx School of Science RR (12th grade), 1st in pod, advanced to final demonstration round • University of Iowa RR (11th grade), 1st in pod, 1st place speaking award • University of Florida Blue Key RR (11th grade), 5th place • University of Iowa RR (10th grade), 3rd in pod



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Tournaments with National Entry

Tournament	Grade Level	Awards
St. Marks, TX	12	Quarterfinalist (top 8 out of 110 competitors); Recipient of Bid to the Tournament of Champions
Bronx, NY	12	Double-Octofinalist (top 32 out of 135 competitors)
Greenhill, TX	12	3 rd place in debate (out of 120 competitors), 8 th place speaking award; Recipient of Bid to the Tournament of Champions
Lexington, MA	11	Quarterfinalist (top 8 out of 125 competitors), 3 rd place speaking award; Recipient of Bid to the Tournament of Champions
Grapevine, TX	11	Octofinalist (top 16 out of 115 competitors), 6 th place speaking award
Stanford, CA	11	Double-Octofinalist (top 32 out of 215 competitors)
Apple Valley, MN	11	Double-Octofinalist (top 32 out of 170 competitors), 7 th place speaking award

Local Tournaments (Dallas-Fort Worth area)

Tournament	Grade Level	Awards
Plano Senior	12	3 rd place in debate
R.L. Turner	11	1 st place in debate
Plano Senior	11	Quarterfinalist (top 8) in debate
South Garland	10	1 st place in debate, 1 st place speaking award
Plano East	10	Quarterfinalist (top 8) in debate
Williams	9	2 nd place in debate, 2 nd place speaking award
South Garland	9	2 nd place in debate

Debate Team Leadership Positions

Position	Grade Level
President	12
Hockaday Tournament Co-Director	12
Secretary	11
National Forensic League member	9-12, earned Degree of Superior Distinction by the end of my junior year



Summer Involvement

Institute	Summer	Description
Victory Briefs Institute at UCLA (selected for Top Lab)	2006	These are summer programs for debate instruction. At these institutes, I have studied advanced philosophy, participated in academic book groups, refined my critical thinking skills, and focused on presentation techniques.
Victory Briefs Institute at UCLA (selected for Advanced Varsity Lab)	2005	
Stanford National Forensics Institute (selected for Varsity Lab)	2004	

IV. Obstacles

I. “If you have overcome obstacles to participate in debate, then you should absolutely highlight them on your applications. While you don’t want to come off as whiny (“my school wouldn’t let me attend this tournament and that’s why I never got to qualify to TOC”), you do want to present yourself as a success story. Maybe you didn’t have enough money to attend a debate tournament, but instead of resigning yourself to this, you actually went out and raised the money. Maybe you didn’t have a coach but you still were successful, or taught yourself how to debate. Or maybe your team didn’t have anyone coaching it, but you were still able to collect novices and teach them how to debate. All of these things would make any applicant seem appealing because it shows how they were able to surmount many obstacles to ultimately participate in an activity college admissions officers find very beneficial.”-Ali Huberlie

II. “I think for first-generation college students or those from lower-income high schools, talking openly about challenges and obstacles they’ve overcome to be a debater would hit a chord. Whether it be balancing a job with weekend commitments or putting up with flack for being a “nerd” or going to tournaments and facing kids with much greater advantage but not letting that discourage them and learning their effort would allow them to compete.”-Stacy Thomas

III. “As an immigrant, I wrote my essay about how I ultimately overcame a huge language barrier to participate in LD debate, and why my background was extremely important in how I ultimately approached debate.”-Nina Vertlib

SAMPLE “OBSTACLES” ESSAY

By Nina Vertlib

As a kindergartener, I endured months of communicational struggles before it occurred to me that the power of language was a viable one – and difficult to exercise, since I was speaking Russian when my teachers expected English. As an immigrant, language barriers for me were common. At lunch, sandwiches with pâté or as I translated, “chicken guts,” elicited raised eyebrows, apparently making more nauseous enemies than friends. My heritage began by making food a religion: every family gathering represents a Thanksgiving of sheer chaos, where grandmothers, aunts and relatives croon over dishes, fighting over the best recipe.



Avoiding bruises from the soup ladle or cheek-pinching, “I-could-break-you-like-a-twig” relatives was only the easy part.

From early maneuvering through the streets of San Francisco to recent tutoring excursions, I have maintained a hearty battlefield by insisting that I retain my Russian language. On a weekly basis since the age of seven, I have attended Russian classes to express myself in my native tongue. At first, these lessons dragged on dully, teaching grammar and sentence structure. In high school, however, they became avenues of self-expression. With an instructor interested in teaching me how to write passionately and sincerely rather than diagram sentences, I cultivated a love for language – Russian or not. I soared, words flying around me: from mind to paper. My healthy diet was of books from all genres: the latest law review to literary greats. I had changed from a shy, precocious child into an avid writer and opinionated critic. My discovery of the power of language was decisive: words can not only convey meaning, but also bounce, skip, jump, exalt. They could be fiery or compassionate. I could barrage a reader with layers of adjectives (a grader’s worst nightmare), or offer, most florally, bouquets of parentheses, stopping to clarify after every ill-advised tangent. Language shaped my existence: I had no Ipods or French manicures, but a deadly vocabulary commanding respect.

No longer a timid kindergartener devoid of personality, I battled a high school world in which opinions had consequences. Without a voice, I’d have no persona, no epic character of dazzling literary merit. Speaking up gave me an unmatched expression: I was a debater, and essay prompts still bored me with their rigidity. Stranded in a naïve perception that writing could make a difference, high school had almost disillusioned me – but not quite. While some students plowed through AP essays about individualism, I asked about the silent, the “unimportant” to society. I wrote about the power of the private sphere to hide oppression of the abused, taking knowledge from debate to the real world. The power of language could inform people about the abuse, the exploitation of the underrepresented – and I took the first step.

I’d taken it because I understood the hardship, the discrimination from days of Soviet Russia. And yet, my American life gave me the power of individualism: power to change. Being bilingual made the emphasis on language even greater, and now that language was fighting back.

V. Other Items to Send

I. “College admissions officers do not typically want to sift through dozens of sheets of paper in your application. Rather, they appreciate concise resumes that truly highlight all of your accomplishments. Accordingly, it’s probably not the best idea to attach even more random stuff. For example, attaching your most recent debate cases is probably not the best idea. If you are a good writer, then this should be showcased in your admissions essays. If you attach all of this extra stuff, nine times out of ten, the admissions officer just won’t read it.

This is why it’s so important to make up a debate brag sheet that really highlights everything you want to tell the college about debate. If there’s something extra, it can probably be highlighted in your essay. However, there are a few things that are probably acceptable to send to officers. For example, I included in my essays that debate had introduced me to a wide range



of philosophy and that, because of debate, I was eager to take classes about philosophers like Foucault and Butler. This didn't take up too much extra space, and it also showed admissions officers that I was reading material that most high schoolers definitely do not even touch during their high school careers.

So to sum up, some things you can include: philosophies you've delved into because of debate, books you've read, lessons you've learned, etc. Try to include these in your resume or essay, but if you absolutely cannot, it's probably acceptable to put them elsewhere. Things not to include: debate cases, any other work you did for debate (blocks, work at camp), pictures of you with your trophies." -Ali Huberlie

II. "I know that one of my students attached an annotated bibliography of all the books she read independently for debate to her application. This was compelling because it showed the admissions officers how she had gone above and beyond to succeed and the level she was reading on." -Stacy Thomas

VI. Making the Most of Small Successes

I. "Coming into senior year without neither competitive success nor experience (I started debating on the circuit in JV junior year, and never broke at a tournament until September of my senior year), I think I can connect very well to the situation many students might be in. My advice is very simple and straightforward – if you are not a competitively successful debater, then do not pretend you are. I guess my opinion may differ from that of many others, since many people think it's smarter to try to find something competitively noteworthy and make a big deal out of it. But in my view, there is SO much else about debate that is just as relevant to talk about that, by the end of it all, a winning essay on debate should never have to have a single sentence about how many tournaments you broke at. So here are things someone can talk about:

First, it takes no more than a genuine interest in debate to answer a simple question: What do you love about debate? In other words, what is it that you value, intellectually or otherwise, about the art of debate? For me, it was the fact that debate seamlessly integrated fields such as logic and philosophy and always challenged me to think more abstractly. For others, the joy of debate may lie in the ability for you to assert your personal moral or ethical beliefs, or for you to come to a more informed opinion of what "right" and "wrong" mean. Find what that joy is, and write about it. If done right, this can do the trick.

Also ask yourself: What motivated you to join debate, and looking back on the time you have spent in the activity, what have you learned from it as a result? Perhaps you joined debate wanting to simply gain more experience in public speaking, but the activity ultimately transformed you into a better independent thinker. Perhaps researching and learning arguments in debate has helped inform you more about the world around you. Maybe debating a topic has compelled you to stand for a political or humanitarian cause. Telling stories about how debate transformed you, especially in ways you did not anticipate, are usually also very compelling.



I have one last piece of advice – I don't know how much this works universally, and it should definitely be done very tactfully, but I've found that admitting limited success can give your application a sense of honesty (this is what I did). In fact, it can strengthen your credibility, because it reveals that your interest in the activity exists solely independent of the competition. Saying that you love the activity so much that awards don't really matter can be a true sign of passion.” –Xiaoqi Zhu

VII. Sample Debate Admissions Essays

I. My Most Meaningful Activity, by Alok Choksi

My high school curriculum will never be able to instill some values into students. First, my teachers were always looking for a specific answer: they never tested me on my thoughts or interpretations of a certain subject. They just wanted the facts. They wanted us to regurgitate words from their lectures back to them on sheets of paper, and our memorization determined our grades. Such testing never really analyzed my ability to wrack my brain and think for myself. Second, I was never comfortable talking in a group of people. I always felt that people would think I was a fool. However, debate helped me overcome both obstacles.

Debate invigorated me. No longer was I seeking the correct answer within the frame of a textbook: I had the power to look beyond the standards, to see a plethora of reasons that answer the same, one question. So, I keep answering the questions. What do I learn? I think as an individual, I don't rely on textbooks - or any other authority - to tell me what I should express. Why do I continue? It's addicting: intellectual curiosity at its finest, debate is an arena of energetic teens pushing each other to find out more.

Additionally, debate gave me confidence in myself. With a strong work ethic, I learned how to manipulate words in such a way that I could convince a conservative to believe in a liberal idea. I realized that communication between people was not just speaking with one another: it was the connection that they make based on their use of the language. I had the power to convince anyone of anything, as long as I argued appropriately.

II. I am a Debater, by Nina Vertlib

I was standing in front of 160 people, hands shaking, heart about to explode, as if I were in a Poe horror story. All eyes were on me, and a spot check revealed that I had not, indeed, forgotten to get dressed. In my mind, I quickly recalled the top ten fears of all Americans – beating going to the dentist and death in all forms – public speaking. Given the circumstances, it's logical to assume that I was in a nightmare and would shortly wake up. No such luck. After enduring four grueling rounds of competition, I was competing in the final round of a debate tournament, by choice.

When I tell friends that I'm a debater, they humorously ask if it's contagious. I explain that it's simply a form of mental insanity causing teenagers to speak passionately about subjects that the rest of the teenage world isn't affected by, accompanied with bouts of obsession with writing and proving each and every assertion that escapes their (or anyone else's) lips. After



many years of teaching debate to incoming freshmen, and hearing every complaint in the book about how unnecessary formal debate is, I've finally discovered what to say.

Debate isn't an activity, it's a lifestyle. As much as people identify with a culture or a religion, so debate brings its own lexicon and community. Debate has taught me to argue my way through any form of convoluted bureaucracy, to read elaborate law reviews as if I were skimming the morning paper, and deliver a cogent impromptu speech in front of a classroom as if I knew about it weeks in advance. The incoming freshmen nod, but don't quite grasp the pervasiveness of their chosen extracurricular. With a slight pause, I look around, seeing evidently that they've heard this speech before. Here's the part they haven't heard. Debate is about compassion. When I stand in front of those 160 people and argue against the injustice of censorship in journalism, I'm not thinking about winning, or trophies, or college applications. I'm passionately expounding on ideas that matter, engaging my audience, and persuading them to care.

I am a debater. It's most certainly contagious, and a sure form of madness that forces me to wake up at 5am on weekends to talk to walls. It's my identity. It's passion, knowledge, wisdom, competition, friendship, and honor all wrapped into one.

III. The Value of Debate, by Sophie Asher

For me the intellectual challenge posed by school is not enough. I want to think harder and test the limits of my knowledge. Lincoln-Douglas debate, a form of value debate, enables me to do so. The initial prospect of debate seems daunting: write two position papers and be knowledgeable enough about a broad and contested topic to answer questions intelligently and reveal flaws in the opponent's arguments. Yet when I sit down to write debate cases I love the challenge of having to think fully through an idea and logically explain it. I begin more extensive research about the topic by poring over law reviews and reading all of the books about the given topic in my local library to augment my own ideas. The thrill of finding the perfect piece of evidence to support my position makes the time I spend reading worthwhile. While reading literature specific to the debate topic, I am also exposed to theories about justice, government, international politics, morality, economics and many other topics. Preparing for a debate tournament represents only half of the activity. The reward for the hours of work spent researching and writing comes from the debate rounds. There I test my knowledge of the topic and improve my public speaking skills because I have to present my ideas logically and coherently in front of a judge. I relish the challenge of devising answers to my opponent's arguments and creating a successful strategy within the short timeframe of a debate round. I can think of much better responses to an argument when I hear it in a debate round as opposed to reading it because I am concentrating much more intently on the idea at hand.

Debate offers an exciting opportunity to meet people during free time at tournaments. Despite the tension and stress that accompany each round, debaters are incredibly warm and compassionate people, in contrast to the dominating and overly competitive aura they seem to possess in rounds. I have met some of my closest friends through debate, even though some of them live across the country and I see them only several times a year. Debate is a national activity; many of the most competitive tournaments are held out of state, so even though the community is widely dispersed, it is still incredibly close because the same group of debaters



travels to each tournament. Though debaters have different backgrounds and beliefs, they have a unique enthusiasm for learning and the exchange of ideas. The diversity of the people I have met through debate has made me more accepting and less judgmental about other people because I have learned to respect all the different facets of their personality.

Debate has taught me about ideas school never touched upon and introduced me to a close-knit and unique community.

VIII. Sample Debate Recommendation Letters

Because you may want to have your debate coach write you a letter of recommendation for college, we have enclosed here some sample letters written by Joe Vaughan, coach of the Scarsdale High School Debate Team in New York, which has sent dozens of debate students to selective colleges and universities. Hopefully, these will provide a good model for your coach/teacher to show them how to highlight debate in recommendations. Moreover, as the student, you can also learn from these letters, as they also show to how to explain debate in a coherent manner. The names of these students have been changed to protect their privacy.

I. Sample Letter One

Dear Admissions Officer:

A few weeks ago I happened upon two students discussing who the best student is in the senior class. They had decided that the best student would be the one who has the capacity to learn and master any skill presented as this definition takes into account raw ability, the willingness to work hard and the drive to succeed. The answer was immediately obvious to me: Sample Sampleman. Sample has one the nimblest intelligences I have ever encountered in my decade of teaching. There is no concept he cannot wrap his brain around, no task that is too enormous for him to surmount through sheer force of will and no person he cannot charm with his genuine sense of kindness.

I have now known Sample for three years as he joined the debate team as a sophomore. I have also had the pleasure to have him in class last year in my introductory physics class and now this year in AP Physics C. As a physics student, Sample is exceptional. He has a knack for picking up material with blinding speed. Whether I introduce a topic through a discrepant event demonstration, analogy or rigorous mathematical proof, Sample is able to conceptualize the big ideas, understand the nuances, and then abstract the principle so that he can apply it in even the most divergent of problems. He sees the connectivity in seemingly disparate ideas and can explain these connections in a clear and concise manner to his peers. Sample understands how the concepts of physics function in the real world and has an uncanny ability to physicalize what most of his peers cannot even conceptualize. His work shows an intense care for detail and a depth of analysis that makes me confident in his growing mastery of physics in terms of his ability to mathematically and descriptively express this understanding. In class, when Sample did have difficulty, he was able to ask incisive questions that would lead him, and his classmates, to greater understanding. Sample handily earned an A+ in my introductory class and I expect, and have already seen, great things from him in AP.



While it has been wonderful watching Sample develop as a physics student, where I have seen the most growth is as his debate coach. Most students join the team as freshmen as it takes a long time to develop the skills and the content base needed to effectively compete as a Lincoln Douglas (LD) debater, a one-on-one form of debate. As a sophomore joining the team in the late fall, he was well behind his peers but he decided to dedicate himself to improvement. Right from the beginning, it was apparent that I had a rising star on my hands as Sample threw himself headlong into the world of LD. He became a voracious reader of the important texts we use from Rawls to Nozick to Marcuse and beyond. He spent hours honing his cases searching ways to more clearly explain his arguments through rigorous and continual editing and research. Sample ended his sophomore year by winning the Novice National tournament in Iowa. It was during the downtime at that tournament that I began to see the true quality of his character. What I saw impressed me then and continues to impress me today. He jumped into the world of varsity debate with a vengeance at the start of his junior year and hasn't looked back.

The event that crystallized my view of Sample in my mind, the moment that defined my view of him as a person, occurred at last year's Tournament of Champions. This is a difficult tournament to qualify for and I was proud of Sample for having made it as a junior and a second year debater. This is an impressive achievement as I have had several students who have debated for four years and have never qualified. At this tournament, three losses essentially eliminate a student from the tournament. Going into round 5, Sample had two losses. He drew an extraordinarily difficult opponent but remained calm. Generally, a debater will make 9 or 10 arguments in a round due to the time constraints. His opponent made upwards of 25 arguments at a pace that would make an auctioneer blush. Rather than being overwhelmed, Sample logically explained to the judge the fallacies and contradictions in the arguments and advanced his own well-developed analysis. Sample won the round and came out smiling, proud of his performance. He wasn't proud because he had won the round though. He was proud because he faced the most difficult challenge of his debate career to that point, maintained his calm, and realized that he had the capacity to become a great debater. The following round, Sample faced an even tougher opponent whom we both have incredible respect for. He went into this round with a newfound confidence. When the round was over, Sample had lost the ballot but came out of the room with this still smiling. I asked him if he was upset to have been eliminated. He quickly informed me that he had just given what he thought was the best debate performance of his career up to that point and, even though he lost, said the round was an amazing learning experience that would make him a better debater in the long run. He thought that what he was taking away from that round in terms of knowledge was ten times more important to him than the ballot. This experience describes the essence of this incredible young man and why I am intensely proud of him.

Having traveled the country with Sample (which now-a-days means having been stuck at many airports in unending delays with him), I have really come to know him quite well. He is a generous young man who is valued by his friends for the support he gives. He is universally liked and respected by his peers on the national debate circuit for his affable nature, competitive spirit and ethical standards. Just this past weekend, when Sample made semifinals at the difficult New York City Invitational, he was lauded as much by students and coaches on other teams as by his own teammates. He has a wonderfully easy sense of humor. It is fun to



watch Sample laugh as his entire body shakes in a paroxysm of laughter that can set off with ridiculous ease.

When I asked Sample what was the most important thing he thought I could say about him in this letter, he didn't want me to talk about his academic prowess or his debate achievements. He wanted me to convey to you his kindness and his ability to make the community in which he participates a better place for his presence. Sample is an incredible young man with an articulate intelligence, a generosity of spirit and a goofy laugh. I generally do not write recommendations that are this lengthy but I feel that Sample deserves this due consideration. Of the twenty plus recommendations I will write this year, this is, bar none, the strongest I will write. I urge you to give Sample the opportunity to continue his exploration of his limitless capacity as a member of you incoming freshman class.

II. Sample Letter Two

Dear Admissions Officer:

In late September, I brought my Speech and Debate Team to the Yale University Invitational. It was late in the tournament and, as usual, the team was doing phenomenally well. Sample Sampleton, the captain of the team this year, and I were standing outside of the room where he had just finished debating his octafinal round when another coach (from a local team that is just trying to get off the ground) asked Sample if he wouldn't mind if she took a picture of him. Bewildered, yet flattered, Sample acceded. I couldn't help but ask why she wanted the picture. She responded that she had promised her students that, as a reward, if they were able to earn a winning record at the tournament, she would give them a picture of Sample since all of her kids try to model themselves after him. Sample blushed furiously and thanked her effusively for the implicit compliment. I knew that all of the underclassmen on my team worshiped the ground he walked on and that Sample is very well respected in the community but I had no idea exactly how far Sample's reputation had carried. Granted, Sample is presently the number one ranked Lincoln Douglas in the nation (and has been for almost a year now according to the National Debate Rankings) but I don't think this interaction would have occurred if he were just an amazing debater. What makes Sample worthy of the respect he has earned is his kind nature and his humble yet fierce dedication to this activity - LD debate - that has defined so much of his high school career.

Our team regularly travels all around the country competing. Regardless of where we are, coaches continually approach me to tell me how they wish their debaters were like Sample or how much they admire him. I always ask why. All comment on his ability to articulate even the most abstruse of ideas in clear, informative language although this never seems to be the most important thing they wish to relate. What they feel compelled to tell me is their perception that Sample is a person of outstanding character with an insightful intellect, a perception I whole-heartedly agree with. These coaches extol the depth of his arguments and exclaim about how wonderful it must be to have a student who reads the philosophic literature so broadly and deeply. Others comment on how gracious he is to his opponents, especially when he is clearly dominating the round. Sometimes in this activity, students new to the activity can get paired up against the 'A-list' debaters. I have seen some of these rounds and they are usually horrifying as the older kid essentially demoralizes the younger student in an attempt to win. More than once,



coaches of new competitors whom have faced Sample have commented to me how Sample had made these rounds a wonderful educational experience for their students even as he was assuredly winning. Sample does not feel the need to prove to others how extraordinarily gifted he is; he simply seeks to challenge himself, discover the boundaries of his intelligence and push those boundaries ever outward.

I could easily fill the rest of this recommendation with Sample's accomplishments and a recitation of the numerous awards he has won at tournaments but I do not think such a list is the most fitting or even an adequate testament to this young man's abilities. What I think is most important is the effect that Sample has had on his teammates these past four years and how, as captain, he has helped reshape our team's approach to the activity. Sample has worked closely with several members of the team, mentoring them and supporting them in their personal endeavors to become better debaters and better competitors. He has instilled the values of hard work and rigorous research in his teammates. Sample has inspired several of the younger members to go to institute during the summer to continue their immersion into the activity. Additionally, Sample's efforts have helped us recruit and retain new members for the team, which, today, is twice as large as it was just one year ago. I attribute this to Sample's successes competitively and his ability to foster a team culture in which dedication is the norm, respect for all viewpoints is demanded and enjoyment is found in camaraderie and competition. Sample is a born leader and teacher. This might not be apparent from a first impression of meeting him, as he is unassuming and seems rather meek. Yet, when he gives a novice lecture or a seminar for younger varsity members, they listen, enrapt in his calm, yet confident demeanor. Sample has been the backbone of our team for the past two years and I, the rest of my team and the entire high school Lincoln Douglas debate community, will sorely miss his presence next year.

In short, I wish to express the deepest admiration for this young man. Sample is an exceptional student, a phenomenal debater and a fundamentally decent human being who is humble in his excellence. I therefore urge you to accept Sample's application for admission for your incoming freshman class and ask that if you have any doubt about his application, please feel free to contact me so that I may convince you otherwise.

III. Sample Letter Three

Dear Admissions Officer:

When Sample Sampleson came to ask me for this recommendation, I asked her a question that I ask all students who request me to write letters for them: "What is it that you think I can add to your application?" Most students hem and haw in response and attempt to stroke my ego rather than answering the question head on. Sample didn't even hesitate. She knew that I could speak about her tenacity, her competitive spirit and her willingness to dedicate herself to the debate team for the sheer enjoyment she has for participating (instead of the normal extrinsic motivation for most kids – trophies). Having known Sample for four years as a member of my debate team and as a physics student last year in my Conceptual Physics class, I can unequivocally say that she independent young woman with an impressive, focused work ethic who sets specific goals for herself which she then works exhaustively to achieve.



As a debater, Sample was always ready to compete. She was usually one of the first people to have her cases written and ready for competition. Sample enjoyed the idea of going to debate tournaments, meeting new people and arguing with them whether the topic was political corruption, the moral obligations of the state or the intrinsic value of privacy. After her rounds, we would often spend a considerable amount of time talking about the rounds: what she did well, which arguments she found compelling and what she could have done better. The subtext of each discussion was clear though: the excitement of clashing ideas with another person was the inherent value Sample derived from the activity. As a side note, for the past two years, Sample has been the sole female debater on my team in what is already a male dominated activity. This fact never seems to faze her as she only sees competitors to challenge her.

As a physics student, Sample was a careful questioner, a meticulous lab student and a risk taker in classroom discussions. When the material of the class caused her difficulty, Sample would not blithely sit there as many students do. Instead she questioned me until she was satisfied that she had internalized the concept and could apply it. If still not content, she would seek me outside of class to continue the discussion. When I posed situations for the class to consider, I knew that Sample would add her voice to the conversation whether or not she was sure of the outcome. The class that Sample was in was largely based on hands-on laboratory experiences. In her lab group, she was the clear leader, ensuring that the group stayed on task and did not settle for insufficient or poorly attained data. Sample was also a good test taker and performed admirably on each form of assessment. For all these reasons, she earned a solid A level grade in my class.

Sample is a confident and diligent young woman who has actively sought to gain the most out of her high school experience. She has shown me through four years of debate that she has the tenacity to achieve the goals she sets for herself. I am confident that Sample will be successful in any endeavor to which she commits herself and thus urge you to accept her application for admission.

IV. Sample Letter Four

Dear Colleagues,

Sample has been a Lincoln Douglas debater on our team for the past four years. Presently Sample is serving as the co-captain of our team and has been an officer for the past two years. Under Sample's stewardship the debate portion of our team has grown in both numbers and competitive strength but more importantly, has become a close knit group of youngsters who cheer for each others successes and help and push each other to new heights.

As a freshman, Sample was an unassuming young man. Not that he really looks his age now (to his chagrin, he gets mistaken for a freshman at first glance now and then), but at the time, he seemed very young to be in high school. Even then, though, his intelligence and sense of humor shone clearly through. He was 'adopted' by the older kids on the team who enjoyed working with him. What I remember most is that although Sample did not meet with immediate competitive success, he competed regularly and really enjoyed being with the team. This attitude has become the hallmark of Sample's influence on the team: just as he valued the



fun of membership with our team, he has created an environment in which the importance of team and the relationships that the students have created with each other supercedes the importance of results.

This thought came clear to me at the end of Sample's sophomore year when he was elected by his peers to be an officer of our team. Generally, the students have a tendency to vote for those students who have been the most successful. At the time of Sample's election, that simply wasn't true. His peers elected him because he is so eminently likable and makes being on the team worthwhile. As one student at the time remarked to me, "Come on, how can you not like Sample?" As an officer, Sample has been responsible for mentoring younger students, running practice rounds, editing his peers cases, group research efforts, judging at novice tournaments and with running our weekly meetings. He has served admirably in each of these jobs, especially as a judge at our local tournaments. Sample has served in this capacity more than 10 times in the past two years. It is clear that he understand how important it is to be on site to work with our younger students and to provide the judging that allows the debate community to function.

Seeming coincidentally, Sample's 'break out' tournament occurred about a month after he assumed his role as a leader on our team. He cleared at a very competitive varsity tournament where he was not expected to. What the ballots indicated was that Sample had begun to display a greater level of confidence in his arguments. Sample had previously been cited for being overly timid in round. From this point forward, Sample reliably cleared at nearly every tournament that he attended. Since becoming captain this season, Sample has had a remarkable season. It seems that Sample's competitive success has correlated with his level of responsibility and leadership on the team. As you know, the motto of our league is "Leadership through Speech." I find it compelling that as Sample became a more effective leader, he became a better speaker and as he became a better speaker, he became a more effective leader.

Sample exemplifies everything that I hope this activity can offer to the young men and women who we coach. He fosters an attitude on my team in which participation is key, the value of learning to speak effectively is evident and the importance of teamwork is paramount. With his good-natured laugh, easy-going nature and incisive intelligence, Sample leaves our team stronger for his presence. He has imparted to our underclassmen a love of the activity and the importance of valuing the speech and debate community.

[IX. Contributors](#)

Sophie Asher is a freshman at Brown University, studying international relations and history. Sophie debated for four years at Menlo-Atherton High School in Atherton, California. In her sophomore year, she reached quarterfinals of the Victory Briefs Tournament, placed second in the Sophomore division of the Victory Briefs Round Robin, and was tenth speaker at College Preparatory School. She advanced to elimination rounds at Greenhill, St. Mark's, College Preparatory School, Emory, and Berkeley during her junior year. She was also a quarterfinalist at both Logan and Harker, receiving the fourth and ninth speaker awards, respectively. In her senior year she was third seed at Greenhill, first speaker and a quarterfinalist at College Preparatory School, and an elimination round participant at Berkeley.



Alok Choksi is a freshman at the University of Pennsylvania, and is also the Saturday Seminars Coordinator for Perspectives, Debate, Inc., which brings together high school debate students from the greater-Philadelphia region to practice debate, research issues, analyze philosophy, and prepare for college during Saturdays throughout the year.

Alok Choksi competed in Lincoln-Douglas debate, Student Congress, and Extemporaneous Speaking events during high school, where he was a top, nationally-ranked debater in Lincoln-Douglas Debate. He reached elimination rounds at Homewood, Saint James, Vestavia Hills, the Crestian, Wake Forest, Emory, and Lexington, and received bids to the Tournament of Champions at St. James and Wake Forest. At the NFL National Tournament during his junior and senior years, Alok finished with a Semi-Finalist performance in Student Congress and a Top 30 finish in Lincoln-Douglas debate.

Stacy Thomas is the director of the Hockaday Debate Team in Dallas, TX. She coached the 2007 NFL National Champion in Lincoln-Douglas Debate, as well as a sophomore to the third place finish. Additionally, three of her students were in elimination rounds at the 2007 Tournament of Champions, including two juniors who are auto-qualified for the 2008 TOC. Each year, she qualifies record numbers to the Texas Forensic Association State Championship in LD, where her students have twice reached finals. In the summers, Ms. Thomas serves as the LD curriculum director at the University of Texas at Austin's National Institute in Forensics. She has a master's degree from UT-Austin in education.

Joe Vaughan teaches at Scarsdale High School in New York. His debaters have won the Harvard National Invitational, the Lexington Winter Classic, Hendrick Hudson, Manchester-by-the-Sea, the Yale Invitational, the Newark Debates, the Princeton Classic, the Newburgh Debate Festival, Monticello, Columbia, and as well as the MBA, Bronx, and Vassar Round Robins. They have also competed in late outrounds at the Glenbrooks, the Barkley Forum for High Schools, and the Greenhill Fall Classic and advanced at such tournaments as the New York State Tournament, the NCFL, the TOC, and Nationals. In the past four years, he has qualified students to the TOC sixteen times. Joe holds a bachelor's degree and master's degree in teaching from Binghamton University. He serves on the New York State District Committee and is a member of the TOC Advisory Committee.

Nina Vertlib is a freshman at Pomona College in California, where she is pursuing a degree in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics. Nina debated for four years at Monte Vista High School in California. Competing extensively both on the local and national circuits, Nina received a bid at Emory. She cleared at Stanford as 14th seed; reached the double-octafinals at Berkeley and quarterfinals at the College Prep Invitational. As a speaker, she placed 8th at CPS and 20th at Berkeley. She has competed at the Immaculate Heart round robin, placing second. On the local circuit, Nina auto-qualified to the California State tournament with an undefeated record at local tournaments since her sophomore year, and has qualified to nationals for two straight years.

Xiaoqi Zhu is a freshman at Harvard University, where he is studying Mathematics and Economics. Xiaoqi debated for two years at Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda, MD, where he was a multiple-time winner of local and district Lincoln-Douglas tournaments. On the national circuit, Xiaoqi participated in outrounds at Yale, Harvard and Columbia, where he was



a finalist. As a senior, Xiaoqi advanced to outrounds at both Nationals and CFL, and was the only student in six Mid-Atlantic states to attend the Tournament of Champions. Xiaoqi was a teaching fellow this past summer at the National Debate Forum in Boston.

X. About the Editor

Ali Huberlie is a freshman at the University of Pennsylvania, where she is pursuing a major in Political Science and a minor in Urban Education. As a debater, Ali was a three-time qualifier to the Tournament of Champions and a two-time qualifier to the Grand Catholic National Tournament. She collected fourteen bids to the TOC, and advanced to quarterfinals of the tournament in her senior year. Over the course of her debate career, she championed the Harvard Invitational, Vassar Round Robin, Skyway Challenge, Woodward Junior Varsity National Championships and Victory Briefs Sophomore Round Robin. She also placed second at both the Greenhill and Montgomery Bell Academy Round Robins. During her junior and senior years, she reached elimination rounds and received a speaker award at all of the tournaments she attended.

Ali has been involved with Perspectives Debate, Inc. since 2006, when she participated in the Senior Fellows program. Since that time, she has been a faculty member at PDI and participated in other Perspectives projects. She is currently the chair of After School Programs for Perspectives, Inc. as well as the editor of *Applying Debate to College Applications* and *An Introduction to Lincoln Douglas Debate*. She will continue her involvement with Perspectives for the duration of her undergraduate years at Penn. When she graduates in 2011, she will be one of thirteen students receiving a Civic Scholars diploma for exemplary leadership in community service. Ali's participation in Perspectives, as well as other community service organizations, has also earned her recognition by the Coca-Cola Company as one of the top 250 high school seniors in the United States and by the state of New Hampshire as a Granite State Scholar. Her participation in other organizations included four years directing, formulating and teaching a math and reading program for young children. Ali hopes to utilize her teaching experience while participating in Perspectives' programs.

Ali can be reached at ali@philadebate.org.

XI. Note on Perspectives

Perspectives Debate Incorporated is a Philadelphia-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization promoting youth debate education. Perspectives' mission is to increase avenues for debate participation in schools and communities and to provide opportunities for students to expand their personal and intellectual horizons. To date, Perspectives has taught students from 30 schools in 8 states. Perspectives' unique premise is that debate education should be accessible and affordable. To that end, Perspectives hosts the lowest-cost summer debate institute in the country, the Philadelphia Debate Institute. Perspectives has also started 13 afterschool debate programs in urban schools in Philadelphia, providing free, experienced volunteer coaches and financial support. Please visit our website at www.philadebate.org.