

# Public Forum: A Guide to the Summary Speech

by Les Phillips

**T**he summary speech in Public Forum presents debaters with a challenge: how to distill the clash of the preceding 22 minutes into a clear, compelling, thorough, two-minute appeal to your judge. Here are some guiding principles:

1. Pure “line-by-line” argument is inadvisable. If you try to go line by line, you will be without sufficient warrants, reference to evidence, or explanations; you will risk saying more than your judge can digest; and you will drop arguments anyway.
2. Identifiable structure provides a “halo effect.” A clear pattern is always preferable to no pattern—regardless of which pattern you choose.
3. The first one or two sentences should explain **why you win**. If you’re practicing economy and clarity in these speeches, starting with “we win this round because” is a good beginning.
4. Two minutes isn’t much time. But if you are concise, there is still time to work in warrants, examples, key phrases, and references to evidence. Do this!
5. Don’t think “this is why we win” means that you simply reiterate your own positions. Don’t just LIST arguments. Even a short speech must refute as it asserts.
6. Your arguments should always be in the foreground, your opponents’ in the background. **Embed** answers to your opponents within your own larger claims. (“We win because we prove that a troop increase is necessary to destroy Al Qaeda. Our opponents say that more troops doesn’t insure success; but they concede that the current level of troops guarantees failure.”) If the summary organization is “my position/opponents’ position,” then “my position” should always come first.
7. Public Forum speeches need rhetoric as

well as argument. If you are concise—and if you practice using active, vivid language with emotive “catch phrases”—you’ll have time for both. (See the bolded phrases in the examples below.)

Here are several possible organizational schemes for the summary speech, together with examples of how they might be executed. The examples show the essential structure of a possible summary speech—in each case, there would still be time for more examples, citations, and references.

## **“There’s no ‘magic bullet’ that guarantees a Public Forum ballot—but shrewd choice, clarity, and structure will greatly improve your chance of winning, every time.”**

*The Most Important Thing.* Here the speaker identifies a core argument of the debate, explains why it’s most important, compares the two positions, and shows why his position wins.

CON SUMMARY SPEECH  
*Resolution: The United States should normalize its relations with Cuba.*

The most important issue in this round is human rights. Castro has created a **1984 style dictatorship**; he controls all discussion and information; he blocks the Internet; he wants to control not just the actions but the **thoughts** of his people. We argue in every speech that the right to think, speak, and assemble is **fundamental** to our lives. The Nozick evidence explains why it **comes before anything else**. Change must come from the Cuban people—it will never come from a dictator—and the Cuban people cannot create change if they cannot speak

or assemble. They give you **no reason why** increasing Cubans’ income or making Venezuela like us better is more important than those fundamental rights. No one in Cuba is starving, or dying for lack of medicine, but **any Cuban can be thrown in jail and detained indefinitely for no reason**. Additionally, the pro **never explains how** more trade will result in democratic freedoms; we show you that Cuba is in a unique **crisis**, and that pressure now will result in Castro making changes. Cuba is an **Alcatraz** among modern nations; its

citizens are **condemned to darkness**; and the United States **must not condone** Castro’s dictatorship. Save the Cuban people; vote con.

*Two Ways To Win.* The speaker identifies two quite distinct arguments—perhaps setting up a choice for the final focus.

PRO SUMMARY SPEECH  
*Resolved: That the United States should significantly increase its use of nuclear power.*

We win this round for two reasons. First, nuclear power is **safe**. Our opponents have not refuted the *Financial Times* evidence, which proves that the storage of waste is **utterly reliable**. The *Newsweek* evidence points out that no American nuclear plant has **ever come close to a damaging accident**; no one was **even injured at Three Mile Island**. Please disregard our opponents’ **scare**

**tactics.** Second, nuclear power can **save us from global warming.** We can increase electricity from nuclear power by 100% in the next five to seven years; **our opponents have no time frame** on solar or wind power. You can't do solar power in Alaska; you can't do tidal power in Kansas; but nuclear power is always available. They say that uranium will run out; but Professor Glennon's evidence shows that we'll have reprocessing reactors within five years, making nuclear energy a **totally renewable resource.** Much of their evidence on safety refers to old reactors. The **new, safe reactors** are ready **now**; we need to **stop global warming now**; we need to get past the **scare tactics** of the **past.** Vote pro.

**The Root Cause.** The speaker identifies the root cause of the problem under discussion and shows how his side solves for that root cause.

#### CON SUMMARY SPEECH

*Resolved: The US should normalize its relations with Cuba.*

The pro team says that the US embargo causes the oppression of Cuban citizens; we prove that **the cause is the Cuban dictatorship itself.** For fifty years Fidel Castro, and now Raul Castro, have kept Cuba **as a giant prison.** In all that time nothing has deterred the Castros from imprisoning and torturing their own citizens, and there is **no reason to believe that this will ever change.** Both teams agree that democracy is the **most important value** and that, when Cuba moves toward a free market economy, democracy will follow. But the Cuban dictatorship will **never** permit a true free market economy. We've proved that any foreign investment and tourism will be subject to serious restrictions, and that Cuban citizens won't gain any economic freedom. When we lifted the Vietnam embargo, foreign investment increased—human rights did not. The pro presents **no evidence** that Cuba will respond if we end the embargo, or that investment in Cuba specifically will create a change in the economic system. Raul Castro says that everything is up for discussion **except the system of government.** There is no reason to doubt him. Vote con.

**Your Best / Their Best.** The speaker identifies her strongest argument and compares it to the opponent's strongest argument.

#### CON SUMMARY SPEECH

*Resolution: That the Obama presidency has been successful.*

We've proven that Obama is a **disaster** as an economic president, that he's **destroyed more jobs** than any stimulus bill could ever restore. In May the US was losing 13,000 jobs every day, and the June unemployment rate was even higher. No president who presides over economic collapse can be called a success. Our opponents compare Obama to Roosevelt; but he's more like Herbert Hoover, the president who ushered in the Great Depression. Hoover made **good speeches** too, but as president he was a disaster; his economic solutions were too little and too late. Obama has created the **largest budget deficit** in history, to no apparent purpose. The economy is by far **the most important issue.** We can't increase health coverage if we're broke; and we can't solve global warming if we can't afford solar and wind power. We can't be world leaders if we owe the Chinese hundreds of billions of dollars. Certainly we shouldn't raise taxes when people have no money.

My opponents argue that Obama shows leadership and has restored the respect of the world. World respect is a nice thing, but exactly what advantage has Obama brought us? Big trips and **great speeches** don't solve problems; they can make things worse. Obama visited the Middle East, and everyone said he'd opened a new era in US-Muslim relations; instead, the Iranian situation got even more dangerous, and Obama has no solution. He made friends with Hugo Chavez; but there is no Latin America policy. We can call Obama a leader when the **rhetoric produces results.**

We've proved that Obama's failures greatly outweigh his successes, so we ask you to vote for the con. Thank you.

**World Of the Pro / World Of The Con.** The speaker compares the effects of resolitional action to the status quo—encouraging the judge to visualize the comparison.

#### PRO SUMMARY SPEECH

*Resolution: The US should reinstate the military draft.*

Consider the world of the pro team vs. the world of the con. The pro assures that our military has enough manpower if there's a crisis; the con wants to get by with the **bare minimum.** They'd have to divert **National Guard troops** from their proper duties, if war occurred. The pro proves that draftees will bring superior skills that the modern army needs. The **most recent evidence** shows that in today's economy, particularly, the excellent benefits that the military provides can draw good candidates. The con says that draftees can't be trained, but their evidence is twenty-five years old. Most important, the pro stands for a citizen army where **rich and poor alike** are called on to serve. The con insures that our troops will be disproportionately **poor and minority.** Our Schlesinger evidence says that a diverse army insures that citizens and leaders alike will **think twice before committing troops to war,** and the con has no answer. Vote for responsible national security; vote for the pro.

Which model should you use in which round? That's a case by case question, since no two rounds are alike. Still, strategic Public Forum debaters can anticipate which models might lend themselves best to specific resolutions, or particular instances of pro/con clash. It's also very useful to practice giving the different types of summary speeches—this can be a great way to build impromptu organizational skill.

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#### *About the Author*

**Les Phillips**, an NFL Five Diamond Coach and former Director of Debate at Lexington High School (MA), directs the Public Forum division of the Stanford National Forensic Institute.