

◆ *Student Congress*

Coaching Beginners in Student Congress

by
Don Schulte

Student Congress provides a valuable channel for coaches seeking a challenging event requiring less upfront preparation than other speech events. Bringing students into speech and debate activities through the use of Student Congress may be the opening your students and/or you might use to build your speech squad. The material included within this article is designed to assist a speech teacher to introduce Student Congress to his or her students. The process of preparing students for a session of debate, teaching parliamentary procedure, and common mistakes for a coach to avoid are discussed below. Two classroom activities are provided below to introduce students to the event.

Student Congress is the most relevant of the speech events to the average student. Student Congress imitates life. In real life a person rarely has more than three minutes to speak his or her mind. In real life a speaker faces potential interruptions, pointed questions, and the chance that his or her listeners will decide to move on just before the speaker gets a chance to share thoughts. Real life thrusts people into leadership roles and so does Student Congress. Cub Scout Pack leaders, PTA meetings, Neighborhood Watch groups and a host of other causes demand some level of meeting organization for which Student Congress prepares citizens in leadership. Student Congress imitates life and prepares students for the role of leadership in our Republic.

The basics of Student Congress are not difficult. Like debate events the speaking order moves from pro-con-pro...Like other events there is a time limit for speeches; in Student Congress that limit is 3 minutes. Like debate, the contestants know the issues before the tournament, but

like extemporaneous speaking, the issues are always changing. Potential Presiding Officers give short orations to persuade others to vote for them. Like Humorous Interpretation and Dramatic Interpretation, some speaks can tickle your funny bone or tear at your heart.

Part I The Basics: Preparing for Congressional Debate

Beginning a session of Student Congress requires proposed legislation. Students can be asked to write their own legislation or some can be obtained from other coaches or past tournaments. With legislation in hand, the students can begin the quick process of researching the issue(s) in the piece. A short while on the internet can provide a wealth of information. To help your students focus, ask them for specific quotations, specific facts, and specific ideas they have about the legislation (see website for worksheet). Rather than "kill trees" to photocopy entire articles from the web, ask each student for four expert quotes (including witty ones from Bartlett's and other quote books). A quote from someone the other students know is worth five quotes from people they've never heard of. Require contestants to provide four specific facts from four different sources. Examples of facts include the population of a country proposed to receive foreign aid (World Almanac), the type of government (CIA Factbook), the US National Debt (Google search resulting in access to the Library of Congress website), and the number of people facing starvation in the entire World (UNHCR Website). An up-to-date almanac is a resource all competitors should have with them and use in the round to both formulate speeches and authorita-

tively respond to other speakers. If the speech team budget is tight, buy last year's almanac from the sales table.

Teaching Parliamentary Procedure Made Easy

Parliamentary Procedure is the scariest aspect of Student Congress for most new coaches. To perform well is not complicated if students know "The Big Five Motions." A chart of "The Big Five" motions is found in Appendix A. "The Big Five" is this author's way of boiling down the complicated twenty-four motions on the NFL Motions Chart to something manageable for the new student to actually use. "The Big Five Motions" are:

- To Amend
- Previous Question
- To Lay on the Table
- To Suspend the Rules
- Point of Order or Point of Parliamentary Procedure

By focusing on these "Big Five" a new contestant can effectively participate in the session after only five to ten minutes of study.

To Amend

This simply means to change something in the proposed legislation. Amendment motions either add, delete, or substitute language in the bill or resolution. An example might be to change a "...\$5 million..." proposal to a "...\$10 million..." proposal. The amendment would sound like this: "I move to amend by substitution. Replace the '5' in the first paragraph with a '10'. This motion requires a "1/3 second." If 1/3 of the people in the room agree to discuss the amendment, then we begin debating. (Don't be surprised if the chamber "sus-



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pend the rules" to immediately vote on the change...especially if it is a commonsense change.) A simple majority is required to amend legislation.

"Typos" and other errors (such as poor quality photocopying) usually are corrected by the author simply announcing the mistake in his or her authorship speech. If there is no objection, it is immediately corrected without a motion or vote.

Previous Question

This motion asks, "Should we stop talking and start voting?" It is sometimes explained as "closing debate" or "voting to vote." This motion requires a "second." Since debate is key to the entire idea of a "deliberative body," it is difficult to end debate. A 2/3's vote is required to end debate and move to the actual vote on the legislation (i.e. the "Main Motion"). If this motion fails, the Presiding Officer (PO) continues looking for a speech. If this motion passes, the PO immediately begins the vote on the proposed legislation.

To Lay on the Table

This motion asks that legislation be set aside for the time being. To lay on the table almost always "kills" the bill or resolution. This motion requires a "second." The votes requires a majority. In some areas of the nation it is common to table legislation before taking a recess...in others they see this motion as unnecessary in order to recess.

To Suspend the Rules

Student Congress is unique in that it can, within certain parameters, change the rules of the event. This motion requires a "second" and a 2/3's vote to take effect. "To take action contrary to standing rules" usually means to extend a speaker's time for additional questions or some other one-time-only event. Some motions to suspend the rules are designed to change a set docket (i.e...schedule) of legislation so a bill or resolution can move up the list and be considered next.

Rise to a Point of Order or Parliamentary Procedure

This motion allows for any person to

interrupt the proceedings if he or she has a question about what is happening and/or whether what is happening is appropriate. This motion does not require a "second." The PO rules the motion to be "in order" if he or she agrees, or "not in order" if he or she disagrees. Usually this motion will involve procedure problems such as when the PO calls for a negative speech when an affirmative speech is in order.

Part II Common Mistakes Coaches Make

When coaching a student it is often as important to know what not to do as it is to know what to do. With a few pointers a teacher can avoid the all too common pitfalls of coaching Student Congress.

First, never give the students the NFL list of twenty-four motions and advise them that, "You'll get the hang of it." "Sink or swim" is not a good coaching paradigm. Giving the student a print out of "The Big Five" would be much better than the overwhelming chart of twenty-four motions.

Second, don't tell students to just sit and watch. They need to participate! At the end of most sessions any contestant raising a hand **MUST** be called upon according to the Rules of Precedence. The speeches are only three minutes, and even new students can cobble together a short speech from the text of the legislation, their own experiences, and from what previous speakers have said. The speech doesn't even need to be three minutes if they will take questions for a portion of the time. Tell your students to try at least one speech. Personally, I believe students who refuse to speak should refund the team for the tournament entry fee.

Third, don't direct students to write speeches out before the tournament. A good outline with a few quotes and a spattering of statistics is wonderful, but a "canned" speech of three minutes can be very dull. Except for the Authorship Speech, each speech should in some way respond, contradict, and/or build upon previous speeches. A pre-written speech is often photocopied and given to the rest of a team. A contestant's credibility is severely damaged when s/he cannot pronounce the words in his or her own speech. In one ses-

sion, I heard the exact same speech from two students from the same school! Some preliminary work is necessary and can be powerful, but completely pre-written speeches have no more place than a completely pre-written foreign extemporaneous speech or a pre-written rebuttal in a debate round.

Coaching a contestant in Student Congress shouldn't be intimidating. Use the materials in this article and you should be well on your way to coaching successful competitors in the fastest growing speech event in the United States!

Part III

Activity #1: Preparing Legislation

Objectives

There are three goals to this activity. First, it calls on students to use critical thinking skills as they both think of an issue to be solved and develop plans to address the issue. Second, the activity calls upon the student to research the issue in order to both write the legislation and defend it from criticism. Finally, it builds organization and writing skills in a format closely resembling those called for in many standardized tests.

Instructions to the Students

The teacher should begin by linking this activity to the regular class curriculum to encourage student "buy-in." Students should be put at ease about the activity as much as possible because most students will find writing legislation to be great fun once they begin. Ask the students to list on a piece of paper some things they would change if they could. Ask the students to keep in mind that legislation should be significant in scope, easily researched, and debatable. If prompting is needed, start with the school environment (lunch schedules, school starting time, required IDs, etc.) and move on to local (curfew ordinances, speed limits, driving restrictions, etc.), state (interstate highway laws, the death penalty, prisons, etc.), national (the draft, voting age, taxes, etc.) and international issues (the United Nations, commitments to NATO, problems in the Middle East, etc.) Once everyone has two or three issues they are



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interested in (or at least that they can live with), hand out a copy of the "Writing Legislation Made Easy" worksheet from Appendix B.

Briefly describe the different sections outlined on the worksheet. Emphasize that they can have more or fewer sections if their issue calls for changes. Take the students to a computer lab with internet access or the library. Allow them to seek information to both draft their bills and defend their ideas from possible attack. Provide students with the "Researching Legislation" worksheet from Appendix C to assist them with preparation of research. Remind students several times that quality, not quantity, is the key when researching a bill. If you're planning to hold a mock congress, share with them that the speeches can only be three minutes. Most speeches are about two minutes with a minute of question and answer. A few good quotes and statistics will serve much better than a ten page print-out of an internet article (that will probably never be read.)

As students finish, quickly reread their proposals and give suggestions. Since bills rarely reach the length of even one page, this proofreading goes very quickly and students have an opportunity to make improvements.

Post Activity Discussion Questions

Once the bills are written, most students want to discuss their ideas. If time permits, a session of mock congress should be held. Questions for a teacher to ask might include "What more information do you require to improve your bill?" "Do you think your issue will be addressed by the school/government in the future?" "Would your bill pass?" "Which individuals or groups would be supportive of your bill?" "Which individuals or groups would oppose your bill?"

Observations About This Activity

The typical class can complete the writing of the bills in one 50-minute class period. On the day before the activity, a teacher might assign the students to create their lists of things they would change. This homework would gain time in the class period and allow students more time to con-

sider their choice of issues. If a student completes the activity before the class period ends, then s/he should type and print out the bill before handing it in. Pairing students to work together will work, but usually individual work is best due to the individual nature of the choice of issues. Pairing student usually leads to one taking a mental "free ride."

Activity #2: A Mock Congress

Objectives

Students will develop knowledge and skills in three areas. The first area is that of participating effectively in a structured group discussion. The second area is in learning the fundamentals of Parliamentary Procedure. Finally, the students will have opportunity to participate in a democratic deliberative body.

Instructions to the Students

Distribute packets of legislation to the students. Tell students that they will be electing a Presiding Officer (PO) to be "chair" of the mock congress. Ask students for nominations for PO and write the names of the nominated on the chalkboard (or its equivalent). Allow each student to give a thirty second "Why you should vote for me" speech. Ask each person to "tear off a piece of paper and write the name of the person you most want to be Presiding Officer." While you count the votes (separate them into little piles and then count the piles), ask the students to "read through the bills and decide the top two bills you want to discuss." When you have a PO elected (hold run-off elections until you feel you have a clear winner), have him or her come forward and take over the meeting.

The first thing the new PO needs to do is to "set the calendar" (also called "docket" and "agenda" in different groups). Have him or her ask for several nominations for the bills people wish to talk about. Once a list is established, have each student vote by raised hand for two bills. For example, "All those for 'Bill G: A bill to Ban Cutting Lumber in National Parks' raise your hand." The bill with the most votes goes first. Ties are broken by the PO.

The hallmark of parliamentary debate

is that all sides have a chance to be heard. Decisions aren't made by the loudest speaker or the one not afraid to be rude to other speakers. Every person has his or her "say" and every person's "say" is heard. This principle is vital for every student to learn. The PO should call on students without bias and the student with the fewest speeches must be called upon before another speaker. The PO and the teacher should be ruthless in not allowing side conversations and interruptions. All discussion should be directed through the PO. Congress is also fair because debate alternates between speakers for the bill (aka: "pro" or "affirmative") and those against the bill (aka: "con" or "negative"). Both sides have chances to try and convince people to vote their way.

Begin debate on the first bill by asking the person who wrote the bill if s/he wishes to speak. If s/he does not, or is not present, begin with an affirmative speech. "I'm looking for an affirmative speech" is the proper formula for a PO to use.

A speaker doesn't have to speak for three minutes...but s/he is limited to three minutes. If the speaker finishes with time left, s/he may take questions from the other students. Asking questions is often the favorite part for some students. Students will try to blurt out questions, to make speeches instead of asking questions, and to ask multiple questions. Questions must be called for through the PO and s/he must hold students to one question, not a mini-speech, allowing only one question each time a student is called on.

After a couple of speeches, distribute "The Big Five" handout from Appendix A. Cover the five motions briefly and continue with speeches. Students will eventually start using the motions or asking the teacher questions as they "learn by doing" the rules of parliamentary procedure.

Post Activity Discussion Questions

"How did that feel to speak your mind on an issue without being interrupted?" is the question receiving the most response after sessions. For many students this activity may have been the first time they were allowed to share their thoughts without interruption.

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Observations About The Activity

Before class begins you might consider choosing a student to be PO and asking him or her to run. This will avoid any possibility of group stage fright setting in when asking for PO nominations.

If you, the teacher, become confused, you can always use "executive privilege" to simply make a decision and move on. In a classroom simulation I suggest you don't let the rules block you from doing what is right for your students and your curriculum. If a student is using the rules to block things from happening (e.g. they know parliamentary procedure from other activities and are showing off), you should not hesitate to step in. Students who are interested

in learning more about student congress should become involved in NFL, 4-H, Boys' or Girls' State, Student Council, etc.

A Parting Thought

Student Congress does confuse coaches. Congress is "neither fish nor fowl" in the world of competitive speech activities. Congress requires writing proficiently, research skills, organizational acumen, extemporaneous style, and a winning personality. Successful Congressional Debaters shun the rude competitiveness, gasping delivery, and esoteric meandering of other debate events. Student Congress has specific parallels at the school, local, state, national, and international levels. Whether a

graduate is headed for a fraternity/sorority, professional association, the White House, the State House, or a PTA...Congress prepares that youth for leadership.

(**Don Schulte** is a social studies teacher at Pattonville High School in St. Louis County, Missouri. He is the author of The Presiding Officer Handbook. He is a triple diamond coach and was Student Congress contestant at the 1981 Salt Lake City National Tournament. He teaches courses including "History of Ideas and Thought", "World War II", "Youth and Law", and "The Civil War". He also serves as one of two directors from Missouri on the NEA Board of Directors.)

"THE BIG FIVE METHOD" OF LEARNING PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURE

<u>Motion:</u>	<u>Second?</u>	<u>Debatable?</u>	<u>Amendable?</u>	<u>Vote</u>
To Amend	1/3	Yes	Yes	Majority
Previous Question	Yes	No	No	2/3
To Lay on the Table	Yes	No	No	Majority
To Suspend the Rules	Yes	Yes	No	2/3
Point of Order or Point of Parliamentary	No	No	No	Decision of Chair



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Writing Student Congress Bills Made Easy

A bill is nothing but an idea which is written out in a logical, easy to use format. Your task is to pick an idea and write it in such a way that it will be passed into law. By following the steps below, anyone can write a simple bill.

Step One: Pick an Idea

Pick an idea that you truly believe should be a law. There are many sources of good ideas. Take the time to look at TIME Magazine, the newspaper, 60 Minutes or the evening news broadcast. Information you gather will also help you when you're debating the issue.

Stay away from:

- foolish topics such as legalization of prostitution, legalization of marijuana use, jailing of all ACLU members, etc.
- a bill about the debate topic for this year or last year.
- ideas that are too far out for most people who want to talk about (such as registration of Irish Cloth Patterns).

Step Two: Think of what needs to happen for your law to be effective

Your idea needs help for it to happen. If it doesn't need help, then you don't need a law. What does it need? Often an idea will need **money** or a way to **enforce** the idea.

- if you ask for money...know how much and why you need that much money. Try not to just guess at how much you'll need.
- there are many ways of enforcing your idea. The most often used are: prison, fines and/or expulsion from conducting business (such as banning from trading stock for 10 years, banned from professional baseball, etc.)



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Step Three: Fill in the Blanks

Using the form below...fill in your ideas. (Lines are usually numbered for easy reference)

1. Title: A BILL TO _____
2. Be it enacted by this Student Congress that:
3. Section 1: _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. Section 2: _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. Section 3: _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. Section 4: _____
13. _____
14. _____

General outline suggestions: (these are VERY flexible...many bills only have three sections and some have seven or eight sections!)

- Section 1: Write the main idea you want to happen.
- Section 2: If needed, explain your idea further (you may need even more sections to outline the idea fully).
- Section 3: Explain who will enforce the law and how you will pay for it.
- Section 4: Outline exactly when the bill will take effect.