
A GUIDE TO PUBLIC SPEAKING FOR CANDIDATE DEBATES

APPEARANCE

- Make eye contact with the audience, the moderator, a panelist asking a question or the camera as appropriate.
- Project comfort, enthusiasm and confidence through your speech and posture.
- Use hand gestures to complement speech, but not as a means to release nervous energy.
- Always conduct yourself as if the cameras and microphones are on and focused on you.
- Do not show anger or frustration over criticisms or difficult questions.
- Avoid bright jewelry or busy clothing; dark, solid colors are best for television.
- Smile and add humor when appropriate.

CONTENT

- Ask what topics will be covered in advance and prepare responses ahead of time.
- Use statistics and anecdotes to provide evidence that supports your positions.
- Be positive. A good political leader offers solutions not just criticisms.
- Never repeat criticisms or accusations that have been made against you.
- Use plain language and short sentences with meaning; long, rambling answers put you at risk for criticism and invite questions that you may not want to address.
- Prepare short, memorable quotes that will stand out in the minds of the audience and media long after the debate.

- Use the opportunity to distinguish yourself from your opponents.
- Make news by presenting new information that reporters or the public did not already have.
- Do not make promises that cannot be delivered; voters want leaders they can trust.

MESSAGE

- Frame each response to not only address the question asked but also promote your core message; everything you say publicly should be linked to your message.
- Always remember your target audience and speak to their interests.
- Focus on the two or three things that you want the audience to remember most.
- Project a vision for the future.

PERFORMANCE

- Visualize yourself performing well.
- Consider a walk or light exercise prior to performance to release nervous energy.
- Avoid potential distractions (pocket change, cell phone, pen, jewelry, etc.); empty your hands.
- Take deep breaths and speak slowly. Vary your tone to emphasize key points.
- Do not inhibit natural body language, but avoid swaying, pacing and making repetitive gestures.
- Avoid words and phrases without meaning (“um,” “like,” “you know”).
- Keep hydrated but avoid foods or drinks that could cause discomfort.

This guide was authored by Josh Hills, media and campaign expert and former NDI debate program advisor.



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