

AGES 11-18
YEARS 7-13

ESU SCHOOLS' MACE DEBATING COMPETITION

2025-26 Handbook





WELCOME...

...to the ESU Schools' Mace Debating Competition 2025-26!

This handbook will explain everything you need to know about taking part in the ESU Schools' Mace this year, as well as guidance on how to develop and deliver a great speech, how you will be marked and what to expect throughout the competition.

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ABOUT THE ESU SCHOOLS' MACE

The English-Speaking Union (ESU) is an educational charity that works to give young people the speaking and listening skills they need to thrive. For over 100 years, we have championed the power of language and communication to build better understanding between people and nations. We are a non-political organisation, open to all, and we believe that debate, dialogue and the exchange of ideas are vital to creating a more connected and collaborative world.

The ESU Schools' Mace is the oldest and largest debating competition for schools in England and Wales. Since its founding, it has provided generations of students with the opportunity to test their ideas, develop their reasoning and sharpen their public speaking in a spirit of friendly, constructive competition. Each year hundreds of schools take part, with students exploring topical and challenging motions and learning to listen and respond with confidence, empathy and skill.

At its heart, the Schools' Mace is about more than winning or losing: it is about curiosity, critical thinking and the courage to engage with different perspectives. It's about honing, through debate, the real-world oracy skills needed for our young participants to reach their full potential and change their lives, and their communities, for the better.

**FOLLOW AND TAG US
ON SOCIAL MEDIA
TO LET US KNOW
HOW YOUR TEAM IS
PREPARING. USE THE
HASHTAG #ESUMACE**

FINALS DAY HIGHLIGHTS



ALUMNI NETWORK

By taking part in the ESU Schools' Mace, our young competitors join a thriving global alumni community full of like-minded people. We would love to keep in touch – to enable us to do so, we ask all competitors, whatever level of the competition they reach, [to sign up to our mailing list](#) (or ask a parent/guardian to sign up on their behalf) and look out for their first alumni newsletter!



'The Mace topics are challenging so the competition is a gateway to learning about these new subjects and forming your own opinions'

Year 12 Mace Participant 2023

TIMELINE

The competition calendar provides an overview of the whole year and is the best way to keep track of key dates. Throughout the season you will receive draws which confirm the date of your round, the location and the motion. As each round is hosted in a different venue, we are not able to provide dates for rounds one and two at the start of the year.

Regional final dates are set in advance and published on the calendar. Please make sure these dates are firmly booked in both staff and students' diaries. Unfortunately once we reach the regional finals we are unable to move schools to a different date or location.

Draws for each stage are sent to schools well in advance so that you have sufficient time to prepare.

HOW IT WORKS

The ESU Schools' Mace takes place over five rounds, beginning in schools across England and Wales and culminating in finals day in London.

Rounds One and Two: Heats

In the opening rounds, schools are grouped into heats within their regions, usually with around six schools in each heat (event). Schools are paired against one another, with one side assigned the proposition and the other the opposition for a given motion. Motions and positions are shared in advance to allow for preparation and provisional pairings are also given but are subject to change. Each heat is hosted by a participating school and is overseen by a competition lead with up to three volunteer judges. Our volunteers play a vital role in supporting the competition and ensuring its success, and we are always pleased to hear from those interested in becoming involved.

At the end of each heat, a pre-selected number of schools progress to the next round, depending on the number of entries in the region. Each region has six places available in the regional finals.

Round Three: Regional Finals

The regional finals follow the same format as the earlier heats, with one important difference: only one school will be named a regional champion and progress to finals day. Regional final dates are already set and listed below. Please make sure you have this date in your diary as it cannot change, and if your team cannot make it then you may have to forfeit your place in the regional final.

REGIONAL FINALS: MARCH 2026

9th: East	16th: North-East
10th: West Midlands	17th: East London
10th: North Wales and North-West England	17th: South-West
11th: West London	18th: South
11th: East Midlands	18th: South Wales and South-West England
12th: Mid South	19th: South-East

Rounds Four and Five: Finals Day

Finals day brings together the 12 regional champions for a day of friendly competition, showcasing debating excellence. Motions and positions are shared in advance, as in the earlier rounds.

The day begins with two semi-finals (round four). The 12 schools are divided into two semi-finals of six, making up three debates in each. The winner of each semi-final goes forward to the grand final (round five) in the afternoon. The grand final motion, along with proposition and opposition positions, is provided at the same time as the semi-final positions and motions so that teams can prepare in case they progress.

Finals day is always a highlight of the ESU calendar: a chance to experience debating at the highest level, hear from distinguished judges and connect with students and teachers as well as ESU alumni and supporters. Whether competing or watching, it makes for an inspiring and memorable school trip.

The date of the ESU Schools' Mace finals day has not yet been confirmed. Updates will be shared on the [ESU website](#), social media, and sent to you by email.

The grand final will be livestreamed at esu.org/mace-gf - please share this link with any students or supporters who are unable to attend.

Feedback and Certificates

The ESU Schools' Mace is designed to be a friendly and supportive experience for everyone who takes part. At every stage of the competition, students receive constructive feedback from the judging panel to help them develop their skills and confidence. To celebrate their achievement, all participants are also awarded certificates, which teachers can print and share with their students after each round. This ensures that every student's effort and progress is recognised, not only those who reach the later stages.

DEBATE FORMAT

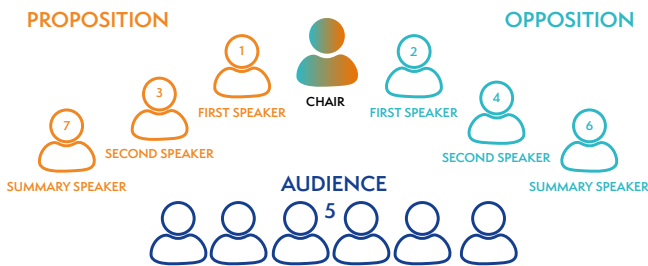
An ESU Schools' Mace debate involves two teams of three speakers: one proposition team and one opposition team. Both teams are given the motion in advance of the debate and will have prepared a case for their side.

The debate begins with the first speaker for the proposition; then moves to the first speaker for the opposition; the second speaker for the proposition; and the second speaker for the opposition. Next comes the floor debate, which is a chance for members of the audience to offer contributions to the debate. Questions and comments from the audience are not answered immediately by teams, but responses are given in their summary speeches. We ask that audience members do not participate in the floor debate of teams with which they are connected. Lastly, the opposition, followed by the proposition, give their summary speeches, which conclude the debate.

Each of the first four speeches last seven minutes. The first and last minute are protected time, which means the opposing bench are not able to offer points of information. Protected time will be indicated by a single tap of the gavel at one minute, and another at six minutes. Summary speeches are five minutes long and entirely protected time.

A timekeeper will indicate the time with a tap of a gavel, (or by lightly tapping the table with their hand) at one minute, six minutes and seven minutes for the first and second speakers in a team, and at four and five minutes for the summary speakers in the team. Speeches that are too long or too short may be penalised.

[CLICK HERE TO SEE HOW THE MACE FORMAT WORKS](#)



'I've seen students' written work improve, just because of the structure they have to use in debating'

History teacher 2024



COMPETITION RULES

Points of Information (POIs) and Barracking

- Point of Information (POI): A formal question or comment made during an opposing speaker's speech. POIs must be brief (about 10 seconds) and are either accepted or declined by the speaker before they are given.
- Barracking: Overloading the opposing side with too many points of information (POIs), disrupting their speech.
- If a competitor barracks a speaker during their speech, one point will be deducted in the 'Listening and Response' category.
- While there are no specific point deductions for it, if a team fails to either propose or accept any POIs during the debate, the judges will take this into account and the speakers' 'Listening and Response' score will be affected.
- Similarly, although there are no specific rules regarding how a team proposes, accepts or declines POIs, it is important that everyone treats each other with respect. Failure to do so may result in point deductions within the 'Expression and Delivery' category.

Ad hominem arguments

- Personal attacks, also known as ad hominem arguments (which target the individual rather than their ideas), are strictly prohibited. We encourage students to engage in thoughtful, respectful discussions and to disagree agreeably.
- Any use of ad hominem arguments will result in a deduction of one to two points in relation to the 'Expression and Delivery' category, and may lead to disqualification from the competition depending on the severity of the incident.

Age Criteria

- Students must be between the ages of 11 and 18 (year 7-11) for the entire competition in order to compete. Unfortunately, any student who fails to meet this requirement will be disqualified. In such cases, schools may nominate a replacement student who is eligible to compete.

Dress Code

- Students may wear either school uniform or business casual attire for all rounds of the competition.

A POINT OF INFORMATION (POI) IS A SHORT VERBAL INTERJECTION OR QUESTION FROM A SPEAKER ON THE OPPOSING TEAM TO CHALLENGE, CLARIFY OR REBUT AN OPPONENT'S ARGUMENT DURING THEIR SPEECH.

SEE ONE IN ACTION HERE.

Reserves

- Each team may consist of up to five students: three competing members and two reserves. Although having two reserve students is not mandatory for entering the competition, it is strongly recommended that teams solidify their reserves at the outset in case of student absence or illness.
- The five students in your team must remain the same throughout the entirety of the competition, and you are welcome to use reserves at any point in the competition.
- If an incomplete team arrives on the day of the competition, they will still be allowed to compete and are still eligible to progress. However, this team will not be given any concessions by the judges and thus may be at a disadvantage competing with fewer team members.

Swing Teams

- A swing team is a team added to a debate to fill a gap and allow the debate to proceed. A swing team may be needed if a school drops out or does not attend the heat. A swing team may contain two or three members.
- While swing teams cannot progress to the next round, this opportunity offers valuable debating experience and judge feedback.
- Any team left without an opponent, and therefore unable to debate, will automatically advance to the next round. We kindly ask that schools assist in forming a swing team if requested.

Timings

- The timekeeper will bang a gavel or knock the table twice to signify when a speaker's time is up. If a speaker goes over by 15 seconds, expect a triple bang and continuous signals until they finish.
- If a speaker chooses to ignore the continuous signals given by the timekeeper, one point will be deducted from the speaker's 'Organisation and Prioritisation' score for every 15 seconds they continue to speak.

THE ESU'S FOUR KEY SKILL SETS – THE JUDGING CRITERIA

Debating requires a range of skills, and the ESU Schools' Mace is assessed using the ESU's Four Key Skill Sets. Judges evaluate the overall persuasive nature of speeches rather than any single element in isolation. Each speaker is assessed out of 40 marks, with 10 awarded for each skill set (apart from the first speaker of the proposition, who is marked out of 15 for 'Reasoning and Evidence', and five for 'Listening and Response'). [Marksheets](#) are available online to see exactly how judges will evaluate each speech.

MARK SCHEME

The ESU's Four Key Skill Sets form the mark scheme for our competitions. We encourage both educators and students to study and discuss this section of the handbook, as it not only forms the basis of our judging criteria, but is a means-tested tool to effectively develop oracy skills beyond our competitions. There are 40 marks available for each speaker.

FIRST AND SECOND SPEAKERS

Expression and Delivery

10 marks for all speakers

- **Vary your voice:** Alter your pitch, tone and pace to emphasise key points. Well-timed pauses signal transitions and add impact
- **Use confident body language:** Facial expressions, eye contact and purposeful movement help to engage your audience
- **Keep it clear:** Speak steadily, avoid slang or overly complex words to ensure your argument is accessible
- **Show confidence through preparation:** Knowing your material lets your natural speaking style shine and builds a genuine connection with your audience
- **Using Notes:** Brief prompts should guide, not dominate. Speakers should speak fluently and will be penalised for reading memorised speeches

Reasoning and Evidence

15 marks for first proposition

10 marks for other speakers

- **Start with a clear position:** Begin with a clear statement of your position so the audience knows exactly where you stand
- **Back it up:** Support your points with relevant examples, facts or analogies. Remember to always explain why they matter
- **Keep it logical:** Build your arguments step by step, making sure each point flows naturally into the next
- **Tackle the other side:** Recognise opposing views and explain why your position is stronger
- **Earn trust through structure:** Trust comes from well-structured, balanced arguments, not necessarily expertise

Organisation and Prioritisation

10 marks for all speakers

- **Guide your audience:** Use clear categories, signposting and logical flow so listeners can easily follow your case
- **Outline with purpose:** Include a strong introduction, ordered main points and a strong conclusion that reinforces your case
- **Show Adaptability:** show a full rounded knowledge of the motion by being able to reorganise your material if developments in the debate require it
- **Manage your time:** Practise with timers or cues to balance each section and avoid rushing through important points

Listening and Response

5 marks for first proposition

10 marks for other speakers

- **Listen first:** Pay close attention, pause to think and respond directly to questions instead of repeating your speech
- **Real-time responses:** Engage with each question specifically, staying relevant and supportive of your original argument
- **Managing complex questions:** Break down long or confusing questions, or ask for clarification to ensure understanding
- **Keep it concise:** Deliver answers clearly and succinctly to maintain audience interest
- **Maintain delivery skills:** Continue using confident body language, eye contact and tone during the question period. Stay calm and composed even when challenged



SUMMARY SPEECHES

Expression and Delivery

10 marks

- As for main speeches

Reasoning and Evidence

10 marks

- **Clarity and Logic:** Set out the most important points of disagreement logically and clearly
- **Revisited material:** Choose the most powerful examples and analogies to revisit
- **New material:** New material is only permitted if it elaborates on or responds to material already mentioned by another speaker in the debate. A small amount of interesting, relevant new material of this type can be rewarded, but totally new material will be penalised

Organisation and Prioritisation

10 marks

- **Choice of arguments:** Don't try to cover everything – stick to the biggest disagreements that matter most
- **Structure:** Organise your speech so it is easy to follow, keeping the audience in mind.
- **Be adaptable:** Respond to how the debate actually unfolded, not just what you wrote beforehand
- **Use time wisely:** Give sufficient time to a discussion of each major area of clash in the debate

Listening and Response

10 marks

- **Own team:** Listen to your own team, reflecting what was actually said rather than what might have been planned beforehand
- **Rebuttal:** Listen carefully to your opponents and show why you disagree with the key arguments
- **Audience Questions:** Listen carefully to audience questions and engage with them through clear, relevant responses

Total Marks Available: 40 per speaker



DEBATING TOP TIPS

Debating is about presenting clear, well-supported arguments, responding to others thoughtfully and communicating confidently. The following guidance can help students develop these skills...

Crack the motion

- **Don't overthink it:** Motions are designed to be open, not steeped with hidden meanings. Go for a clear, logical interpretation you can defend
- **Make it your own:** Decide what you think it means, then stick to that line consistently

Frame your argument

- **Identify your position clearly:** proposition or opposition
- **Decide on your central idea:** Everything you say should point back to this thesis
- **Plan the structure:** introduction → key points → evidence → conclusion... clear journeys beat complex tangles

Brainstorm first

- **Initial brainstorm (60 seconds):** Scribble down everything that comes to mind about the motion
- **Secondary brainstorm:** Pick your best approach, expand with examples and note down possible counterarguments

Research

- **Mix it up:** Facts, statistics, expert opinions and short stories can all help
- **Double-check:** Out-of-date or questionable statistics makes your argument vulnerable
- **Keep it relevant:** Anecdotes should be short, sharp and tied to your argument

Using anecdotes and examples

- **Keep them short:** A mini-story should never dominate your speech
- **Use them wisely:** Stories should clarify, connect or add humour, but never distract
- **Always link back:** Tie every example firmly to your argument

Debating isn't just about winning – it's about curiosity, confidence and respect for different viewpoints. By listening actively, arguing persuasively and embracing the back-and-forth, students grow sharper with every debate, developing both critical thinking and confidence through practice.

Elevate your style

- **Repetition:** Reinforce key ideas strategically.
- **Parallelism:** Use similar sentence structures for emphasis and rhythm
- **Metaphor and simile:** Make abstract ideas tangible and memorable by painting pictures in the audience's heads
- **Rule of three:** Present points in threes for clarity and impact
- **Rhetorical questions:** Engage the audience by inviting them to pause and think

Practise your delivery

- **Full run-throughs:** Rehearse your arguments aloud to spot weak points and refine timing
- **Check your flow:** Ensure your introduction hooks the audience, your points flow logically and your conclusion is strong
- **Test with others:** Present to friends, teachers or family and ask for feedback on clarity, persuasiveness and engagement
- **Simulate debate conditions:** Stand, speak, make eye contact and practise responding to questions or interruptions

Develop your argument

- **Logical flow:** Arrange points so they naturally build on each other
- **Evidence integration:** Support every claim with examples, data or reasoning
- **Address counterarguments:** Acknowledge opposing views and explain why they fall short
- **Make it clear:** Define tricky terms and give real-world examples to clarify complex ideas

RESOURCES

One of the perks of registering for the ESU Schools' Mace Debating Competition is the step-by-step guidance of how to incorporate practical debating in your own schools. Once registered, you will receive access to our tried-and-tested advice for leading debate activities.

Explore our [competitions page](#) to find out more!

ADDITIONAL GUIDANCE AND RESOURCES

Debate club inspiration

Read about Bristol Cathedral Choir School, whose student-led debate club reached the grand final of the ESU Schools' Mace in their very first year, [showing how quickly a club can grow and succeed](#).

How to give the best speech of your life

Click here for guidance from alumni of the ESU International Public Speaking Competition (IPSC), who came together at IPSC 2025 to share their top tips on giving the [best speech of your life](#).

Get inspired

Watching past debates can be particularly helpful. You can find these on our [ESU Schools' Mace playlist on YouTube](#).

Explore more from the ESU

For more resources, to read our equity policy or to learn about fellow alumni, head to our website:

- [Resources](#)
- [Equity policy](#)
- [Safeguarding policy](#)
- [Alumni network](#)



'They need to be able to formulate and articulate their opinions and doing so helps them to think more clearly. Debating gives students a voice to engage in civil discourse'

English Teacher 2022



CELEBRATE THE TEACHERS WHO MAKE IT POSSIBLE...

EXPLORE THE ESU-RUTLAND ORACY AWARDS!

None of our competitions would be possible without the dedication of the amazing educators who inspire and support students every step of the way.

The English-Speaking Union and The Rutland Foundation are recognising educators who champion speaking and listening in schools. If you're helping young people find their voice, we want to hear from you!

The ESU-Rutland Oracy Culture Award celebrates schools that have created a vibrant culture of oracy, where speaking and listening are central to learning and daily life.

The ESU-Rutland Oracy Teacher Award honours educators leading powerful oracy initiatives that make a real impact.

Winners and runners-up will receive £500 and £250 respectively, and all applicants are invited to the ESU-Rutland Oracy Teacher Conference in the autumn – a valuable CPD opportunity to connect with fellow educators, share best practice and deepen your oracy expertise. Award winners will also be celebrated at the ESU's prestigious Evelyn Wrench Lecture.

Applications open in the spring and close at the end of summer. Keep an eye on our awards page and social media platforms for updates on the nomination window!

Visit www.esu.org/awards to find out more



The ESU's programmes equipped me for life – they gave me the confidence to get in to Oxford and build my businesses thereafter – and individual teachers are vital to enabling that process. It is teachers who believe in us and who give up their lunchtimes to prepare us for the competitions. It is teachers who rent the minibuses, drive us all over the country and put in so much of their own time, above and beyond their existing commitments which we all know are huge and becoming greater by the year. These awards are to recognise these teachers, so often unsung, who go the extra mile for their students, so that they can gain the skills that will carry them through life.'

Chris Byrne,
founder of the
Rutland Foundation
and Sponsor of
the ESU-Rutland
Oracy Awards



IT DOESN'T HAVE TO STOP HERE...

Enhance your teaching with expert-led CPD workshops from the English-Speaking Union! Our interactive sessions help you integrate oracy into your classroom, building students' essential skills in communication, confidence and resilience. Whether it's a half-day, full-day or twilight session, our training offers practical tools and resources for immediate use. Empower your students and boost your teaching skills today. For more details, visit esu.org/cpd to enquire and book your session!

STAY IN TOUCH

By taking part in today's competition, you're part of a worldwide network that values the power of communication. Join us to meet new people, get support from other alumni, mentor the next generation and share your journey as you become part of the next generation of speakers and leaders. Stay connected with the international community of ESU alumni at esu.org/alumni.



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