

AGES 11-18  
YEARS 7-13

# ESU SCHOOLS' MACE DEBATING COMPETITION

2026-27 Handbook



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION

discovering voices



# WELCOME...

...to the ESU Schools' Mace Debating Competition 2026-27!

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.

## CONTENTS

|                                                      |    |
|------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Timeline                                             | 4  |
| How it works                                         | 4  |
| Debate format                                        | 5  |
| Competition rules                                    | 6  |
| The ESU's Four Key Skill Sets - the judging criteria | 7  |
| Summary speeches                                     | 8  |
| Debating top tips                                    | 9  |
| Resources                                            | 10 |

## 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**

## COMPETITION HIGHLIGHTS



## YOUNG ALUMNI COMMUNITY

By taking part in the ESU Schools' Mace, our young competitors become part of a thriving global community of like-minded people. We would love to continue our relationship with them beyond the competition, supporting their career paths and aspirations.

We therefore encourage all competitors to [sign up for free](#) as young alumni of the ESU. By signing-up they will stay in touch with the ESU and our mission, have a formal association with a globally respected charity that they can leverage with their developing networks, as well as receive inspiring stories, useful resources and opportunities to continue their journey with the ESU into the future.

## DUKE OF EDINBURGH AWARD

We are proud to be an Approved Activity Provider for the Duke of Edinburgh Award. This means that students are able to use their participation in the Schools' Mace Debating Competition for their Bronze, Silver or Gold Award Skills section.

'The Schools' Mace was such an enriching experience for my students. It was really lovely and very rewarding to see how much they'd enjoyed themselves'

Teacher, 2026 Schools' Mace Debating Competition





[CLICK TO VIEW OUR COMPETITION CALENDAR](#)

## 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 2027

|                                                          |                                                    |
|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| <b>3rd:</b> West Midlands; South                         | <b>10th:</b> East Midlands                         |
| <b>4th:</b> East London; South<br>Wales and West England | <b>11th:</b> North Wales and<br>North West England |
| <b>8th:</b> South West                                   | <b>15th:</b> Mid South                             |
| <b>9th:</b> North East;<br>West London                   | <b>16th:</b> South East                            |
|                                                          | <b>17th:</b> 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](https://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 lasts 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 really enjoyed how the topics are so different to the subjects I'm studying – it's given me time to understand more about the world. It's helped me to gain confidence, too, as public speaking isn't something I'd normally do'

Participant, 2026 Schools' Mace Debating Competition

## 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.

### 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.

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.](#)

- 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. Complete teams are required at finals day. Any incomplete teams at the semi-finals will not be able to progress.

### 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

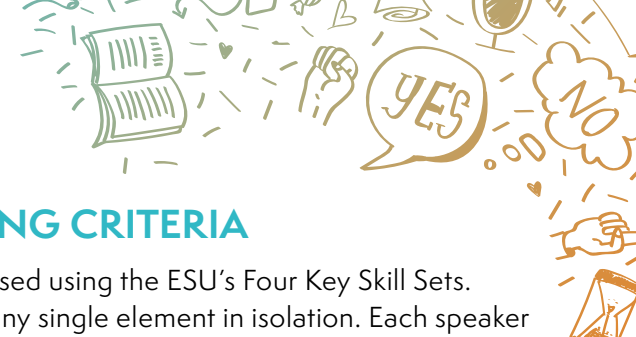
- The timekeeper will bang a gavel or knock the table twice to signify when a speaker's time is up. If a speaker goes over by 15 seconds, expect a triple bang and continuous signals until they finish.
- If a speaker chooses to ignore the continuous signals given by the timekeeper, one point will be deducted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

### Devices

- Devices are allowed to be used during debates as long as the internet is not accessed. This means competitors may read notes off of a tablet or keep track of time with a phone, if needed. This is to ensure the competition is accessible for all learners.

### Defining the Motion:

- The proposition team will be tasked with defining and explaining the parameters of the motion. Guidance on how to do so can be [found here](#).



## 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*



[CLICK HERE TO SEE  
THE FULL JUDGE  
SUMMARY SHEET](#)



## 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

### 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

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.

## RESOURCES

One of the perks of registering for the ESU Schools' Mace Debating Competition is gaining access to our brand-new Competitions Hub. From step-by-step guidance to essential resources and information, you'll find everything you need to help your competition run as smoothly as possible.

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

## ADDITIONAL GUIDANCE AND RESOURCES

### Debate club inspiration

You can find lesson plans on how to set-up and run a debate club on our Competitions Hub. Also read about Bristol, 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](#).

### Ten tips for debating success

Our competition judges [spill the beans on winning strategies](#) for the ESU Schools' Mace debating competition.

### 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](#)



'There's such a lovely camaraderie among all the schools throughout the competition. The students develop as public speakers, and also in terms of their confidence. And what makes the ESU different to every other competition is the amazing feedback from the judges'

Teacher, 2026 Schools' Mace  
Debating Finals Day



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