

AGES 13-16
YEARS 9-11

ESU PUBLIC SPEAKING COMPETITION

2026-27 Handbook



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION
discovering voices

WELCOME...

to the ESU Public Speaking Competition 2026-27!

This handbook will explain everything you need to know about taking part in the ESU Public Speaking Competition this year, as well as guidance on how to develop and deliver a great performance in any role, how you will be marked and what to expect throughout the competition.

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ON SOCIAL MEDIA
TO LET US KNOW
HOW YOUR TEAM IS
PREPARING BY USING
THE HASHTAG
#ESUPUBLICSPEAKING**

ABOUT THE ESU PUBLIC SPEAKING COMPETITION

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 Public Speaking Competition is the largest and most prestigious public speaking competition for schools in England and Wales. Each year hundreds of teams take part, engaging in well-considered, thought-provoking and topical discourse across multiple rounds.

Along the way, participants not only sharpen their speaking, listening and questioning skills, but also deepen their understanding of global issues and the power of constructive dialogue. The competition is designed to nurture confidence, resilience and teamwork; qualities that will serve participants far beyond the classroom.

The ESU Public Speaking Competition is about more than winning or losing: it is about working together with curiosity, empathy and professionalism. It celebrates the ability to listen as well as to speak, to respond with respect as well as with rigour, and to use words to connect, persuade and inspire.

YOUNG ALUMNI COMMUNITY

By taking part in the ESU Public Speaking Competition, 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.

HOW IT WORKS

The ESU Public Speaking Competition 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 to eight schools in each heat (event). Each speaker is paired with a chair and questioner from another team. These pairings are shared in advance but are subject to change.

Each heat in round one is hosted online and each heat in round two is hosted in person at a participating school. For more information, see our [competition rules](#). Every heat, whether online or in person, 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 teams 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 take place in person and 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

8th: East

9th: South West

10th: South

11th: East London

15th: North East

16th: North Wales and North West England; Mid South

17th: South Wales and West England

18th: West London; West Midlands

22nd: East Midlands; South East

Rounds Four and Five: Finals Day

Finals day brings together the 12 regional champions for a day of friendly competition, showcasing public speaking excellence. New Topic lists are shared in advance, as done in the earlier rounds.

The day begins with two semi-finals (round four). The 12 schools are divided into two semi-finals of six, and each one follows the same format as the earlier rounds. Three teams from each semi-final go forward to the grand final (round five) in the afternoon. Speakers use the same speech in the grand final as they did in the semi-final, but will be paired with a new school.

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

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

Feedback and Certificates

The ESU Public Speaking Competition 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.

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 topic list. 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.

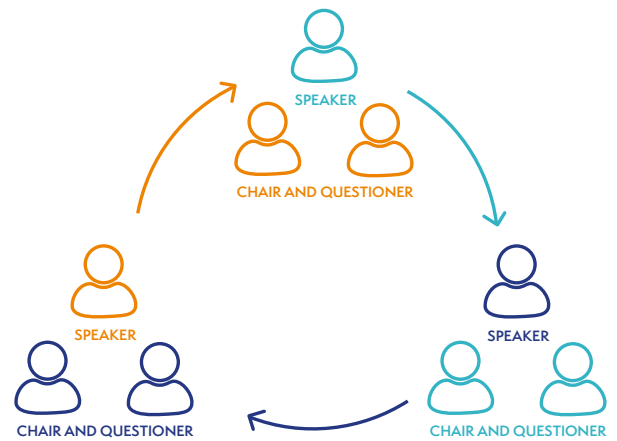
Regional final dates are set in advance and published on the calendar. Please make sure these dates are firmly booked in both staff and students' diaries. Unfortunately, once we reach the regional finals we are unable to move schools to a different date or location.

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

**CLICK HERE TO VIEW
THE PUBLIC
SPEAKING
COMPETITION
CALENDAR 2026/27**

THE FORMAT AND ROLES

An ESU Public Speaking Competition team has five members: a speaker, a chair, a questioner and two reserves who support the team to prepare. Before the competition, each speaker prepares a speech on a topic from a selection provided by the ESU. This list includes one piece of art, and the topics can be interpreted however the speaker wishes. When they arrive at the competition, each speaker is grouped with a chair and questioner from another team. The group then has up to 20 minutes to discuss the speaker's topic and prepare for their presentation. The format is designed to mirror that of an event with a guest speaker in attendance to deliver a speech on a particular topic. All three roles are equally vital and work together to deliver a compelling presentation.



The speaker is responsible for delivering a well-structured and engaging five-minute speech on a given topic, supported by research, evidence and balanced argumentation. They must respond to questions with clarity and demonstrate a deeper knowledge beyond their prepared remarks.

The chairperson manages the flow of the session, introducing the speaker and questioner, guiding the audience, ensuring the presentation stays on time and summarising key points at the end. Their tone sets the atmosphere – warm, welcoming and respectful.

The questioner engages directly with the speaker after their speech, aiming to probe deeper into the topic through thoughtful, courteous and well-targeted questions. They should listen attentively and seek to expand the discussion without being adversarial.

The timings and order of each presentation is outlined to the right. Together, these roles showcase teamwork, critical thinking and communication skills, each contributing to the educational and collaborative spirit of the competition.

14 MINUTES TOTAL



ESU PUBLIC SPEAKING COMPETITION RULES

Competing via Zoom

- Round one of the Public Speaking Competition takes place via Zoom, but all subsequent rounds take place in person
- Hybrid heats (where participants compete both in-person and online) may be arranged for subsequent rounds if absolutely necessary, however we strongly encourage in-person participation wherever possible as hybrid formats are not our standard practice
- Any request for a hybrid heat must be submitted in advance and approved by the ESU
- During virtual competitions, all individuals must keep their cameras turned on, with their microphones muted unless presenting

Age Criteria

- Students must be aged 13-16 (years 9-11) for the entire competition to be eligible to compete
- Unfortunately, any student who fails to meet this requirement will be disqualified. In such cases, schools may nominate a replacement student who fully meets the eligibility criteria

Devices

- Devices are allowed to be used during presentations 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.

Dress Code

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

Reserves

- Two reserve members are allowed per presenting team, in addition to the three core members
- These reserve members can assist the team in preparing for rounds and step in to present for a core member
- If a team so chooses, reserve members are welcome to swap roles with a core team member and present at any point of the competition
- For example, students one, two and three can present during round one, and then students four, five and one can present during round two

- The purpose of this flexible rule is to allow teams who have several eager and competent students to gain as much experience as possible
- Failure to provide reserves may leave your team competing with an incomplete team and at a disadvantage to other competitors

Competing with an Incomplete Team

- On the day of competition, your team will still be able to compete even if you are unable to provide a full team
- This is to honour the preparation time of both your present team members and the other competitors
- Even with an incomplete team, all three roles must still be performed, regardless of preparation
- For example, if a team consists only of a speaker and chair, one of the competitors will be expected to perform the role of questioner in addition to their prepared role
- Incomplete teams will still be eligible to progress to the next round, however they will not be offered any concessions in adjudication; judges will mark all competitors the same regardless of preparation. Complete teams are required at finals day. Any incomplete teams at the semi-finals will not be able to progress.

Presentation Timings

- Adhering to the allotted time is essential to the competition and all participants are expected to manage their time effectively in their roles
- For every 30 seconds that a speaker's presentation runs over or under, one point will be deducted from the 'Effectiveness in Role' category
- The chair's 'Effectiveness in Role' score may also be affected as it is their responsibility to ensure the presentation runs to time

Topics

- The ESU provides a topic list for every participating team in each round of the competition
- Each speaker must base their speech on a topic listed in their team's provided topic list
- They may not use a topic of their choice or a topic from another team's topic list, even if that team is from their school
- If a speaker uses a non-approved topic for their speech, their **content score** will be automatically reduced by two points

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

Whilst the three roles are marked separately, it is worth noting that the Public Speaking Competition is very much a team effort and should be marked accordingly. The best teams will be those that show strength in all three roles, rather than relying on a single member who makes up for deficiencies in the other two roles.

Adjudication is given on the basis of three main criteria:

1. Content
2. Effectiveness in role
3. Style

Within these main criteria, we encourage participants to study the ESU's Four Key Skill Sets to fulfil their roles to the highest quality. They are as follows:

Expression and Delivery

- Are you using tone, pace and emphasis to keep your audience engaged?
- Does your body language – eye contact, posture, gestures – support your message?
- Are you speaking clearly and confidently, without rushing or mumbling?

Reasoning and Evidence

- Are your arguments supported by credible evidence, examples or stories?
- Have you explained why your points matter, not just what they are?
- Are you anticipating and addressing possible counterarguments?

Organisation and Prioritisation

- Does your speech have a clear structure – introduction, main points and conclusion?
- Have you prioritised your strongest arguments rather than trying to include too much?
- Is your conclusion memorable and does it reinforce your central message?

Listening and Response

- Are you actively listening to the speech, and/or the questioner's points?
- Do you adjust your responses to show you understood the questions, rather than just repeating your speech?
- Are you staying calm and respectful, even if challenged?

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



'The students are so incredibly motivated, thoughtful, lively and passionate, and I absolutely adore the collaborative nature of the competition, where you get kids from state and private schools meeting and mixing together'

**English Teacher,
Bristol Free School 2024**

MARKING CRITERIA

The criteria are weighted in the following way:

	CONTENT	EFFECTIVENESS IN ROLE	STYLE
CHAIRPERSON (30)	15	10	5
SPEAKER (40)	20	10	10
QUESTIONER (30)	15	10	5

Speaker Content

- Shows evidence of careful consideration of topic and delivers a logical case
- Gives arguments supported by evidence and relevant analogies
- Considers alternative viewpoints to their own

Effectiveness in Role

- Employs a clear structure that is easy to follow – spontaneous comments where appropriate will be rewarded
- Answers questions comprehensively yet succinctly, demonstrating a greater knowledge of the topic over and above that displayed in the speech

Style

- Use of sheets or notes is appropriate; participant does not over rely on them
- Does not appear to have merely memorised the speech
- Natural fluid style that makes use of carefully-chosen language and rhetoric
- Seeks to draw the audience in with tools such as good eye contact and appropriate body language

Speaker Scoring Scale

STANDARD	CONTENT	EFFECTIVENESS IN ROLE	STYLE	OVERALL
EXCEPTIONAL	17-20	9-10	9-10	33-40
VERY GOOD	13-16	8-9	8-9	25-32
GOOD	9-12	7-8	7-8	17-24
SATISFACTORY	5-8	5-6	5-6	9-16
POOR	0-4	0-4	0-4	0-8

Chairperson Content

- Makes a relevant introduction demonstrating interest in the topic
- Effectively links the speaker and the topic
- Summarises key themes of the presentation at the end

Effectiveness in Role

- Creates a warm and friendly atmosphere
- Introduces speaker and questioner
- Manages the audience questions, asking for rephrasing or repetition, or re-asking the question directly where appropriate
- Effectively manages time, ensuring presentations do not over run or spend too much time on any one section of the presentation

Style

- Ensures speakers feel welcome and appreciated and leads applause
- Interrupts firmly but politely to keep participants to time

Questioner Content

- Asks relevant questions that show they have listened to the speech as given, not merely preprepared questions
- Shows evidence of understanding of the topic by introducing other aspects where appropriate

Effectiveness in Role

- Attempts to deepen understanding of the topic and add clarity where necessary
- Suggests alternate lines of argumentation or views
- Offers clear and succinct questions
- Asks follow-up questions where appropriate

Style

- Employs a non-combative style, being courteous but probing
- Engages in a friendly dialogue with the speaker
- Good use of stance, gesture and eye contact to include the audience in the questioning period

Chairperson and Questioner Scoring Scale

STANDARD	CONTENT	EFFECTIVENESS IN ROLE	STYLE	OVERALL
EXCEPTIONAL	13-15	9-10	5	26-30
VERY GOOD	10-12	8-9	4	21-25
GOOD	7-9	7-8	3	16-20
SATISFACTORY	4-6	5-6	2	11-15
POOR	0-3	0-4	0-1	0-10

CLICK HERE
TO SEE THE
PSC MARK SHEET

BREAKING DOWN EACH ROLE

CHAIRPERSON: HOW TO PREPARE

On the day of your heat, the chairperson and the questioner from your school will be paired with a speaker from another school. You will have about 15-20 minutes to prepare with them, so using time wisely is key!

- Take control: Let the speaker and questioner know how you will introduce them, and how you want the presentation to go
- Keep to time: Discuss how you will let the speaker and questioner know they are close to going over time. Knocking on the desk or clapping can be a good cue

1. Introduce the speaker

Set the tone with a confident, friendly introduction. In one minute, you need to:

- Say the speaker's name
- State the topic (add a quick, neutral comment if you can)
- Explain why the speaker chose this topic

2. Listen to the speech

- Even though you're not speaking, you are still in charge
- Pay attention, support the speaker and keep the audience engaged, making notes along the way
- If the speaker goes over time, wait about 15 seconds, then quietly ask them to finish

3. Run question time

When the speech is done, introduce the questioner and then:

- Inform the questioner they will have four minutes
- After four minutes, invite the audience to ask questions – choose students first
- Avoid questions from the speaker's team or their supporters, and don't pick the same person twice
- You might need to repeat or rephrase questions for the speaker

4. Wrap up

You have two minutes to:

- Summarise the speaker's main points and key questions
- Thank the speaker and questioner, highlighting what you enjoyed
- End on a friendly, positive note

Remember: as chair, you will score out of 30 points. 'Content' counts for 15, 'Effectiveness in Role' counts for 10 and 'Style' will count for five points.

STANDARD	CONTENT	EFFECTIVENESS IN ROLE	STYLE	OVERALL
EXCEPTIONAL	13-15	9-10	5	26-30
VERY GOOD	10-12	8-9	4	21-25
GOOD	7-9	7-8	3	16-20
SATISFACTORY	4-6	5-6	2	11-15
POOR	0-3	0-4	0-1	0-10

The best chairperson:

- Shows they're in charge
- Makes the audience excited to hear the speaker
- Keeps track of time efficiently
- Summarises the speaker and questioner's main points
- Is warm and thanks everyone for their time

'It's important for young people to learn public speaking skills because it's something which is so integral to the adult world. Whether that's in our careers, or just being a citizen who is able to express their own opinion, and I think that is something which is fostered so well this competition'

PSC Finalist, 2026



BREAKING DOWN EACH ROLE

SPEAKER: HOW TO PREPARE

On the day of your heat, you will be paired with a questioner and chairperson from a different school. You will have about 15-20 minutes to prepare with them, so using your time wisely is key!

- Main points: Try to give them a brief summary of your speech. Go over the main points and what sources you used to research
- Think of what you missed: Work with the questioner to go over aspects of your speech that you would like to add more depth to. The questioner can lead their questions to give a greater understanding

1. Preparing your speech

- Choose a topic you're interested in with your team and research it thoroughly
- Sum up your main points in one or two sentences
- Get feedback from your teammates, especially on any weak points

2. Writing your speech

Introduction: Grab people's attention, state your main point and explain why it matters.

- Connect the topic to the audience – why should they care?
- Start with a quote, relevant anecdote or question to grab attention
- Show why the topic is important

Main points: Show evidence of careful consideration of topic and deliver a logical case. Make sure your arguments are supported by evidence and relevant analogies, and consider alternative viewpoints to your own

- Use reliable sources and mention them in your speech
- Share stories to make it relatable
- Build your argument logically

Conclusion: Wrap up your speech by reinforcing your main argument.

- Remind the audience of your main point
- Refer back to your intro and what you aimed to achieve
- End with a memorable line

3. Tips for delivering a great speech

- Style: Mix up your sentence lengths and tone to keep the audience engaged
- Vocabulary: Keep your audience in mind and explain any tricky words
- Projection: Practise speaking loudly enough for everyone to hear

- Pace: Don't rush – practise with a friend to find the right speed
- Pauses: Use them thoughtfully to make your point stronger
- Expression: Show you believe in what you're saying
- Body language: Consider the appropriate stance, gestures and expressions to add impact to your words
- Eye contact: Look at your audience and keep them engaged

4. Answering questions

Question time is your chance to show how well you know your topic. Here's how to handle it:

- Introduce new material if it's relevant
- Keep your answers brief, giving the questioner time to respond
- Stand confidently, make eye contact with the whole audience when listening to and answering questions

Remember: As speaker, you will be scored out of 40 points. 'Content' counts for 20, and 'Effectiveness in Role' and 'Style' count for 10 points each.

STANDARD	CONTENT	EFFECTIVENESS IN ROLE	STYLE	OVERALL
EXCEPTIONAL	17-20	9-10	9-10	33-40
VERY GOOD	13-16	8-9	8-9	25-32
GOOD	9-12	7-8	7-8	17-24
SATISFACTORY	5-8	5-6	5-6	9-16
POOR	0-4	0-4	0-4	0-8

The best speaker:

- Engages their audience and keeps their attention with versatile words, tone and personality
- Structures their speech so it's easy to follow
- Considers both sides but leads to a clear conclusion
- Is prepared, but not over-rehearsed
- Answers questions briefly and adds new information when relevant

BREAKING DOWN EACH ROLE

QUESTIONER: HOW TO PREPARE

On the day of your heat, you and the chairperson from your school will be paired with a speaker from another school. You will have about 15-20 minutes to prepare with them, so using your time wisely is key!

- What's missing?: Ask the speaker to give you the main points of their speech. What areas do you think are worth exploring further? Is there any part of their speech they wanted to dive deeper into?
- Expand understanding: Try putting yourself into the audience's shoes - if this topic were completely new to you (and it might be!), what areas would you like clarification on?

1. Listening well

- Take short notes during the speech
- Focus on the most important points and base your questions on them
- Organise your notes to ensure a smooth and confident delivery

2. Asking good questions

- Refer to what the speaker just said
- If something is unclear, simply ask for a clarification, such as; 'could you explain...?'
- Ask for more evidence if needed, to elaborate the main point not annihilate the argument
- Get the speaker's opinion on related topics not covered
- Suggest different viewpoints or areas of disagreement
- Don't be afraid to ask follow-up questions – just stay polite

3. Expression and Delivery

- Stand and make eye contact, so everyone feels included
- Organise your notes efficiently, so you can look up from them when asking your questions
- Vary your tone and the length of your questions

Remember:

- Bring a pen and paper, or cue cards. You'll know the speech topic about 20-30 minutes before!
- As questioner, you will be scored out of 30 points. 'Content' counts for 15, 'Effectiveness in Role' counts for 10 and 'Style' will count for five points.

STANDARD	CONTENT	EFFECTIVENESS IN ROLE	STYLE	OVERALL
EXCEPTIONAL	13-15	9-10	5	26-30
VERY GOOD	10-12	8-9	4	21-25
GOOD	7-9	7-8	3	16-20
SATISFACTORY	4-6	5-6	2	11-15
POOR	0-3	0-4	0-1	0-10

The best questioner:

- Asks questions to which the audience would want answers
- Shows they're a good listener
- Encourages the speaker to expand, add evidence and consider other views
- Politely asks for an explanation if something isn't clear
- Stays curious and friendly – don't try to challenge or trip up the speaker!



'The specific feedback to my team after the results were announced were very positive and detailed - clearly based on close attention to each part of the presentation. Comments were thorough and clearly explained: they emphasised where their strengths lay, and gave clear guidance on where precisely they needed to improve'

Teacher, PSC Grand Final 2026



RESOURCES

One of the perks of registering for the ESU Public Speaking 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.

PIONEERS IN ORACY

Explore the story of how one school went from having a small debate club and no drama department to entering all three of the ESU's national competitions! If you need a little inspiration on the impact your involvement can have, read the full story on the [ESU News and Views page](#) today.

TEN TIPS FOR PUBLIC SPEAKING SUCCESS

Our competition judges [share their winning strategies](#) for acing the Public Speaking Competition.

GET INSPIRED

Watching past speeches and competitions can be particularly helpful. You can find these on our ESU Public Speaking Competition playlist located on the ESU YouTube channel.



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](#)

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.



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION
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