Coach Handbook

A step-by-step guide to starting, running and growing a speech and debate team in WASDL.

For coaches · Washington Area Speech and Debate League

1. Welcome to coaching

Thank you for coaching. Every speech and debate team starts with one adult willing to say yes, and you don't need to have competed yourself. WASDL coaches include English and social studies teachers, librarians, parents, grandparents and former competitors. What matters most is that you show up, keep students organized and help them get better one tournament at a time.

This handbook walks you through running a team in the Washington Area Speech and Debate League (WASDL), step by step. It is written for coaches at public and private middle and high schools anywhere in the league: the District of Columbia, Maryland and Northern Virginia.

Why speech and debate

Speech and debate teaches students to research, think critically, listen carefully and speak with confidence. They learn to argue both sides of a question and to disagree respectfully. Those skills show up in the classroom, in college applications and for the rest of their lives. For many students, their team becomes a second home.

How WASDL fits in

WASDL is the local league of the National Catholic Forensic League (NCFL), open to public and private schools alike. It has run tournaments in the Washington area since the early 1950s. Each season, WASDL offers:

- **Five preliminary tournaments** in each event, on Saturdays from October through February.
- **MetroFinals** in March: the league championship, where students also qualify for the NCFL Grand National Tournament.
- **Four debate formats** (Policy, Lincoln-Douglas, Public Forum and Student Congress) and **eight speech events**, with sections for novices, middle school students and experienced competitors.

> You are not on your own. WASDL has many experienced coaches who are glad to help. If you are new, ask us to connect you with a mentor coach.

2. Your first 30 days

Starting or taking over a team can feel like a lot. Do these in order and you will be ready for your first tournament.

1. **Talk to your school.** Confirm with your principal or activities director that the team is an approved activity, who the sponsor is, and whether there is a budget or coaching stipend.
2. **Join WASDL.** Submit the membership application, approved by your principal, and arrange payment of the annual dues. See Joining WASDL.
3. **Set up Tabroom.com.** Create your Tabroom account and get access to your school's account. See Tabroom.com, step by step.
4. **Pick a starting point.** Choose either speech or debate, and only a few events, for your first season. See Choosing your events.
5. **Recruit students.** Hold an interest meeting, show what the events look like, and set a regular practice time.
6. **Line up judges.** Every tournament needs judges from your school. Start asking parents now. See Judges.
7. **Handle the paperwork.** Get the school's field-trip or activity approvals, permission forms and transportation sorted out for the season.
8. **Judge a tournament yourself.** If you can, judge at a WASDL tournament before you bring students. It is the fastest way to learn how the day works.

> Don't take on too much at once. Many successful WASDL teams started with a handful of students in one event and grew from there.

3. Joining WASDL

Membership

Any public or private middle or high school in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area may join. The team coach submits a membership application, approved by the school principal. Apply on the Get Started page. Middle schools can compete on their own or as part of the high school they feed into.

The application also tells the league who may represent your school. Every school must have a **school-authorized adult** on site for the whole of every tournament, usually the coach. Your principal can designate additional adults at any time before a tournament, and electronic signatures are accepted.

Dues and fees

- **Annual dues** are set each year at the Fall Meeting. They are generally scaled to a school's entries the previous year, with a separate rate for new or returning schools. Dues must be paid before your students compete.
- **Preliminary tournaments** have no per-student entry fees; dues cover them.

- **MetroFinals** costs $10 per student ($20 per two-person team).
- **Fines** apply for late drops and missing judges. See Deadlines, drops and fines.

League meetings

WASDL is run by its member schools. Every school has a voice through the Executive Committee, which meets twice a year:

- **Fall Meeting** (September): dues for the year are set and the season gets under way. It is the best place to meet other coaches.
- **Spring Meeting**: next season's calendar is presented, and rule changes and elections are considered.

The officers on the Executive Council run each event. The Vice President for an event is your first stop for questions about it. The league's rules are in the Constitution and By-Laws.

4. Choosing your events

WASDL offers four debate formats and eight speech events. You do not need to offer them all. Choose based on your students' interests, your own comfort and how many judges you can bring. Each event is described on the Competition Events page.

Event	Format	Good for
Public Forum Debate (PF)	Teams of two; a new topic every month or two	New teams. Accessible to beginners and audiences, and the most popular WASDL debate event.
Lincoln-Douglas Debate (LD)	One on one; values and philosophy	Students who like ethics and want to compete on their own.
Policy Debate	Teams of two; one topic all year, heavy research	Research-minded students. It needs the most coaching support.
Student Congress	Chambers of 12–25 students debating student-written bills	Larger groups and mixed experience. Great for new students.

Event	Format	Good for
Speech	Declamation, Dramatic Performance, Duo Interpretation, Extemporaneous Speaking, Impromptu, Informative, Oral Interpretation, Original Oratory	Performers, writers and storytellers. Students can double-enter in two speech events.

Sections and levels

Debate events have **Varsity**, **Junior Varsity**, **Novice** and **Middle School** sections, so new students compete against other new students. Speech offers Middle School versions of Declamation, Dramatic Performance, Duo and Oral Interpretation for grades 6–8. Who belongs in which section is explained in Debate Divisions.

Advice for a first season

- Start with either speech or debate. Many WASDL schools have separate speech and debate coaches.
- In speech, offer just a few events. In debate, start with one format; Public Forum or Student Congress are the usual choices.
- Add events as your team and your judge pool grow.

5. Recruiting and keeping students

Recruiting

- **Show, don't tell.** At an interest meeting, have a returning student give a short speech or run a two-minute mini-debate.
- **Ask teachers.** English, history, government and drama teachers know which students love to argue, write or perform.
- **Use school channels.** Morning announcements, club fairs, the school newsletter and parent emails all help.
- **Recruit friends.** Your best recruiters are students who just had a great tournament.
- **Build a pipeline.** Partner with feeder middle schools, which can compete in WASDL's Middle School sections.

Keeping students

- Get new students to a tournament early. The first tournament is usually what hooks them.
- Pair each new student with an experienced teammate.
- Celebrate improvement, not just trophies. Read ballots together and point out progress.
- Give students leadership roles: captains, practice leaders, research leads, social chairs.
- Keep the team fun with team dinners, end-of-season awards and traditions.

- Be realistic about the time commitment so students and families know what to expect.

6. Tabroom.com, step by step

WASDL runs all registration, pairings and ballots on Tabroom.com, the free tournament system run by the National Speech and Debate Association (NSDA). Most other tournaments in the region use it too, so time spent learning it pays off.

Tabroom has four parts. Coaches handle the first two; tournament staff handle the rest:

1. **Your school's account**: coaches, students and judges.
2. **Registration** for each tournament.
3. Tournament setup (done by WASDL).
4. Running the tournament: pairings, rooms, ballots and results (done by WASDL's tab staff).

Set up your account and school

1. **Create your own account.** Sign up at Tabroom.com using an email you check often. This is your personal login and stays with you if you change schools.
2. **Get access to your school.** If your school already has a Tabroom account, ask the previous coach to add you as a coach. Previous coaches don't need to share a password. If nobody has access, Tabroom's support team can help (help@tabroom.com). If your school is new to Tabroom, create the school from your account.
3. **Add other coaches.** You can give assistant coaches access to share the work. Only give access to adults you trust with registration and student information.

Build your roster

1. **Add your students.** Enter each student's name and graduation year. Add a phonetic pronunciation so names are read correctly at awards. Students drop off the active roster automatically after they graduate.
2. **Have students create and link their own accounts.** Students sign up at Tabroom.com and link to your school. They then get their pairings and room assignments on their phone during tournaments, and keep a record of their ballots and results.
3. **Add your judges.** Judges also create their own Tabroom accounts and link to your school. A judge who judged before, such as an alum, keeps their existing account and history.

You can add students and judges at any time during the season.

Tabroom's own step-by-step help guides are at docs.tabroom.com.

Register for a tournament

Registration for each WASDL tournament opens on Tabroom.com about two to three weeks before the tournament. The tournament's Tabroom page lists the events, schedule, location, judge requirements and deadlines. Then:

1. **Enter students by event and section.** For example, Public Forum – Novice, or Policy – Varsity. Pair partners for PF, Policy and Duo Interpretation carefully. In Speech, a student may enter two different events, but not two in the same category.
2. **Enter Student Congress details.** For each Congress student, choose a committee and mark who wants to preside or chair a committee, and who is a Middle School or novice speaker.
3. **Enter judges.** Register judges by event. Tabroom shows whether you have met your judge obligation. Students without enough judges cannot compete.
4. **Upload Congress legislation.** Upload one piece of student-written legislation for every two Congress students, balanced across the Domestic, Economic and International categories. Follow the file-naming rules in Congress registration instructions. Only the coach or another adult should upload legislation.
5. **Double-check before the deadline.** Look over names, partners, sections and judges.

Deadlines, drops and fines

WASDL preliminary tournaments are on Saturdays. Tabroom stops accepting changes at these times in the week before each tournament:

Tuesday, 9 pm	Student entry deadline (and Congress legislation upload)
Thursday, 9 pm	Judge entry deadline
Friday, 9 pm	Last chance to drop students online with no penalty
Saturday, 8:25 am	Check-in closes. Report any last-minute drops.

Late changes cost money and disrupt pairings, so drop students as soon as you know they can't attend. Under the By-Laws:

- Dropping an entry after the published drop deadline: **$10 per entry** ($25 at MetroFinals).
- A judge who misses a round: **$30 per round missed**.
- Late entries, when the Vice President allows them: an extra **$5 per entry**.
- A student who registers and simply doesn't show up may be ruled ineligible for the next tournament in that event.

Schools can't compete again until fines are paid. Appeals go to the President within 48 hours of the tournament.

On tournament day and after

- **Pairings:** students, judges and coaches with linked accounts receive each round's room and opponent by text, email or the Tabroom app, about 15 minutes before each round.
- **Ballots:** judges submit decisions and points on Tabroom.com within ten minutes of each round, and complete written comments by the deadline the Tab Room sets.
- **Results and feedback:** after the tournament, students can read their ballots on their own Tabroom accounts. Reading ballots together at the next practice is one of the best coaching tools you have.

7. Judges

WASDL tournaments run entirely on volunteer judges, and every school brings judges in proportion to its entries. Most WASDL judges are parents with no experience, and that is fine. They judge as ordinary, thoughtful listeners, and students learn to persuade real audiences.

How many judges you need

Event	One judge for every…
Public Forum and Lincoln-Douglas	4 entries, or fraction thereof (a PF team is one entry)
Policy Debate	2 teams, or fraction thereof
Speech	5 entries, or fraction thereof (a Duo pair is one entry)
Student Congress	5 students, or fraction thereof

Obligations are higher for online tournaments and for MetroFinals, where most rounds have two judges. Some sections also have judge-experience requirements, set out in the By-Laws for each event.

Finding judges

- **Parents.** Ask every family to commit to judging at least one Saturday a season, and ask early.
- **Alumni.** Former competitors are excellent judges. College students home for break are a great source, and the WASDL Alumni Association is building a network of them.
- **Teachers and staff** at your school.
- **Community members**: grandparents, neighbors and local professionals who enjoy hearing young people speak.

Preparing your judges

Coaches are responsible for making sure their judges are trained. The 8:30 am briefing on tournament day is not enough on its own. Before the tournament:

- [ ] Make sure each judge has a Tabroom account linked to your school.
- [ ] Send them the instructions for their event from Judge Resources, and suggest How to Be a Great Debate Judge or Speech Judge Instructions.
- [ ] Point them to WASDL's judge training sessions when they are offered.
- [ ] Tell them when and where to arrive (8:00–8:15 am, Judges' Lounge), that lunch is provided, and to expect a full day.
- [ ] Remind them to submit ballots on Tabroom within ten minutes of each round, and to finish written comments by the Tab Room's deadline.
- [ ] Give them the tournament text line, **(844) 676-0212**, for problems in a round.

Thank your judges, every time. A judge who has a good first experience comes back.

8. Tournament day

WASDL preliminary tournaments follow the same schedule every Saturday. The full timetable is on the Tournament Day page. In short:

8:00–8:15 am	Arrive. Students go to the cafeteria, judges to the Judges' Lounge. Confirm that all your registered students and judges are there or minutes away.
8:25 am	Check-in closes. Tell tournament officials about any drops. Entries not checked in may be left out of Round 1.
8:30 am	Judge briefings.
9:00 am	Round 1 begins (Congress Session 1).
About 5:30 pm	Awards ceremony.

Coach's checklist

- [ ] Your school-authorized adult(s), on site for the whole day.
- [ ] Emergency contacts and any medical information for every student, per your school's policy.
- [ ] A charged phone, and Tabroom notifications turned on.
- [ ] The tournament text line, **(844) 676-0212** (texts only; monitored on tournament Saturdays).
- [ ] Your registration list, to check attendance quickly.
- [ ] Snacks, water and phone chargers for students. Food is usually also sold at the host school.

During the day

- **Problems in a round**, such as a missing judge or a late competitor, go to the Tab Room. Judges and students can text **(844) 676-0212** with their name, room and the issue.
- **Forfeits** are decided only by the Tab Room, never by a judge.
- **Devices:** laptops and phones may be used in debate rounds, Congress and the Extemp prep room, but not during other speech events.
- **Recording is prohibited.** Recording any round, in person or online, leads to disqualification.
- **Leave rooms as you found them.** We are guests in the host school, so students put desks and chairs back after every round.
- Please don't leave the building during the tournament, and keep students in the cafeteria or other student areas between rounds.

Online tournaments

Some tournaments are held online. The Vice President for each event publishes the schedule, check-in, device rules and judge obligations for online tournaments, which can differ from in-person ones.

9. The season, month by month

A typical WASDL year for a coach looks like this. Exact dates are on the tournament schedule.

August	Confirm school approval and budget. Renew WASDL membership. Plan recruiting. Update your Tabroom account.
September	Attend the Fall Meeting. Recruit and hold first practices. Build your Tabroom roster. Line up judges for the fall. Submit school approvals for the season's Saturdays.
October–February	Five preliminary tournaments in each event, on Saturdays. Middle School Public Forum has its own Saturday tournaments. Each month: register by Tuesday, judges by Thursday, drop by Friday, compete Saturday, review ballots at the next practice.
February	Check which students have qualified for MetroFinals.
March	MetroFinals, the league championship. Speech runs on a Saturday; debate events usually run Friday and Saturday.
After MetroFinals	NCFL qualifiers submit their commitment form and fee by the date the President sets. Students qualified in more than one event choose one within two weeks.
Spring	Many schools also compete at their NSDA District tournament and state or invitational tournaments. Attend the Spring Meeting.

Memorial Day weekend	The NCFL Grand National Tournament.
June	Team banquet, awards and thank-yous. Choose next year's captains and start planning.

10. MetroFinals and the NCFL Grand National Tournament

MetroFinals, the Metropolitan Championship Tournament, is WASDL's season championship in March. Students qualify during the preliminary season, mostly by winning awards at preliminary tournaments, and the By-Laws set the exact rules for each event. WASDL publishes the list of qualifiers, so coaches should check it and report any omissions promptly. Understanding WASDL MetroFinals explains it in detail.

- MetroFinals costs $10 per student ($20 per two-person team), and judge obligations are higher than at preliminary tournaments.
- A student must compete in every preliminary round to be considered for NCFL qualification.
- Students compete only in the events they qualified in.

Going to Nationals

Top MetroFinals finishers qualify for the **NCFL Grand National Tournament**, held each Memorial Day weekend in a different city. Students qualify as part of their diocese: the Diocese of Arlington for Virginia schools, and the Archdiocese of Washington for D.C. and Maryland schools. Public schools qualify through their diocese too. After MetroFinals, each qualifier needs:

- a **commitment form**, signed by the student, coach, a parent or guardian and the principal (electronic signatures accepted)
- a **commitment fee**, both by the date the President sets

Start planning travel, chaperones and costs early. School approval for overnight travel can take time.

11. Beyond WASDL

WASDL provides most of the regular-season competition for schools in the region, but your students have other opportunities too.

- **National Speech and Debate Association (NSDA).** The national honor society for speech and debate. Members earn points for every round they compete in, at any tournament including WASDL, toward degrees and academic honors. The NSDA also runs the District tournaments that qualify students for its national tournament. WASDL does not require NSDA membership, but many schools join. See speechanddebate.org.
- **National Catholic Forensic League (NCFL).** WASDL's national organization and host of the Grand National Tournament.

- **State associations.** Some schools also compete in their state's high school speech and debate program; for example, Virginia public schools compete through the Virginia High School League (VHSL). Rules and events differ a little from WASDL's, so check each one.
- **Invitational tournaments.** Schools and universities in the region and across the country host invitationals, listed on Tabroom.com. They are a great next step for experienced students.

12. Conduct, ethics and safety

WASDL tournaments work because everyone treats each other with respect. Coaches set the tone for their teams.

What we expect

- **Coaches** supervise their students all day, make sure judges are prepared, model good sportsmanship and handle concerns through the Tab Room, not in the hallway.
- **Students** are on time, respectful to opponents and judges, honest in their arguments and evidence, and good guests in the host school.
- **Judges** decide fairly based on what happened in the round, set aside personal opinions, and write kind, useful comments.
- **Parents and observers** support every student, follow tournament rules and never record rounds.

Honest evidence

In debate, evidence must be real, accurately quoted and properly cited. Students must never invent, distort or misrepresent a source. Teach this early. It protects your students and the integrity of the activity.

Dress

Most competitors wear neat, business-style clothes, but WASDL has no dress code and judges should never decide a round on clothing. Comfortable shoes are a good idea, because tournaments involve a lot of walking.

Safety and respect

WASDL prohibits all forms of harassment and discrimination, and follows an open-door policy so anyone may leave a round that affects their well-being. Read the Harassment & Discrimination Policy and share it with your team. Report concerns to the Tab Room or a tournament official right away.

13. Logistics: approvals, travel and money

School approvals

Most schools treat tournaments as field trips or off-campus activities. Work with your administration early to understand the approval process. Many coaches submit approvals for the whole season at once. Keep permission and emergency forms for every student.

Transportation

Options include school buses, chartered buses and parent drivers, depending on your school's rules. Plan for the 8:00 am arrival and an awards ceremony that can end after 6 pm.

Chaperones

A school-authorized adult must be on site for the entire tournament to handle any student emergency. If you can't attend, your principal can designate another adult before the tournament.

Budget

Typical costs for a season include:

- WASDL dues
- MetroFinals fees
- NSDA membership (optional)
- transportation
- any invitational or national tournaments
- practice materials
- team shirts or awards

Common funding sources:

- school activity funds or stipends
- a parent booster group
- team fundraisers
- local businesses and foundations

Budget for possible fines too, and avoid them by dropping entries on time.

Communicating with families

Set up one simple channel for families, such as an email list or a group-messaging app your school allows. At the start of the season, share the calendar, what tournament day looks like, the time commitment and how to sign up to judge.

14. Coaching strategies

You don't need to be an expert to coach well. Good coaching is mostly structure, encouragement and practice.

Running practice

- Meet at a regular time each week, more often in the week before a tournament.
- Warm up with short drills: impromptu speeches, quick rebuttals, reading evidence aloud, cross-examination practice.
- Have students give full speeches or practice rounds and get feedback from you and from teammates.
- Use the ballots from the last tournament. Judges' comments show exactly what to work on next.

Building skills over time

- Teach the basics first: speaking clearly, organizing ideas and answering the other side.
- Move students from Novice to Junior Varsity to Varsity as they gain experience. Debate Divisions explains when they must move up.
- Teach research and citation habits early.
- Encourage experienced students to coach younger ones. Teaching others is one of the best ways to learn.

Free coaching resources

- National Speech and Debate Association: event guides, coach courses and videos.
- NFHS Learning Center: free introductory courses for speech and debate coaches.
- WASDL Coach Resources and Student Resources: event rules, topics and how-to guides.
- Other WASDL coaches. Ask for a mentor; most coaches are glad to help.

15. Hosting a WASDL tournament

WASDL tournaments happen because member schools open their doors. Hosting is a great way to show off your program to your school community, and the league provides the tab staff and awards.

What a host school provides

- [ ] Enough classrooms for the event, typically one per debate or speech section, plus a Tab Room with good Wi-Fi.
- [ ] A cafeteria or common area for students, and a separate Judges' Lounge.
- [ ] Building access from about 7:30 am to the end of awards, and custodial coordination.
- [ ] Food for sale for students and families, if possible. Judges' lunch is part of tournament hosting.
- [ ] Signs, maps and a few student or parent volunteers to guide people.
- [ ] An area for the awards ceremony, usually the cafeteria or auditorium.

How to volunteer

Next season's calendar is presented at the Spring Meeting. If your school can host, tell the President or the Vice President for the event before then, and bring your school calendar to the meeting. You will work with the event's Vice President and Tournament Director on the details.

16. Glossary

Ballot

A judge's decision and comments for a round, submitted on Tabroom.com.

Break / elimination rounds

Rounds after the preliminary rounds for top competitors, such as at MetroFinals.

Chamber

One room of Student Congress, with 12–25 students.

Check-in

Confirming on tournament morning that your students and judges are present (closes at 8:25 am).

Constructive / rebuttal

The first speeches that build a case, and later speeches that answer the other side and summarize.

Crossfire / cross-examination (CX)

Question-and-answer periods between speeches in debate.

Docket

The order of legislation to be debated in a Congress session.

Double entry

Entering a student in two Speech events at one tournament.

Drop

Removing an entry or judge from your registration.

Extemp prep room

Where Extemporaneous Speaking students prepare their speeches.

Flight

In double-flighted rounds (PF and LD), a judge hears two debates back to back in the same time slot.

Judge obligation

The number of judges a school must bring, based on its entries.

Novice / JV / Varsity

Experience levels in debate. See Debate Divisions.

Pairings (or postings)

The round assignments showing who competes against whom, in which room, with which judge.

Presiding Officer (PO)

The student elected to run a Congress session.

Speaker points

Scores a judge gives each debater for speaking skill, separate from the win or loss.

Sweepstakes

Season-long school awards based on student results, such as the Daniel S. Masterson, Jr. Sweepstakes Award.

Tab Room

Tournament headquarters, where pairings, results and problems are handled.

Text line

WASDL's tournament-day text number for problems: (844) 676-0212.

About this handbook

This handbook is maintained by WASDL and updated as league rules and tools change. Where it differs from the Constitution or By-Laws, those documents govern.

Parts of this handbook are adapted, with thanks, from the *Debate & Speech Coach's Handbook* by Jim Dunning, WASDL President Emeritus.

Spotted something out of date, or have a tip for new coaches? Let us know.