Young Speakers Scotland

Communicate with Confidence

2026-2027

Public Speaking Competition Handbook

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Contents

1 *Welcome*

2 *Introduction*

3 *Competition Info and FAQs*

4 *Advice for First Time Speakers*

Welcome

Young Speakers Scotland was established to empower young people in Scotland by developing their communication skills through public speaking and debating. Our mission is to foster confidence, critical thinking, and effective communication in young people, helping to reduce the poverty-related attainment gap.

We believe that the ability to speak confidently in public is a vital life skill that transcends industries and career paths. Whether in politics, business, law, or education, those who can express themselves clearly and persuasively are at a distinct advantage. At Young Speakers Scotland, we aim to help young people realise their potential by equipping them with these essential skills.

Our Public Speaking Competitions offer students a unique platform to hone their oracy skills.

This handbook provides comprehensive guidance on our Public Speaking Competitions. For more information on this year's event, or to learn about our other programmes, please visit our website or contact us at events@youngspeakersscotland.org.uk. We look forward to seeing how you'll take on the challenge and wish you the very best of luck!

> ***Debating has led me to participate in the Young Speakers Scotland competition where I could passionately express myself like never before. I've found myself becoming more confident in holding mature conversations with those decades older than me. I'm incredibly grateful for the opportunity to express myself in this way."***
>
> ***Lila-Jane F (Arbroath Academy), winner of the Senior Public Speaking competition.***

Public Speaking Competition

Introduction

Young Speakers Scotland runs two single-speaker competitions: the Senior Public Speaking Competition, for pupils in S4 to S6 (aged 18 or under), and the Junior Public Speaking Competition for S1 to S3 pupils. Both competitions consist of preliminary heats followed by a joint national final.

In each competition, participants choose to participate in one of two streams: Persuasive Speaking & After-Dinner Speaking. Persuasive Speaking lends itself to more serious speeches, and After-Dinner Speaking lends itself to more humorous speeches. Below you can find descriptions of what speeches in each division entail.

Persuasive Speaking

If you choose to deliver a persuasive speech, you must select a problem and offer a proposed solution. You are free to choose whatever topic you like under these parameters, but should deliver your speech in a serious manner. Time should be devoted to both the problem and the solution, but speakers are free to choose how they divide these sections of their speech, and may also offer multiple solutions. Topics can be broad or specific, and need not be about Scottish issues. Your problem could be an issue at your school, with the government, with the video game industry, or with the economy of rural China. Personal anecdotes are more than welcome if they help further the argument being made.

Speakers will be judged on the delivery of their speech and how well they present their topic. Judges will ask whether the problem is well-described, and how well they are convinced by the solution.

After-Dinner Speaking

If you choose to deliver an after-dinner speech, you must select an imaginary audience and deliver a humorous speech to this audience. For example, you could give a speech to the annual meeting of Musical Theatre Haters or a gathering of doomsday preppers. Speakers are encouraged to use their imagination and are free to use fictional or fantastical settings. The audience should be revealed during the speech, but this can be done at any point - including right at the end of the speech, as a punchline. While after-dinner speeches are humorous, they are not stand-up comedy sets and should still contain structure, rather than being a list of jokes.

Speakers will be judged on how entertaining, clever and well-delivered their speeches are.

Competition Info and FAQs

Questions

There are **no longer any questions** after speeches in either division.

What are the age requirements?

The Senior Public Speaking Competition is open to pupils in S4-S6. The Junior Public Speaking Competition is open to pupils in S1-S3.

What are the speech lengths?

Speeches are 5 minutes for both juniors and seniors, in both categories. Speakers will receive indication when they have one minute left of their speech, and judges will not take notes for anything said after 5.30.

Are speakers allowed to use props or visual aids?

Speakers are not permitted to use any props or visual aids, but may use any form of speech notes.

Do I deliver the same speech again if I make the final?

No. If you make the final you will need to write a new speech, and this will also need to be in the same category you entered for the preliminary round.

How much does it cost to enter the Public Speaking Competitions?

Entry for the Public Speaking Competition is £30 for one speaker and £15 for each additional speaker entered per school.

I've chosen our speakers but I have a whole class/debating club eager to be involved. Is there a way that they can all take part?

It's great if you can get a whole class or club involved in helping your speakers prepare. Additionally, students can also accompany their school's speakers to the heat and offer in-person support, making the competition a real team activity.

What is the speaking order?

The speaking order will be randomly allocated and communicated to all speakers at the start of the round.

Advice for first time speakers

Getting started

For many pupils, speaking in a competition for the first time will be a nerve-wracking experience and even very experienced speakers get nervous before speaking in public.

Some confident pupils will immediately volunteer for competitions whilst others may be reluctant to speak in public. They may, however, become more involved in public speaking over time, especially if they are able to help the competitors prepare, attend heats and ask questions. You will know which of your pupils will be able to compete initially and which will need more help to become more confident.

Building confidence

You should let pupils know that it is perfectly natural to be nervous before speaking in a competition and that, in many ways, it is a positive thing - a few nerves can encourage dynamism and quick thinking.

Most young people are much better public speakers than they think are. However, many pupils will be very nervous about speaking in public, especially in front of their peers.

Working with their team mates and pupil coaches can help encourage speakers - both in their preparation and showing them that all speakers get nervous before a competition. The pupil coaches and team mates can play an important role in encouraging and supporting speakers.

There are a number of strategies that can help young people overcome their nerves. These may be particularly useful for pupils competing for the first time.

Preparation

Good preparation helps. If a speaker has done a lot of research and worked with others to prepare their arguments and practise their speeches, they will be much less nervous. It is also a good idea for the speaker to practise answering questions on their topic. You can involve other pupils in helping with this.

The audience is on your side!

At the heats most of the audience will comprise fellow competitors and some supporters. The other competitors will also be feeling nervous so everyone is in the same boat. The supporters may also have invested time in helping the speaker to prepare and they want the speakers to succeed.

Speakers should not see the audience as an intimidating factor but remember that they are on their side! If you are chairing, encourage the audience to applaud the speeches and remind the speakers that the audience is here to enjoy and learn from their speeches.

Constructive feedback

Judges will highlight the strong aspects of a speaker's performance and suggest areas where the speaker can improve. Positive and constructive feedback is a useful way of building a speaker's confidence. If the speakers are practising their speeches in front of other pupils to prepaper, ask pupils in the audience to say two things they liked about each speech and one thing to work on. Encourage peer support and learning from each other.