

Zen and the 1AR
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These notes consider the unique challenges of the first affirmative rebuttal in policy debate, and offer some thoughts about “outside the box” resources that aspiring debaters can use to take good 1AR skills and make them great.

- I. ***The mission.*** Technically, the 1AR is the most difficult speech in policy debate. At a 3:1 time disadvantage compared to the negative block that precedes it, the 1AR must meaningfully cover every argument in the round. That difficult challenge poses strategic and technical considerations.
 - A. ***Strategically,*** the 1AR has two related goals:
 1. ***No drops.*** A good 1AR must cover all the major arguments in the round. Even a novice-level 2NR will pivot from any pre-round strategy to go for a significant dropped argument.
 2. ***Create options.*** The 3:1 time disadvantage of the 1AR is well-known. But it’s often overlooked that the 1AR begins the “affirmative block” where the affirmative has a 2:1 time advantage in the final three speeches. A strong 1AR starts the affirmative block by giving the 2AR options about the major issues in the round. By doing so, the 2AR not only has more flexibility in the final speech, the 2NR is placed under pressure to anticipate and answer all of the 2AR’s possible strategic decisions.
 - B. ***Technically,*** a good 1AR avoids line-by-line debate, using two related techniques:
 1. ***Don’t flow the block.*** There isn’t time. A skillful 1AR is writing out the answers that they will read in the speech, as they hear the negative arguments.

2. **Group.** A skillful 1AR will group large chunks of the flow: contentions of the case, half of the numbered off-case arguments on a disad, etc. Then, the 1AR delivers their arguments in a simple list. A more “ornate” organization can easily waste time with signposting, in a speech where there is already a 3:1 time disadvantage.

II. **Insights.** Doubtless, there are many other sports, activities, and academic disciplines that

- A. **Use the unconscious mind.** Cormac McCarthy is well known as one of the greatest American fiction writers. He also wrote one notable nonfiction essay, drawing on his collaboration with scientists while in residence for many years at the Santa Fe Institute.

Called “[The Kekulé Problem](#),” the essay explores how human consciousness arises from the unconscious mind. It uses the discovery of the structure of benzene by chemist Friedrich August Kekulé as a metaphor. Kekulé famously dreamed of a snake biting its own tail (in anthropology, an image called an [Ouroboros](#), which recurs in many cultures).

From that starting point, McCarthy reflects on the role of the unconscious in creativity and problem-solving, questioning why language, a conscious construct, fails to capture the depth of unconscious thought. He proposes that the unconscious operates on a fundamentally different, non-verbal level, essential to human cognition yet largely inscrutable.

His insights are directly relevant to the 1AR’s preparation process during a debate. There isn’t time to consciously think through every issue under discussion. The speaker has to rely on lessons learned by, and insights offered by, their unconscious mind. Developing confidence in doing so is an important part of a 1AR’s advancement.

- B. **Sense everything.** In baseball, it’s well known that the ball moves too fast for the human brain to track it in real time after it leaves the pitcher’s hand, especially at speeds above 90 miles

per hour. Hitters rely on extensive practice and experience to predict the ball's trajectory based on the pitcher's release, body movements, and the ball's initial flight.

This predictive processing lets hitters start to swing before the ball reaches the plate. Their brains unconsciously adjust for small variations in speed and direction, making contact possible through anticipation rather than real-time tracking.

Good 1ARs do the same thing. An easy example occurs when a 1NR does good work extending a potentially significant argument, but the 1AR knows that the 2NR never extends their partners' arguments. A more subtle example arises when a 2NC is extending a significant argument that they obviously are not personally familiar with. Under the pressure of an actual round, the 2NR will be more likely to choose another argument with which they have more familiarity. A good 1AR lets that knowledge influence how they shape and structure that speech.

The literature about baseball hitting is, of course, tied to the mechanics of that sport. But it still provides insights about an analogous challenge to the human mind and will repay some study. Skimming Ted Williams's 1971 book, [*The Science of Hitting*](#), is probably enough to get the general idea, although there is no shortage of thoughtful online commentary on this aspect of the game.

- III. *Summary.*** High-level policy debate involves far more than rational exchange about arguments on a flowsheet. Especially in the technically demanding 1AR, the activity requires use of the entire mind—conscious and unconscious—and awareness to far more than just what's on the flow. The above examples are two good ones, but I'm sure there are other areas that offer similar insights into how to develop the full skill set needed for policy debate success.