

David Gergen's 20 General Tips for Political Debates

1. Prepare thoroughly:
 - Study your positions and those of your opponent
 - Engage in mock debates, using a podium and televised tapes for review
 - Encourage candid advice
 - Narrow down the group of advisers toward the end
 - Agree upon general strategy, main points to be hammered home, sound bites, rhetorical responses, surprises
 - Consider props
 - Prepare opening and closing statements
 - Have professionals negotiate conditions in the hall
 - Spend some time alone thinking
 - Be rested

2. Adopting a general strategy:
 - Which voters are you trying to win over?
Base vs. swing
 - What are you trying to accomplish substantively?
 - What are you trying to accomplish personally?

Remember that usually audiences must like and admire you personally and be inclined emotionally in your direction before they will listen to the logic of your arguments.

3. Settle upon 3 or 4 key points to drive home:
 - About your qualifications vs. your opponent's
 - About the emotions you wish to arouse
 - About your philosophy vs. opponent's
 - About your policy position vs. opponent's
4. Always remember that your main audience is on the other side of the television camera, not in the studio. Even as you engage with the moderator and your opponent, make sure you are always reaching your main audience.
5. Preparation and sound bits:
 - The sound bite will be repeated endlessly and will shape memories long after the debate is over
6. Take care in criticizing the other side:
 - Frequently best to use sadness rather than scorn
 - Use humor deftly
 - Scorn, tough words best reserved for moral points
7. Condense arguments to their essentials; find a pithy sentence or two to make them memorable.

8. Back up arguments with concrete examples, evidence that is graphic and easy to understand.
9. Answer the question first and then, if it helps, use that as a springboard to make the point you want. Don't be afraid to rephrase the question, but don't do it too often
10. Draw upon the past to light the way to the future:
 - Draw upon those figures from the past who best help you appeal to swing voters and to your base (not always the same)
 - Draw upon old verities, showing how they can best be applied today
 - A quote or two from other source always enlivens (in an American context, can be anyone from Lincoln to Yogi Berra)

If your opponent makes a strong, persuasive point, don't be afraid to acknowledge it but then find a way to blunt its effectiveness.

11. If your opponent makes a hard charge against you, answer it. A charge left unanswered can be interpreted as a charge that is true. But don't let your opponent get under your skin EVERand don't let him throw you off your own message. If you play defense all night, you won't score many points.
12. Don't be overly aggressive or hot. Television is a cool medium.
13. Be flexible –robot-like response can kill you.
14. Always assume that the camera is watching you
15. Effective ripostes:
 - In today's culture, they can be the key to debating -- often people judge a candidate by how creatively and humorously she or he can respond; ripostes often become the stuff of sound bites, too.
16. For the want of a nail, a kingdom can be lost:
 - Pay attention to details; they can count a lot more than you think.
17. Have your staff prepared for the post-debate debate with the press.
18. Ensure that your events just after a debate are attended by huge, enthusiastic crowds.
19. If you have blown something in the debate, be prepared to admit your mistake fast.
20. Enjoy yourself and the debate.