

Choosing an LD Workshop: Suggestions for Coaches, Parents and Students

Summer workshops powerfully influence the practice and culture of contemporary LD debate. Given the educational ramifications of workshop attendance, the LDEP encourages coaches and parents to be informed participants in decisions about which, if any, workshops students will attend. We especially encourage coaches to be proactive in helping parents to understand the issues and assess their alternatives.

Knowing the right questions to ask is only part of the challenge. Finding reliable answers to those questions is also important. Few coaches and virtually no parents have the chance to observe workshops first-hand, and student reports are often colored by considerations of style, loyalty to their instructors, powerful advertising and a desire to be hired by the workshops they have attended. The best advice is to seek information from as many sources as possible, including people whose judgment you already trust, and to ask direct questions that are likely to elicit precise answers. To gain a balanced perspective on workshops, you may want to speak to their directors, to alumni from your school who have attended them, and to coaches you know whose students have attended them.

The following are questions we believe parents, coaches, and students may find it helpful to ask about prospective workshops:

1. What are the specific academic objectives of the workshop? How does the workshop accomplish those objectives? Workshops may agree on their most general goals—e.g., to make students better debaters—but they differ considerably in their interpretations of these general goals. It makes sense to find out what a workshop means by “good debate.” Likewise, while it is easy to state impressive objectives, workshops should be able to provide detailed explanations of how they achieve those objectives. Different students thrive in different social settings, and comparing the overall size of potential workshops as well as the size of their working lab groups may help to reveal the potential for substantial one-on-one contact with teaching staff.

2. Who are the directors of the workshop? What are their credentials to address the needs of high school students? You’ll want a workshop’s administrators to be people who can be trusted to make important academic, social, and safety decisions for a large and heterogeneous group of high school students. Does the workshop have insurance and individuals on staff to deal with health and other non-curricular issues that may arise?

3. Who are the workshop’s *teaching* staff? What are their academic and teaching backgrounds? Sometimes the advertised staff and the actual staff are not the same. Some advertised staff may be primarily administrative or may only be guest speakers. Be sure you know who the true teaching staff members are and whether they are experienced educators that are able to diversify teaching methods for the distinct learning styles of students. Recent high school graduates who were successful debaters are often an integral part of the teaching staff. While talented as debaters, these staff members have little or no teaching experience and few academic qualifications. You might want to consider the overall experience level of a workshop’s teaching staff and also inquire about whether and how the workshop trains and mentors recent graduates in their new role as teachers.

4. Who will be my student’s primary teacher(s)? Most workshops are organized on the “lab” model, in which part of each day is spent working in a small seminar (or “lab group”) with the same instructor on basic debate skills. A student’s lab leader is often the biggest single determinant of the quality of the student’s workshop experience. Requesting an example of past in-lab curriculum (for example, a lesson plan) might give you an indication of the type of experience your student will receive.

If you select a workshop on the basis of one or two big-name staff members, do not assume that your student will have extensive opportunities to work with those people. The safest policy is to choose a workshop with a strong staff overall. If you are most interested in particular members of a workshop’s advertised staff, find out in advance how much teaching they will be doing, how many students they will instruct, and the experience level of their students. If possible, secure specific advance guarantees from the workshop director to work with those instructors.

A related issue is the workshop's policy regarding student access to a diversity of staff members. Many workshops are comfortable with the student's primary instruction coming from one or two instructors. Others embrace a model of exposing students to a diversity of opinions from different faculty. Knowing the model a particular workshop has before the student arrives seems to be a wise move for consumers.

5. Are the actual teachers good academic and personal role models? Many students greatly admire their workshop teachers and imitate them, so it makes sense to find a staff composed of people you would be glad for your student to emulate. If you do not like the way a person debated or conducted himself or herself outside of debates, it is unwise to place your student under his or her tutelage. If you are unsure about the reputation of a workshop's staff members, ask coaches who might know.

6. What boundaries are enforced between students and staff, and who enforces them? Especially with younger staff members who may be quite comfortable fraternizing with students, it is important that there be clear social boundaries to preserve an academic atmosphere. What are a workshop's official policies in this area, and what is its unofficial reputation? How exactly has the workshop enforced these policies in the past?

7. What are the behavioral expectations of students, who enforces them, and how strictly? Workshops should be able to furnish a specific list of rules. Just as important as the content of these rules is their actual enforcement, since workshops are reputed to vary widely in their strictness. Again, it is wise to find out what reputation a workshop has in this department and how it has handled serious infractions in the past. Professional teachers and other adults typically find it easier to enforce rules than do recent high school graduates. Does the workshop place younger staff members in positions of authority concerning disciplinary issues?

8. How are students supervised at different times of day? Are students, for example, required to be at all scheduled academic functions, or are they permitted to skip some? Are there blocks of unsupervised time in the evening or on weekends? Find out what procedures workshops use to track students throughout the day and to locate missing students.

9. How does the schedule balance academics, play, and rest? Debate workshops are traditionally demanding academic experiences, but some focus more on extracurricular activities than others. How much time will a student spend studying debate? Make sure the workshop you choose matches your priorities.

10. Does the workshop have a history and policy of encouraging students to respect the decisions of their coaches and families? Students sometimes return from workshops challenging their local authorities. Probably no workshop officially encourages such disrespect, but ideally workshops should actively discourage it. Are all staff trained and committed to follow such policies? The experiences of past coaches with a given workshop may be the most reliable guide to its ethos.

11. Does the workshop teach anything, stylistically or substantively, that I would not want my student to learn? Some workshops, for example, may teach a model of LD value structures at odds with various regional understandings. Or a workshop might promote a faster, more evidence-driven "national circuit" style of debate that a coach does not support. Ask around to be sure that prospective workshops respect your values and priorities.

12. What are the workshop's true costs? Initial cost quotations vary widely in what they include. Are there other optional or required fees for, for example, applications, airport transportation, photocopies, field trips, workshop souvenirs, or books for reading groups? Does the board fee include all meals from the student's arrival to his or her departure, or must some meals be covered by the student out-of-pocket? How much spending money do students need? Of course, transportation expenses are also part of any complete cost comparison.