Coaching Beginners in Student Congress

Don Schulte

Student Congress provides a valuable channel for coaches seeking a challenging event requiring less upfront preparation than other speech events. Bringing students into speech and debate activities through the use of Student Congress may be the opening your students and/or you might use to build your speech squad. The material below is designed to assist a speech teacher to introduce Student Congress to his or her students. The process of preparing students for a session of debate, teaching parliamentary procedure, and common mistakes for a coach to avoid are discussed below. Two classroom activities are provided below to introduce students to the event.

Student Congress is the most relevant of the speech events to the average student. Student Congress imitates life. In real life a person rarely has more than three minutes to speak his or her mind. In real life a speaker faces potential interruptions, pointed questions and the chance that his or her listeners will decide to move on just before the speaker gets a chance to share thoughts. Real life thrusts people into leadership roles and so does Student Congress. Cub Scout Pack leaders, Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, Neighborhood Watch groups and a host of other causes demand some level of meeting organization for which Student Congress prepares citizens in leadership. Student Congress imitates life and prepares students for the role of leadership in our Republic.

The basics of Student Congress are not difficult. Like debate events the speaking order moves from pro-con-pro.... Like other events there is a time limit for speeches; in Student Congress that limit is three minutes. Like debate the contestants know the issues before the tournament, but like extemporaneous speaking the issues are always changing. Potential Presiding Officers give short orations to persuade others to vote for them. Like Humorous Interpretation and Dramatic Interpretation some speakers can tickle your funny bone or tear at your heart.

The Basics: Preparing for Congressional Debate

Beginning a session of Student Congress requires proposed legislation. Students can be asked to write their own legislation or some can be obtained from other coaches or past tournaments. With legislation in hand, the students can begin the quick process of researching the issue(s) in the piece. A short while on the internet can provide a wealth of information. To help your students focus, ask them for specific quotations, specific facts, and specific ideas they have about the legislation (see website for worksheet). Rather than “kill trees” to photocopy entire articles from the web, ask each student for four expert quotes (including witty ones from Bartlett’s and other quote books). A quote from someone the other students know is worth five quotes from people they have never heard of. Require contestants to provide four specific facts from four different sources. Examples of facts include the population of a country proposed to receive foreign aid (World Almanac), the type of government (CIA Factbook), the US National Debt (Google search resulting in access to the Library of Congress website), and the number of people facing starvation in the entire World (UNHCR Website). An up-to-date almanac is a resource all competitors should have with them and use in the round to both
formulate speeches and authoritatively respond to other speakers. If the speech team budget is tight, buy last year’s almanac.

*Teaching Parliamentary Procedure Made Easy*

Parliamentary Procedure is the scariest aspect of Student Congress for most new coaches. To perform well is not complicated if students know “The Big Five Motions.” A chart of The Big Five Motions is found in Appendix A. “The Big Five” is this author’s way of boiling down the complicated twenty-four motions on the NFL Motions Chart to something manageable for the new student to actually use. The Big Five Motions are: To Amend, Previous Question, To Lay on the Table, To Suspend the Rules, and Point of Order or Point of Parliamentary Procedure. By focusing on these “Big Five” a new contestant can effectively participate in the session after only five to ten minutes of study.

**To Amend.** To Amend simply means to change something in the proposed legislation. Amendment motions either add, delete, or substitute language in the bill or resolution. An example might be to change a “...$5 million...” proposal to a “...$10 million...” proposal. The amendment would sound like this: “I move to amend by substitution. Replace the 5 in the first paragraph with a 10.” This motion requires a “one third second.” In other words, if one third of the people in the room agree to discuss the amendment, then we debate begins. (Don’t be surprised if the chamber “suspends the rules” to immediately vote on the change...especially if it is a commonsense change.) A simple majority is required to amend legislation. “Typos” and other errors (such as poor quality photocopying) usually are corrected by the author simply announcing the mistake in his or her authorship speech. If there is no objection, it is immediately corrected without a motion or vote.

**Previous Question.** A Previous Question motion asks, “Should we stop talking and start voting?” It is sometimes explained as “closing debate” or “voting to vote.” This motion requires a “second.” Since debate is key to the entire idea of a “deliberative body,” it is difficult to end debate. A two thirds vote is required to end debate and move to the actual vote on the legislation (i.e. the “Main Motion”). If this motion fails, the Presiding Officer (PO) continues looking for a speech. If this motion passes, the PO immediately begins the vote on the proposed legislation.

**To Lay on the Table.** The motion, To Lay on the Table, asks that legislation be set aside for the time being. To lay on the table almost always “kills” the bill or resolution. This motion requires a “second.” The vote requires a majority. In some areas of the nation it is common to table legislation before taking a recess...in others they see this motion as unnecessary in order to recess.

**To Suspend the Rules.** Student Congress is unique in that it can, within certain parameters, change the rules of the event. This motion of To Suspend the Rules requires a "second" and a two thirds vote to take effect. “To take action contrary to standing rules” usually means to extend a speaker's time for additional questions or some other one-time-only event. Some motions to suspend the rules are designed to change a set docket (i.e.: schedule) of legislation so a bill or resolution can move up the list and be considered next.

**Rise to a Point of Order or Parliamentary Procedure.** The motion of Rise to a Point of Order or Parliamentary Procedure allows for any person to interrupt the proceedings if he or she has a question about what is happening and/or whether what is happening is
appropriate. This motion does not require a “second.” The PO rules the motion to be “in order” if he or she agrees, or “not in order” if he or she disagrees. Usually this motion will involve procedure problems such as when the PO calls for a negative speech when an affirmative speech is in order.

**Common Mistakes Coaches Make**

When coaching a student it is often as important to know what not to do as it is to know what to do. With a few pointers a teacher can avoid the all too common pitfalls of coaching Student Congress.

First, never give the students the NFL list of twenty-four motions and advise them that, “You’ll get the hang of it.” “Sink or swim” is not a good coaching paradigm. Giving the student a print out of “The Big Five” would be much better than the overwhelming chart of twenty-four motions.

Second, don't tell students to just sit and watch. They need to participate! At the end of most sessions any contestant raising a hand MUST be called upon according to the Rule of Precedence. The speeches are only three minutes, and even new students can cobble together a brief speech from the text of the legislation, their own experiences, and from what previous speakers have said. The speech does not even need to be three minutes if they will take questions for a portion of the time. Tell your students to try at least one speech. Personally, I believe students who refuse to speak should refund the team for the tournament entry fee.

Third, don't direct students to write speeches out before the tournament. A good outline with a few quotes and a spattering of statistics is wonderful, but a “canned” speech of three minutes can be very dull. Except for the Authorship Speech, each speech should in some way respond, contradict, and/or build upon previous speeches. A prewritten speech is often photocopied and given to the rest of a team. A contestant's credibility is severely damaged when s/he cannot pronounce the words in his or her own speech. In one session I heard the exact same speech from two students from the same school! Some preliminary work is necessary and can be powerful, but completely prewritten speeches have no more place than a completely prewritten foreign extemporaneous speech or a prewritten rebuttal in a debate round.

Coaching a contestant in Student Congress should not be intimidating. Use the materials in this article and you should be well on your way to coaching successful competitors in the fastest growing speech event in the United States!

**Activity #1: Preparing Legislation**

,Objectives

There are three goals to this activity. First, it calls on students to use critical thinking skills as they both think of an issue to be solved and develop plans to address the issue. Second, the activity calls upon the student to research the issue in order to both write the legislation and defend it from criticism. Finally, it builds organization and writing skills in a format closely resembling those called for in many standardized tests.

*Instructions to the Students*
The teacher should begin by linking this activity to the regular class curriculum to encourage student “buy-in.” Students should be put at ease about the activity as much as possible because most students will find writing legislation to be great fun once they begin. Ask the students to list on a piece of paper some things they would change if they could. Ask the students to keep in mind that legislation should be significant in scope, easily researched, and debatable. If prompting is needed, start with the school environment (lunch schedules, school starting time, required IDs, etc.) and move on to local (curfew ordinances, speed limits, driving restrictions, etc.), state (interstate highway laws, the death penalty, prisons, etc.), national (the draft, voting age, taxes, etc.) and international issues (the United Nations, commitments to NATO, problems in the Middle East, etc.). Once everyone has two or three issues they are interested in (or at least that they can live with), hand out a copy of the “Writing Student Congress Bills” worksheet from Appendix B.

Briefly describe the different sections outlined on the worksheet. Emphasize that they can have more or fewer sections if their issue calls for changes. Take the students to a computer lab with internet access or the library. Allow them to seek information to both draft their bills and defend their ideas from possible attack. Provide students with the “Legislative Research” worksheet from Appendix C to assist them with preparation of research. Remind students several times that quality, not quantity, is the key when researching a bill. If you are planning to hold a mock congress, share with them that the speeches can only be three minutes. Most speeches are about two minutes with a minute of question and answer. A few good quotes and statistics will serve much better than a ten page printout of an internet article (that will probably never be read).

As students complete their worksheets, quickly reread their proposals and give suggestions. Since bills rarely reach the length of even one page, this proofreading goes very quickly and students have an opportunity to make improvements.

Post Activity Discussion Questions
Once the bills are written, most students want to discuss their ideas. If time permits, a session of mock congress should be held. Questions for a teacher to ask might include “What more information do you require to improve your bill?”, “Do you think your issue will be addressed by the school/government in the future?”, “Would your bill pass?”, “Which individuals or groups would be supportive of your bill?”, “Which individuals or groups would oppose your bill?”

Observations About The Activity
The typical class can complete the writing of the bills in one 50-minute class period. On the day before the activity, a teacher might assign the students to create their lists of things they would change. This homework would gain time in the class period and allow students more time to consider their choice of issues. If a student completes the activity before the class period ends, then s/he should type and print out the bill before handing it in. Pairing students to work together will work, but usually individual work is best due to the individual nature of the choice of issues. Pairing students usually leads to one taking a mental “free ride.”

Activity #2: A Mock Congress
Objectives

Students will develop knowledge and skills in three areas. The first area is that of participating effectively in a structured group discussion. The second area is in learning the fundamentals of Parliamentary Procedure. Finally, the students will have opportunity to participate in a democratic deliberative body.

Instructions to the Students

Distribute packets of legislation to the students. Tell students that they will be electing a Presiding Officer (PO) to be "chair" of the mock congress. Ask students for nominations for PO and write the names of the nominated on the chalkboard (or its equivalent). Allow each student to give a thirty second “Why you should vote for me” speech. Ask each person to “tear off a piece of paper and write the name of the person you most want to be Presiding Officer.” While you count the votes (separate them into little piles and then count the piles), ask the students to “read through the bills and decide the top two bills you want to discuss.” When you have a PO elected (hold run-off elections until you feel you have a clear winner), have him or her come forward and take over the meeting.

The first thing the new PO needs to do is to “set the calendar” (also called a “docket” or “agenda” in different groups). Have him or her ask for several nominations for the bills people wish to talk about. Once a list is established, have each student vote by raised hand for two bills. For example, “All those for ‘Bill G: A Bill to Ban Cutting Lumber in National Parks’ raise your hand.” The bill with the most votes goes first. Ties are broken by the PO.

The hallmark of parliamentary debate is that all sides have a chance to be heard. Decisions aren't made by the loudest speaker or the one not afraid to be rude to other speakers. Every person has his or her “say” and every person’s “say” is heard. This principle is vital for every student to learn. The PO should call on students without bias and the student with the fewest speeches must be called upon before another speaker. The PO and the teacher should be ruthless in not allowing side conversations and interruptions. All discussion should be directed through the PO. Congress is also fair because debate alternates between speakers for the bill (also known as “pro” or “affirmative”) and those against the bill (also known as “con” or “negative”). Both sides have chances to try and convince people to vote their way.

Begin debate on the first bill by asking the person who wrote the bill if s/he wishes to speak. If s/he does not, or is not present, begin with an affirmative speech. “I’m looking for an affirmative speech” is the proper formula for a PO to use.

A speaker does not have to speak for three minutes...but s/he is limited to three minutes. If the speaker finishes with time left, s/he may take questions from the other students. Asking questions is often the favorite part for some students. Students will try to blurt out questions, to make speeches instead of asking questions, and to ask multiple questions. Questions must be called for through the PO and s/he must hold students to one question, not a mini-speech, allowing only one question each time a student is called on.

After a couple of speeches, distribute “The Big Five” handout from Appendix A. Cover the five motions briefly and continue with speeches. Students will eventually start
using the motions or asking the teacher questions as they “learn by doing” the rules of parliamentary procedure.

*Post Activity Discussion*

“How did that feel to speak your mind on an issue without being interrupted?” is the question that gets the most response after sessions. For many students this activity may have been the first time they were allowed to share their thoughts without interruption.

*Observations About the Activity*

Before class begins you might consider choosing a student to be PO and asking him or her to run. This will avoid any possibility of group stage fright setting in when asking for PO nominations.

If you, the teacher, become confused, you can always use “executive privilege” to simply make a decision and move on. In a classroom simulation I suggest you don’t let the rules block you from doing what is right for your students and your curriculum. If a student is using the rules to block things from happening (e.g. they know parliamentary procedure from other activities and are showing off), you should not hesitate to step in. Students who are interested in learning more about student congress should become involved in NFL, 4-H, Boys’ or Girls’ State, Student Council, etc.

*A Parting Thought*

Student Congress does confuse speech coaches. Congress is “neither fish nor fowl” in the world of competitive speech activities. Congress requires writing proficiency, research skills, organizational acumen, extemporaneous style, and a winning personality. Successful Congressional Debaters shun the rude competitiveness, gasping delivery, and esoteric meandering of other debate events. Student Congress has specific parallels at the school, local, state, national, and international levels. Whether a graduate is headed for a fraternity/sorority, professional association, the White House, the State House, or the PTA, the Student Congress prepares that youth for leadership.

*Work Consulted*

## Appendix A
The Big Five Motions of Learning Parliamentary Procedure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motion</th>
<th>Second?</th>
<th>Debatable?</th>
<th>Amendable?</th>
<th>Vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To Amend</td>
<td>1/3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous Question</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Two thirds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Lay on the Table</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Suspend the Rules</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Two thirds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point of Order or Point of Parliamentary Procedure</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Decision of Chair</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Editor’s Note: The author suggests including the definitions for each of the Big Five Motions be included on the handout. See definitions and explanations for these Big Five Motions previously detailed in this article.
Appendix B

Writing Student Congress Bills

A bill is an idea written in a logical, easy to use, format. Your task of writing a bill involves three simple steps. Anyone can write a simple bill if they follow the steps below.

STEP ONE: PICK AN IDEA! Pick an idea you truly believe should become a law. If you need ideas look through Time Magazine, check out recent newspapers, watch the news or a news program such as 60 Minutes, etc. (Any information you gather should be saved for use when you’re debating your issue.) Stay away from: a foolish "joke" topic such as jailing of all ACLU members, invading Canada, etc.; a bill about this year or last year's debate topic; ideas that are too "far out" for most people to care about (such as registration of Irish cloth patterns or reinstating the “Black Sox” players).

STEP TWO: WHAT NEW THINGS WILL NEED TO HAPPEN FOR THE LAW TO BE EFFECTIVE? Most ideas need specific help in order for them to effectively work. If your idea doesn't need help then there isn't a need for a law regarding it. What does your idea need? Often an idea will need funding and/or a way to enforce the idea and/or a date the law will become effective.

• If you ask for money...know how much and why you need that much money. Try not to guess how much money you’ll need. Find some logical reason for your request amount.

• There are many ways of enforcing your idea. The most often used enforcement ideas include prison, fines, and/or expulsion from some activity. Examples include “five to twenty years in federal prison,” “a ten thousand dollar ($10,000) fine,” or “banning from trading stocks for ten (10) years.”

• Most bills take effect "immediately upon passage" or “January 1, 200__.”

STEP THREE: FILL IN THE BLANKS

Using the form on the next page, fill in your ideas. Lines in bills are usually numbered for easy reference during debate. The form is supposed to be VERY flexible. Bills vary from two to twelve sections in Student Congress. The typical length is four to six sections.

A SUGGESTED MODEL: Section One - Write the main idea you want to happen. Section Two - If needed, explain your idea further (you may need even more sections to outline the idea fully). Section Three - Explain who will enforce the law. Section Four - Explain how you will pay for the law. Section Five - State exactly when the bill will take effect.
Appendix B: Writing Student Congress Bills (continued)

LEGISLATION TEMPLATE FILL IN THE BLANKS

1. Title: A BILL TO

2. Be it enacted by this Student Congress that:

3. Section 1:

4.

5.

6. Section 2:

7.

8.

9. Section 3:

10.

11.

12. Section 4:

13.

14.

15. Section 5:

16.

17.

Respectfully submitted,

______________________________
Name

______________________________
School Affiliation
Appendix C
Legislative Research Template

TITLE/TOPIC: ____________________    REFERENCE #_______
PREPARED BY: _________________________________

FIVE FACTS ABOUT THE LEGISLATIVE TOPIC:

1.
   SOURCE:

2.
   SOURCE:

3.
   SOURCE:

4.
   SOURCE:

5.
   SOURCE:

FOUR QUOTES ABOUT THE TOPIC (LIST AUTHOR...TRY TO SELECT SOMEONE KNOWN BY PARTICIPANTS; USE THE BACK OF SHEET AS NECESSARY)

1.

2.

3.

4.

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