



SEATTLE
CITY CLUB
AN ENGAGED PUBLIC MATTERS

DEBATE TOOLKIT

A helpful guide to putting on debates in your community





INDEX

I.	Introduction	3
II.	Before the Debate	4
	a. Creating an Outline	4
	b. Choosing a Venue	5
	c. Fundraising	6
	d. Inviting Candidates	7
	e. Choosing Debate Elements	8
	f. Spreading the Word	12
III.	During the Debate	13
	a. Creating a Timeline	13
	b. Briefing Candidates	15
	c. Setting Up Your Venue	17
IV.	After the Debate	18
V.	Appendix	19

Seattle CityClub

Mailing Address:

PO Box 2752

Seattle, WA 98111-2752

Phone: 206.682.7395

Email: cityclub@SeattleCityClub.org



Seattle CityClub created this tool kit for Washington residents and organizations to leverage community resources and *empower voters*. We know that our democracy depends on what voters know and where they get their information. Voters need direct, *nonpartisan*, opportunities for dialogue with candidates and their community. That is why Seattle CityClub has made it our priority to enhance citizen access to, and civil engagement with, candidates in 2020 and beyond.

Formed by eight Seattle citizens in 1981, Seattle CityClub is a nonprofit organization which serves to inform, connect and, engage the public to strengthen the civic health of the Puget Sound region. We believe that our region is defined by its natural wonder, innovative businesses, vibrant culture, and an informed people engaged with their leaders in effective democracy. Seattle CityClub is a part of the [Washington State Debate Coalition](#) which enhances Washingtonians' access to those who hold and seek our state's highest elected offices.

This tool kit was originally created for the 2015 Seattle City Council election when we saw a need for strong voter education regarding how the new district election system would work. We have since revised and improved this tool for leaders, like yourself, to continue providing quality opportunities for your community to engage in the electoral process. These tips are the product of Seattle CityClub's decades of experience engaging the community in public policy and candidate forums.

We thank you for your contributions to voter education. Feel free to contact us for additional resources or support. We look forward to helping you in any way we can.

Sincerely,

Whitney Keyes
Executive Director
Seattle CityClub

Alexander Wheeler
Program Manager
Seattle CityClub

[Return to Index](#)



A brief note – The debate elements discussed in this document are an à la carte menu. No one debate needs to incorporate all of these elements to be successful. Feel free to pick and choose which elements you use based on your organization’s goals.

Creating an Outline

The first thing to create is an internal timeline for your organization indicating responsibilities and deadlines. Additionally, consider these questions before you begin planning:

- What are your **goals** for hosting this debate? Use these goals to influence the debate elements you choose. (For example, fairness should be a goal of all debates; it is the debate hosts’ responsibility to inform citizens in a nonpartisan, equitable manner.)
- What like-minded **partners** might be interested in co-hosting your debate or spreading the word to their constituents? Partners allow you to lighten your organization’s responsibility load and allow access to more debate attendees.
- How can your debate **reach** your full district? (For example: Can someone live-tweet the debate? Can a volunteer record/stream the debate and post it on YouTube? Can you ask your municipal TV station (e.g. Seattle Channel) to film it? (Details on how to approach media can be found in the [“Spreading the Word” section](#))
- What **venue** is both cost-effective and accessible to the community you are trying to reach? ([See suggested venues below](#))
- Consider your desired venue. Is your venue a virtual or physical space? Do you **need to rent or borrow** any tables and chairs? Audio/sound equipment?
- Do you need **funds to support** your event? ([See suggestions below](#))
- Can you provide **online event registration**? Offering pre-event registration is beneficial in many ways; it increases your opportunity to capture contact information, allows you to remind your attendees about the event as it approaches, and helps you engage with your attendees after the debate takes place. Consider free platforms such as Eventbrite.

[Return to Index](#)

Choosing a Venue

Possible venues include libraries, colleges, community centers, senior centers, arts centers, and churches.

If you are located in Seattle, think about holding your debate at your local branch of The Seattle Public Library. The following branches have meeting rooms; an asterisk (*) denotes sizable parking lots and/or street parking. To learn more about the individual branches, including transit/directions/parking, visit the [hours and locations](#) section of the Seattle Public Library website or search for "Seattle Public Library branches."

Large (100+ attendees)

[Central Branch](#)

[Ballard Branch](#) *

[Columbia Branch](#)

[University Branch](#)

Midsize (50 -100)

[Beacon Hill Branch](#) *

[Broadview Branch](#) *

[Douglass-Truth Branch](#) *

[Fremont Branch](#)

[Green Lake Branch](#)

[Greenwood Branch](#) *

[High Point Branch](#) *

[Lake City Branch](#) *

[Northgate Branch](#)

[Queen Anne Branch](#) *

[West Seattle Branch](#)

Small (20-50 attendees)

[Capitol Hill Branch](#) *

[Delridge Branch](#) *

[Magnolia Branch](#) *

[Montlake Branch](#) *

[New Holly Branch](#) *

[Rainier Beach Branch](#) *

[Southwest Branch](#)

Sometimes in-person debates are not feasible. In this case, consider moving your debate to a **virtual space**. Some virtual venues include [Facebook Live](#), [Zoom](#), and [Crowdcast](#). Refer to additional resources in the appendix for best practices.

[Return to Index](#)

Fundraising

1. Think about launching a **media or marketing campaign**. You can utilize social media, emails, hard mail, ads, board member outreach, or other means.
2. Research local foundations that give out grants or sponsorships related to your mission and goals. If you are applying for a grant, **research the foundation's requirements** for the best chance at receiving funding. You can also contact the foundation to get to know the grantee.
3. To cultivate new donors, you can **look at annual reports from similar organizations** in your area. Narrow down a list of major donors that need to be stewarded and make a list of targeted contributions you would like to utilize for this event (individual donations, sponsorships, matching gifts, grants, in-kind gifts, etc.).
4. **Do not limit your search to monetary donations**. Think about where you might find people willing to provide labor, equipment, or other in kind goods and services.
5. If you are based in Seattle, consider applying for a Department of Neighborhoods [Small Sparks Fund](#) grant. Please note that to be eligible, your debate must be open to all candidates and you must allow at least six weeks for the grant process leading up to the event.

[Return to Index](#)

Inviting Candidates

1. Keep your invitation **short and sweet**, include the basic logistics of the debate and information about your organization. If a candidate has questions, they will follow up with you!
2. **Follow up by phone** 2-3 days after your initial invitation. Candidates receive multiple invitations to debates. Make yours stand out by adding a personal call.
3. **Track candidates' responses** with an Excel spreadsheet, including information such as: candidate name, phone, email, date of invitation, date of follow up call, RSVP and notes.

Sample Candidate Invitation

Dear [Candidate],

[Your organization] is pleased to invite you to participate in a [jurisdiction and race, i.e. Seattle City Council] debate on [date] at [location], in association with [partners].

The debate will run for [X] minutes, from [X:XX] –[X:XX am/pm]. We request that you arrive by [time, approx. 20 minutes before the debate]. The format will include [your debate elements, such as “brief opening and/or closing remarks, questions from our moderator, and audience Q&A.”]. The debate will be moderated by [moderator name] and [if applicable] televised by [TV affiliate].

Please contact [your organizer's name, title] at [phone number] or [email] to confirm your participation and ask questions. We look forward to hearing from you about your vision and priorities for our [jurisdiction, i.e. city].

Sincerely,

[Your organizer's name]

[Your organization]

[Your contact information]

[A brief description of your organization]

[Return to Index](#)

Choosing Debate Elements

1. As noted above: Before choosing any debate elements, **think about your goals**. Include debate elements that you think will help you best achieve them.
2. Consider ways to **engage your audience** before, during, and after your debate. For example, you can: ask attendees to submit questions before the event; encourage audience participation through Q&A; ask attendees to live tweet their opinions with an event hashtag; share photos and key moments from the debate with your constituents.
3. The **quality of your moderator** can make or break a debate. Moderators with journalism experience are some of the best. Their job is to ask the tough questions and they know how to follow up. Plus, many journalists have experience with moderation. Ask yourselves, what journalists live in and/or cover the issues in your community? Consider: neighborhood bloggers, columnists, editorial writers, news anchors, talk show hosts, etc.
4. **Meet with your moderator approximately 2 weeks prior** to the debate to discuss draft questions and your debate's timeline. ([See sample timeline below](#))
5. For any timed questions, **designate a volunteer timekeeper** and bring count down cards to keep candidates to their time limits. Cards can indicate intervals such as "2 minutes," "1.5 minutes," "1 minute," "30 seconds," and "STOP." A volunteer timekeeper should sit within clear view of the candidates and the audience.
6. Consider **securing interpretation services** and translating promotion for the event. There are several professional translation and interpretation services in Seattle, such as Dynamic Language.
7. **Make candidate bios available** for your attendees. Take these from the voters' pamphlet to avoid perceived or real bias.



Sample Debate Elements

1. Pre-debate reception – allows participants to mix and mingle in person, feel connected to each other and part of their larger community. You may also use a reception as an opportunity to:

- Do outreach on behalf of your organization
- Source potential topics or questions, via a “submit your question” box or an event hashtag
- Encourage voter registration and action opportunity sign ups (Note: Voter registration forms are available on the [King County elections webpage](#).)

Pro tip: Consider allowing **1 outreach table for each campaign** for their materials in the reception area. Note: Seattle CityClub has a policy that campaign materials and signage are not allowed in the space where the debate will take place. This distinction provides for a welcoming debate environment for the attendees.

2. Moderated candidate conversation. This conversation could include:

- Opening statements – 1 to 1.5 minutes per candidate

Pro tip: Provide a question prompt to encourage candidates to provide comparable answers. An example of an opening question: “What do you think is the most critical issue facing our community at this time, and what do you propose to do about it? You each have one minute to respond.”

- Separate “rounds” of questions, based on topic areas (ex. public safety, housing, economic development, etc.). You can see a short list of [sample questions](#) below.

Pro tip: You can **use local data to establish important topic areas** for your community. For example, the Seattle Office of Planning and Community Development hosts data on the demographics of each Urban Center and Village, Community Reporting Area, City Council district, and Census area. For more information on your district, visit the City of Seattle [Population & Demographics webpage](#).

- A quick answer round, when candidates can only answer the question with 2-3 words.

Pro tip: Should you choose to include this debate element, be sure to **craft your questions carefully**, so a 2-3 word response is appropriate.

These types of questions are a great way to get to know the person behind the candidate. For example, questions might include: “Favorite neighborhood

restaurant?" "Favorite public artwork?" or "What public leader (past or present) is your role model?"

- A quick answer round, when candidates can only answer the question with a "Yes," "No," or "Waffle" card. A "waffle" response indicates that the candidate has yet to make up their mind.



Pro tip: Should you choose to include this debate element, be sure to craft your questions carefully, so a "Yes," "No," or "Waffle" response is appropriate. This is **a great opportunity to ask candidates how they would vote** on current issues. Some examples are "I support a tax on heating oil," "I support the Green New Deal," and "I support the city's attempt to institute an income tax."

Pro tip: This section can be adapted to other types of questions. For example, ask candidates whether they think something is underrated or overrated using cards in the same way.

- Audience Q&A

Pro tip: This is **the most important element of any debate**, as it allows citizens direct access to candidates. You may want to encourage audience questions throughout the debate (asking them to raise their hand or come to an audience Q&A mic when they have a question) or identify a segment of the program for audience questions only. Alternatively, you can solicit questions during online registration. You can also provide question cards as guests pass through registration. Just be sure to collect these questions and provide them to the moderator before the debate begins.

Pro tip: Establish some guidelines for audience questions to increase your debate's efficiency and allow you to ask even more questions. Seattle CityClub begins every debate with audience guidelines such as: "At the appropriate time, the audience will be asked to stand in line at the mic near the stage to indicate they would like to ask a question. Each questioner will be asked to give their name before stating their question. Each questioner is allowed 30 seconds to ask

their question. If you have a candidate in mind for your question, please specify. No statements please, only questions are allowed.”

- Closing statements – 1 to 1.5 minutes per candidate

Pro tip: A question prompt is not required for the closing statement. This is the candidates’ opportunity to expand upon any topics of their choosing, or simply provide a final “call to action” of why they believe they are the best candidate.

3. Post-debate Reception - allows participants to discuss the debate’s content with their fellow community members. You may also use a reception as an opportunity to source event feedback from your attendees via a suggestion box and continue voter registration, organization tabling, action opportunity sign ups and mingling.

Sample Questions

Seattle CityClub used the following questions from the 2019 Seattle City Council debates. Consider modifying these for your own debate.

- Should you be elected, what is one, tangible impact you want to make in the next two years?
- How do you plan to engage your constituency on the city’s issues?
- What is your vision for your district 20 years from now?
- How do you balance representing your district with the good of the whole city?
- On which committee would you like to serve and why?
- What is the most pressing issue facing your district and what should be done about it?
- What is the city spending too much money on and why? Where would you reallocate the funds?
- What was the biggest mistake the council made in this last election term and what was its best contribution?
- What ideas do you have to generate new revenues for city services?
- What is one thing you admire about your opponent?

[Return to Index](#)

Spreading the Word

1. **Create an event page** on a website where your attendees can RSVP such as Eventbrite or Facebook.
2. Think about **where your potential attendees live, work, and play**. Post your debate announcement in community newsletters, neighborhood blogs, community boards, nextdoor.com, etc. Think about both physical and virtual spaces that your attendees would frequent.
3. If you are based in Seattle, **post your event on the Department of Neighborhoods community calendar!** The Department's calendar is shared with the City of Seattle calendar, so your reach will be greatly increased.
4. **Note submission deadlines** for community calendars, partners' newsletters, etc.
5. **Ask like-minded organizations** to share your debate information. (Seattle CityClub would be happy to share King County debates with its community. Simply send the information to the contact at the end of this kit.)
6. **Invite media to cover your event**. Please note, in order for media organizations to film your debate, you will need to provide an audio feed of all microphones. This is NOT the same as a P.A. system. For questions, contact your venue. If you are based in Seattle, Seattle Channel covers many election-related events. Send an email – *at least* two weeks in advance – to contact@seattlechannel.org.

[Return to Index](#)



A brief note – When you are hosting a debate, remember that not everything will go as planned. Be adaptable and take notes on what you could improve on for next time.

Creating a Timeline

This sample timeline assumes 5 participating candidates

- 4:30 p.m. Registration and outreach tables set up
- 5:00 p.m. Doors open
- 5:15 p.m. At the latest, candidates and moderator arrive, meet each other, and go over any last minute details as necessary.
- 5:30 p.m. [Organization representative] welcomes audience, makes brief announcements and gives ground rules for candidates and audience, then introduces moderator to the stage.
- 5:35 p.m. Moderator welcomes candidates and asks each candidate to take one minute for the opening question
- 5:40 p.m. Moderator will pose individualized questions to each candidate. All get 90 seconds to respond
- 5:48 p.m. Moderator will ask all candidates to respond to the same question. All get 90 seconds to respond.
- 5:56 p.m. Moderator asks candidates a series of Yes/No/Waffle questions. Candidates are only allowed to respond by holding up Yes/No/Waffle cards indicating their answer.
- 6:06 p.m. Moderator will pose individualized questions to each candidate. All get 90 seconds to respond
- 6:14 p.m. Moderator will ask all candidates to respond to the same question. All get 90 seconds to respond.
- 6:22 p.m. At the latest, moderator will begin to direct audience questions to specific candidate. Each candidate gets one minute to respond to audience questions.
- 6:32 p.m. Moderator invites candidates to take 30 seconds for a closing statement.
- 6:34 p.m. Moderator thanks candidates for their participation.

6:35 p.m. Candidates leave stage, post-debate reception begins.
7:00 p.m. Event ends.

[Return to Index](#)

Briefing Candidates

1. **DO NOT give candidates your questions in advance.** Instead, share a list of sample topics the questions cover, *at least* one week prior to your debate. This encourages a lively, candid conversation without rehearsed, word-for-word responses.

One exception to this rule: Should you decide to include timed opening statements as a debate element, you *may* want to share the prompt in order to both a) provide candidates advanced prep to answer a broad question in a short period of time and b) keep candidates accountable to that time.

2. Clearly **remind candidates about strict time management.** Prep materials should include a note, such as: "Please respect the time limits so that we can offer you and the public a well-run debate. A timekeeper will be provided, with signs indicating time remaining. If necessary, the moderator will interrupt a candidate to discontinue an answer if it has exceeded the allotted time."

3. Establish **ground rules** for the candidates. For example, respecting time limits and refraining from personal attacks unrelated to the debate topic. Have a representative from your organization or the moderator state these rules clearly at the beginning of the debate.

4. To promote fairness, **use a coin toss to determine the order** that the candidates will do their opening and closing statements. Seattle CityClub recommends that the candidate who wins the toss determines the order of one statement of their choosing and the other candidate decides the remaining statement.

Sample Candidate Prep Materials

Dear [Candidate],

Thank you for participating in this debate. With our moderator, [moderator's name], we look forward to a lively and stimulating discussion. The purpose of this notice is to provide you with further details. The event announcement for this forum is available on our website, [website link]. This is the language used in our publicity and by our partners.

Specifics:

[Type of event, such as "Free, evening debate. Open to all ages."]

[Place] [Date] [Time]

[Broadcast/ media presence, if applicable]

Timeline: [[Example above](#)]

Approach to questions: Strong differences of opinion and perspective inevitably arise and are large part of both the fun and importance of our conversations. We pride ourselves on discussing real differences in an open and respectful manner and we appreciate you joining us in that spirit.

Questioning format: [[Example above](#)]

Please respect the time limits so that we can offer you and the public a well-run debate. If necessary, the moderator will interrupt a candidate to discontinue an answer if it has exceeded the allotted time.

Further Debate Details:

- Response time for each question will be one minute per candidate, unless otherwise stated.
- There will be three “quick answer” rounds. Candidates will only be allowed to answer by holding up a card indicating a yes, no, or waffle. Not holding up a card is considered a waffle response.
- There will be one round when candidates will answer questions with no more than two words.
- There will be three rounds around big city issues. Topics include business, public safety, transportation, housing, education and more.
- We will take questions from the audience for approximately 15 minutes before the moderators’ final question.
- There are no formal rebuttals. Candidates may take some of their allotted answer time for rebuttals as they choose.

Campaign Literature: Each campaign will be given one table to display their campaign literature and to act as a campaign outreach station in the reception area. Table size is TBD, depending on our venue’s available tables. Please note: Distribution of campaign materials and signage is NOT allowed in the room where the debate will take place.

If you have any questions or concerns about the forum, please feel free to give us a call. We are truly excited about having you participate in this forum. Thank you!

[Your organizer’s name]

[Your organization]

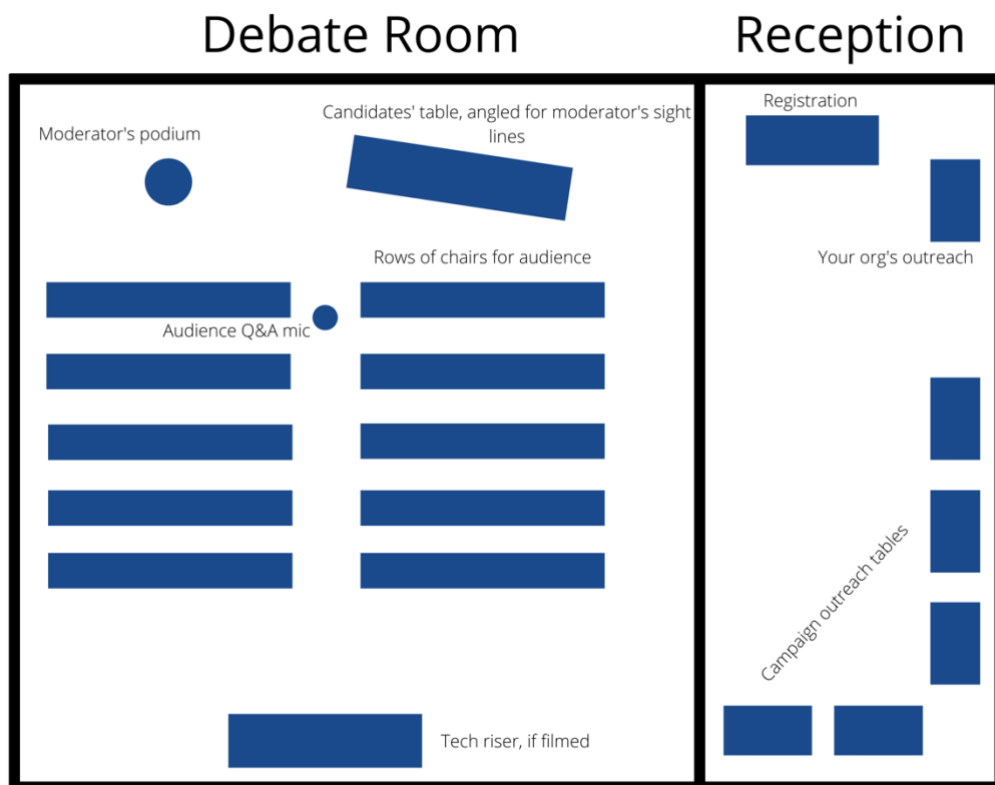
[Your contact information]

[Return to Index](#)

Setting Up Your Venue

1. Seat candidates at a long table, with ***name plates*** in front of them. This visual cue will help your audience follow along and remember which candidate is which.
2. ***Seat candidates alphabetically***. Ask questions alphabetically and reverse alphabetically. This will help your moderator avoid real or perceived bias.
3. Remember to ***have the timekeeper in clear view*** of the candidates, the moderator, and the audience if possible.

Sample Debate Floor Plan



[Return to Index](#)



1. Consider **polling your attendees** for opinion changes as a result of the debate, how they plan to vote, and suggestions for next time.
2. Send **thank you notes** to all attendees, candidates, and your moderator.
3. Expand the reach of your forum by **sharing key moments from the debate** (via your newsletter, email, social media, etc.) with your constituents, partners, neighborhood blog, etc.
4. **Share your experience with other debate organizers**. For example: Did you have an interesting question you would like to see asked at other debates this election season? Share your suggestions with the contact below.
5. **Contact us** if you have any questions. We regularly revise this tool kit. Your feedback will help make future editions better. Let us know how your debate went and celebrate your successes with you.

Contact: Alexander Wheeler, Programs Manager, Seattle CityClub,
awheeler@SeattleCityClub.org

(Revised 06.2020)

[Return to Index](#)



1. Seattle Public Library Locations Page: <https://www.spl.org/hours-and-locations>
2. Facebook Live Tips: <https://www.facebook.com/facebookmedia/blog/tips-for-using-live>
3. Zoom Tips: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/209743263-Meeting-and-Webinar-Best-Practices-and-Resources>
4. Crowdcast Tips: <https://docs.crowdcast.io/en/articles/699973-how-to-rock-your-first-crowdcast-event>
5. Department of Neighborhoods Small Sparks Fund grant: <http://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/programs-and-services/neighborhood-matching-fund>
6. King County elections webpage/Voter registration materials: <https://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/elections/how-to-vote/register-to-vote.aspx>
7. Seattle Office of Planning and Community Development Demographic Data: <http://www.seattle.gov/opcd/population-and-demographics>

[Return to Index](#)