

ESU PUBLIC SPEAKING COMPETITION

Volunteer Judge
Handbook 2025-26



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION
discovering voices

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WELCOME

Dear volunteer judges,

Thank you so much for offering your time and expertise to judge the ESU Public Speaking Competition. The support of generous volunteers like yourself to enables it to run successfully. Now in its 66th year, the ESU Public Speaking Competition has allowed countless young people to discover their voice and find a love for public speaking. Thank you for being part of their experience this year.

This handbook outlines the format of the competition and gives guidance on judging, marking and giving feedback.

It is vital that all judges, no matter how experienced, read the ESU Volunteer Agreement and complete the online training. The ESU and our volunteers both have a duty of care to the young people who take part in our programmes. The training covers competition rules and judging guidelines as well as vital safeguarding issues. Further details will be shared with you separately from this handbook.

Full information about the competition can be found at esu.org/competitions/public-speaking-competition/

If you have any questions about the competition or being a volunteer judge with the ESU, please do not hesitate to contact us. Contact details are below.

- Competitions team, for any questions about the competition itself:
competition@esu.org | 0207 529 1565
- Anna Mitchell and Harry Hodges, Supporter Services and Engagement Team, for questions about your role as a volunteer: volunteering@esu.org | 0207 5291 587

Once again, thank you for your generosity in giving up your time to support the ESU Public Speaking Competition. We hope you are looking forward to your first competition heat.

Best regards,

Anna and Harry

Supporter Services and Engagement Team

HOW THE COMPETITION WORKS

The ESU Public Speaking Competition (sometimes referred to as PSC) consists of five rounds.

- **Round one:** takes place online via Zoom
- **Round two:** takes place in local schools and regional sponsorship centres
- **Regional finals:** take place in local schools and regional sponsorship centres
- **Semi-finals:** take place on the morning of finals day
- **Grand final:** takes place on the afternoon of finals day

Notes on Round One:

Round one, held online on Zoom, may be affected by connection problems, technical issues and unfamiliarity with equipment from participants and/or judges. Our aim is that no participant should be disadvantaged by these and we provide training to judges, competition leads and schools to mitigate any issues as much as possible. If you have any concerns in advance, please get in touch with us at volunteering@esu.org.

Should any issues arise at the beginning of a heat, the competitions team will be available for support, and throughout the heat the competition lead will be responsible for supporting and alleviating technical issues as much as possible. As a judge, please be accommodating and supportive. Report any issues which do occur to the competitions team.

In general, cameras should be on throughout the heat, but especially when students are speaking, as this enables them to engage their audience with passion and panache and is vital for judging variations in body language including eye contact and hand gestures.



Who Can Enter?

The ESU Public Speaking Competition is open to all schools in England and Wales. All students must be aged 13-16 throughout the competition.

Team Setup

- Each team has 3-5 students, all from the same school.
- Only three students will participate at a time, but team members may rotate between rounds.
- Each team consists of a speaker, chair and questioner. The other two team members may have helped with preparations or research and may or may not attend the heats you judge. You will only judge the speaker, chair and questioner.

Competition Setup

The speaker from each school will be paired with the chair and questioner from another school. They will have time at the beginning of the heat for the chair and questioner to prepare their introductory remarks and questions by asking the speaker about their personal connection to the topic and the approach they intend to take in their speech.

Once the presentations begin, the chair will introduce the speaker, the speaker will give their prepared speech, and then the questioner will ask questions of the speaker. After, the audience will also have a chance to ask questions of the speaker, and finally the chair will give their closing remarks.

Each presentation lasts for 14 minutes. The time breakdown for the presentation is:

Duration	Chair	Speaker	Questioner
1 minute	Introduction		
5 minutes		Speech	
4 minutes		Questioner's Questions	Questioner's Questions
2 minutes	Audience Questions	Audience Questions	
2 minutes	Summary		

A timekeeper will give an audible signal when the speaker's five minutes have elapsed and again after fourteen minutes when the presentation should have finished. It is the responsibility of the competition lead to ensure that the presentation runs according to time and fits within the fourteen minutes allocated.

Judges need not worry about time infringements during the presentations since the timekeeper will inform them of any serious infringements at the end of the presentations. In round one you will deliberate in a Zoom break-out room before returning to the main Zoom call. In round two onwards you will have a private room or quiet space to deliberate.

Once a decision has been made by the judging panel, the chair judge will give general feedback and announce the winners, then the judging panel will give specific feedback.

Speech Details

- The competitions team will provide a number of speech topics, or a piece of art, for the participating students to choose from.
- If they choose to use the piece of art, the title of their speech must only contain the name of the artist, the title and the date of the art being discussed.
 - For example: William Blake, 'I want! I want!', 1793.
- No props or visual aids are allowed.
 - If they choose the piece of art, they may project the image on a screen. If the host school does not have the capability they may print out copies for the audience, judges, chair and questioner.
- Students may use electronic devices for notes but not for internet access or messaging.



JUDGING

You will receive a heat briefing prior to every heat you judge, which will include all relevant information and the procedures for the format of the heat. You will need this briefing as a reference, along with this handbook and the judge summary sheet for recording notes and marks.

When you get together as a panel, on Zoom for round one or in person thereafter, one judge will be appointed chair of the panel.

Usually there are three judges, but if there is an even number, the chair will have a casting vote on any controversial decision. The ESU competition lead will take you through the mechanics of the marking sheets and may also sit on the judging panel.

At the end of this document is a page on the art of giving feedback. It is vital that you read this carefully and adhere to the ESU feedback guidelines.

While the three roles are marked separately, the competition is very much a team effort, and the winning team/s should be chosen on their overall success. The best teams will be those that show strength in all three roles.

Adjudication is given on the basis of three main criteria;

- **Content**
- **Effectiveness in role**
- **Style**

These criteria are weighted in the following manner:

	Content	Effectiveness in Role	Style
Chairperson (30)	15	10	5
Speaker (40)	20	10	10
Questioner (30)	15	10	5

Numerical scores are a guideline for deliberations and the judging panel should discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each participant as they reach an agreement on the winning team/s.

Should one of the presentations touch on a topic about which a judge has specialist knowledge, the judge should try to put aside personal biases and assess how well the speaker meets the judging criteria, not whether they are always correct. While factual accuracy is important, judges should remember the age of the participants and temper expectations.

Judges should also put aside personal preferences for style when marking speeches. Various styles and tone are part of a presentation and what matters is how well suited they are to the topic and content.

SUMMARY SHEET

Speaker

Content

- Shows evidence of careful consideration of topic and delivers a logical case.
- Gives arguments supported by evidence and relevant analogies. Considers alternative viewpoints to their own.

Effectiveness in Role

- Employs a clear structure that is easy to follow. Spontaneous comments where appropriate to be rewarded.
- Answers questions comprehensively yet succinctly, demonstrating a greater knowledge of the topic over and above that displayed in the speech.

Style

- Use of sheets or notes is appropriate, but does not over rely on them.
- Does not appear to have memorised the speech. Natural fluid style that makes use of carefully chosen language and rhetoric.
- Seeks to draw an audience in with tools such as good eye contact and appropriate body language.

Chairperson

Content

- Makes a relevant introduction demonstrating interest in the topic.
- Effectively links the speaker and topic. Summarises key themes of the presentation at the end.

Effectiveness in Role

- Creates a warm and friendly atmosphere. Introduces speaker and questioner.
- Manages the audience questions, asking for rephrasing or repetition, or re-asking the question directly where appropriate.
- Effectively manages time, ensuring presentations do not over run or spend too much time on any one section of the presentation.

Style

- Ensures speakers feel welcome and appreciated and leads applause.
- Interrupts firmly but politely to keep participants to time.

Questioner

Content

- Asks relevant questions that show they have listened to the speech as given, not just pre-prepared questions.
- Shows evidence of understanding of the topic by introducing other aspects where appropriate.

Effectiveness in Role

- Attempts to deepen understanding of the topic and add clarity where necessary.
- Suggestions of alternative lines of argumentation or views.
- Offers clear and succinct questions.
- Willingness to ask follow up questions where appropriate.

Style

- Employs a non-combative style, being courteous but probing.
- Engages in a friendly dialogue with the speaker. Good use of stance, gesture and eye contact to include the audience in the questioning period.

Scoring Scales

Speaker

Standard	Context	Effectiveness in Role	Style	Overall
Exceptional	17-20	9-10	9-10	33-40
Very Good	13-16	8-9	8-9	25-32
Good	9-12	7-8	7-8	17-24
Satisfactory	5-8	5-6	5-6	9-16
Poor	0-4	0-4	0-4	0-8

Chairperson and Questioner

Standard	Context	Effectiveness in Role	Style	Overall
Exceptional	13-15	9-10	5	26-30
Very Good	10-12	8-9	4	21-25
Good	7-9	7-8	3	16-20
Satisfactory	4-6	6-7	2	11-15
Poor	0-3	5-6	0-1	0-10

GIVING FEEDBACK

The competition heats are a chance for students to not only show their public speaking skills, but to learn about public speaking too. Feedback is an essential part of this and the most important thing to remember is to keep a positive tone and to make sure that all critique is constructive. We want every child to come away from the event with a feeling that they have gained something and enjoyed the experience, win or not. Below are guidelines for giving feedback, which must be adhered to by all judges.

Follow the ESU Criteria

It is essential that all judges use the criteria and marking guidelines in this handbook. Teams have been coached to meet this criteria and will be expecting feedback relating to them.

General Feedback

There are two types of feedback: general and individual. After deliberations and before the results of the competition are announced, the chair judge will give general feedback to all participants.

General feedback will cover general advice that the majority of participants will benefit from. For example that the standard was generally very high, that you were particularly impressed with a certain aspect of the performances, or something that really stood out about a certain role.

Individual Feedback

After the results of the competition have been announced, the judges will give individual feedback to each student. This is your chance to offer constructive feedback and advice which is specific to each student.

This is usually done with the whole team from each school, away from other schools. In round one, individual feedback will be given in break-out rooms after the results are given.

The teacher for the team must always be present, whether the round is in person or on Zoom, and a judge must never be alone with any student/s. This is for safeguarding reasons and as some students feel particularly nervous or tense when receiving feedback, especially if they have not gone through to the next round, and having another adult with whom they are more familiar is often helpful to put them at ease and manage their emotions.

The speakers must accept the judges' decision; you should refer to your mark sheets for detailed comments, but the speakers have no right to see them or hear their marks. In the rare event that a student or teacher becomes overly frustrated and is rude or unprofessional, remove yourself from the situation. Alert the ESU competition lead immediately and later alert the ESU competitions team.

The Sandwich Method

The ESU requires feedback to be given following the sandwich method, to ensure students feel positive about their experience.

The sandwich method begins and ends with praise, and the notes on how the student could improve next time is sandwiched in between.

Make sure you know what you would like to feedback to the student before you begin and when giving feedback remember to be positive and encouraging.

Feedback should be relevant to the criteria explained earlier in this handbook. It could include, but is not limited to, the following:

- What you were looking for in their role and whether this was fulfilled by the student
- What was challenging about the role and how the student overcame the challenge or how they could overcome it next time
- How voice, expression, body language or eye contact was used by the student and how this was successful or could be improved
- How pace, anecdotes or humour was used to engage the audience and why this was successful or how it could be improved in future

Do not make specific references to the competencies or difficulties encountered by other participants.

Make sure to highlight the significance of their achievement in taking part in the competition, ideally at the end of the feedback so the students leave with a sense of accomplishment and pride.





If Individual Feedback Cannot be Given

Some teams will need to leave quickly or early, without hearing their individual feedback. The competition lead must be aware of any teams who do leave early and this should have been agreed with the competitions team prior to the heat.

In this case, the competition lead is responsible for passing feedback to the competitions team, who will in turn pass the feedback to the teacher to relay to their students. Please support the competition lead with this, ensuring they have the full feedback either verbally or in writing, before leaving the heat.

Giving feedback in writing is important for students but is a time-consuming process for all parties involved. Therefore, please do your best to ensure feedback is given in person at the heat whenever possible.

Be Inclusive

Never refer to a student's dress sense, hairstyle or any physical characteristic, including their voice. Such remarks are at best inappropriate and at worst hurtful.

If and when you come across unfamiliar names, give the student the respect of your best attempt at pronunciation.

It has now become common practice in debating competitions for judges and participants to express their preferred pronouns at the beginning of the debate. This small statement, which takes up very little of everyone's time, can ensure that debates remain as inclusive as possible to all participants, including those who may identify as transgender or non-binary.

In practice, this means that at the beginning of each debate participants, when they are introduced, will express what pronouns they prefer to be referred to by and if possible ask their teacher for guidance beforehand. Again, ensure you give the student the respect of using their requested pronouns, he/him, she/her, or they/them.

The English-Speaking Union is committed to providing opportunities for individuals of all backgrounds to access and develop communication skills. Make sure you read and adhere to the [ESU Equity Policy](#) and the [ESU Safeguarding Policy](#).

SAFEGUARDING

The wellbeing of volunteers and young people alike is taken very seriously by the ESU. Safeguarding is key to this and therefore we require all staff and volunteers to follow the expectations outlined below. The full safeguarding policy can be found on our website.

Safeguarding Principals

The English-Speaking Union's safeguarding principals are applicable to all staff, volunteers, members and individuals representing the ESU in any personal or professional capacity online and in-person. These principals are:

- Promote the wellbeing of children and adults through a culture of shared responsibility for safeguarding.
- Prevent harm through full compliance with Safeguarding Policy and Procedures and the creation of a culture of informed vigilance.
- Protect through responding effectively when safeguarding concerns arise.

All staff, members and volunteers have a role to play and must be proactive in developing an understanding of safe practice and their personal responsibilities towards the beneficiaries of the charity (our young people) and each other. The ESU acknowledges its responsibility to protect staff and volunteers from harm and to create a positive and safe working environment in which every individual is respected for their contribution.

Safeguarding at ESU events

During ESU events a young person is away from their usual context and is encouraged to express themselves during competition. They may share concerns about personal situations unrelated to the event. Children and young people from a wide range of backgrounds, countries and home situations engage with ESU activities. Therefore, it is important that as a volunteer representing the ESU you recognise and are aware that this may be a period of heightened stress, emotion and excitement for the young people which could raise the possibility of a disclosure or behaviour which may raise a safeguarding concern.

In all circumstances, the staff and volunteers of the ESU will listen with empathy and provide support, guidance and assistance to young people. Children and young people should never be made to feel ashamed or that they are creating a problem by reporting concerns.



Raising a Safeguarding Concern

It is everyone's responsibility to raise a safeguarding concern if any person's actions, behaviour or words create any kind of concern that harm to a child(ren) or an adult(s) at risk has occurred, may occur or will occur. Raising a concern with the Designated Safeguarding Lead for that event is an action that must be taken. The Designated Safeguarding Lead will be identified as part of the briefing volunteers receive prior to each event, and will generally be a member of ESU staff or school staff.

Our Code of Conduct

The ESU expects all volunteers to maintain a professional and honest approach in their dealings with young people, fellow volunteers, ESU members, staff, supporters and any individuals that they come into contact with in the course of their work with the ESU.

As representatives of the ESU, you are expected to act in accordance with the principles of the ESU's Safeguarding policy, the ESU Equal Opportunities Policy and the Harassment and Bullying Policy; any failure to do so may result in disciplinary action or a discontinuation of your services.

Social Media

The full names of children in ESU programmes along with the school they attend should not be put on social media. Furthermore, volunteers should not take photos of children at ESU events. The only circumstances where photography is permitted is when a designated member of staff is permitted to do so, on an ESU registered device and with a signed photo permission form from the child's parents/guardians.

Confidentiality

While you are working for the ESU you may have access to confidential information about the ESU, its plans, programmes, policies, procedures, finances, members, supporters and beneficiaries. Where such information is confidential it must not be divulged to any unauthorised person either inside or outside the organisation, during or after your time with us. If you are in any doubt about the confidentiality of information, or the correct course of action in relation to divulging information, you must seek guidance from an ESU staff member.

External Communications

The ESU encourages and welcomes use of external media and social media to celebrate your participation and engagement with the ESU's work. We ask that you consider the sensitivity and professionalism of your communications e.g. in dealings with the press, media and potential supporters. The supporter services and engagement team are more than happy to support if you have any questions about external communication, wording, phrases to use or access to accompanying photographs.





PRACTICAL INFORMATION

What you will need on the day

Please bring your Judge Mark Sheet printed – some host schools may print out mark sheets however other venues may not have the capacity to do so.

We encourage you to bring a bottle of water and a snack.

Swing Teams

A swing team is a team added to a debate to fill a gap and allow the debate to proceed. A swing team may be needed if a school drops out or does not attend the heat.

- A swing team may contain two or three members.
- Although swing teams cannot progress to the next round, the opportunity to take part in the debate offers valuable debating experience, and the team will receive judge feedback.
- Any team left without an opponent, and therefore unable to debate, will automatically advance to the next round.
- When judging a swing team, still follow the usual criteria, but also be mindful of the time constraints the swing team may have faced. This could mean that their speaking times are shorter than usual and that there is less content for the opposing team to respond to. If this is the case, a thoughtful question and the response from the swing team can help provide more material for the opposing team to engage with.
- Judges do not need to provide a swing team with a numerical score, so you can focus on providing them with constructive feedback to help them improve.

Punctuality

We ask you to maintain high standards of punctuality and professionalism. The young people get the most out of the competitions and experience when it runs smoothly and efficiently. Please arrive 30 minutes before the event. Arriving on time, prepared is the single most important thing you can do to help our events run smoothly and our young people have the best possible experience.

ENJOY!

We hope you have a fantastic time as an ESU volunteer judge. Once again, thank you for your generosity in giving up your time to support students around the UK to discover their voices.

Follow and tag us on social media using the QR code and let us know how you enjoy the heats using the hashtag **#ESUPublicSpeaking**.



By taking part in the ESU Public Speaking Competition, students are automatically part of the ESU's thriving alumni community. Please encourage the parents/carers who attend the heat to sign up to our **alumni mailing list** to keep up to date with opportunities and events they can be part of.

THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION

The ESU is a global educational charity that brings people together across languages and cultures. We aim to build confident communicators, critical thinkers, and active citizens. Our work promotes international dialogue and cultural exchange, reflected in the diverse activities of our alumni and members worldwide.

Our goals are:

- To promote education in the English-speaking world and beyond, respecting traditions while addressing current issues.
- To use English as a tool for international communication and understanding.

We are non-political and work with people from all backgrounds. For more on our education programmes, visit [esu.org](https://www.esu.org).

English-Speaking Union, Dartmouth House,
37 Charles Street, London, W1J 5ED

0207 529 1550

[esu.org](https://www.esu.org)

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