

(This article is taken from a number of blog posts on my blog, [Coachean Life](#).)

When I was coaching I believed that debate helped students in a number of areas that would be of lifelong value to them. There is public speaking, of course, something with which I had my own difficulties when I was younger. Sooner or later, in countless professions, one is called upon to make a presentation, and some professions are virtually endless presentations. Skill at this is definitely a skill for life, and debate is a great realm for learning it. And it is unlikely that anything about AI will replace that learning or that value.

Which leaves everything else I thought students would be learning.

There's research, of course. The art of research has changed dramatically in my lifetime. When I was a debater back during the Van Buren administration, research was a process of manipulating physical media. We went to the library and used *The Reader's Guide to Periodic Literature* to find articles in magazines that we then dug out of the stacks. The information we gleaned from those articles we wrote onto 3*5 index cards, and those cards, in shoeboxes, comprised our research. In the first phase of the personal computer, which was a machine that was not connected to a Web that didn't exist yet, I acquired an encyclopedia on a CD, Microsoft Encarta, for my personal research. Then the internet and search engines came along, and the magic of Google's algorithm. And then there was Wikipedia, which got off to a bumpy and rather unreliable start, to put it mildly, before becoming quite useful. The unifying factor of all of these is that their manipulation required skill. That is, it could be said that, using the tools at hand, one was, or wasn't, a good researcher. And learning to be a good researcher was another area of lifelong value added to a debater's education.

Next up on the list of skills to be learnt was writing. To debate you needed cases, and if you wanted cases, you had to sit down and write them. In my experience, contemporary elementary school education does not come close to teaching students how to write. At best it teaches an approximation of what writing might be if one removed spelling, punctuation, grammar, and anything resembling lucidity. The writing of grammar school students is the equivalent of what we assume were the grunts and groans of the pre-Neanderthals: something was being

communicated, but only at the most basic level. You can't communicate complex thoughts if you can't articulate them in the first place, and if you can't write them down, they remain unarticulated. Debating forced students, one way or another, to become decent writers, even if only of something that was going to be entirely spoken. (The exchange of written cases is relatively modern.)

And finally, there is the logic of argumentation. (There are other valuable skills in Speech and Debate, of course, but we're concentrating here on the ones most in present-day jeopardy.) There is the structure of claim/warrant/impact. There is the ability to listen to what someone is saying and to respond cogently. There is the process of weighing in one's own mind the importance of what is being said, and prioritizing accordingly. In other words, there is the art of debate itself. What makes a good debater is the ability to present their own position clearly, and to clearly refute the position of the opponent. You take what is said and turn it around or disprove it or show that it misses the point or that what you are saying outweighs it. Refutation is a combination of quick thinking and logic and very much knowing what you're talking about (which you learned from your research and working through the writing process). And successful refutation is the key to debate success.

And here's the problem. When it comes to research, writing, and argumentation, AI at its simplest, most easily accessible form, is incomparably better at the first two than any high school debater, and a fair contender with the third one. (I'm not going to demonstrate any of this. You probably know it already, but if you don't believe it, you can try it for yourself.)

As for research, any AI agent can feed you a list of sources on literally any topic, saving you the need to poke around on Google or Wikipedia using only your wits and a galaxy-hitchhiking towel. If it is the first of the month and the topic has just been released, AI is probably not a bad starting point. It's the next progressive step in that research process I described earlier that used to begin with a physical trip to the public library. If this initial step in research is followed by careful analysis and evaluation of the results, I'm all for it. We would be using the presumably best possible research tool, combined with our own skill at evaluating research. Debate coaches can still envision educating a good researcher.

As for writing, I have fed an NSDA PF topic into an AI agent, and gotten back, in seconds, a perfectly acceptable set of both Pro and Con cases, complete with citations and timings to keep it within the speaking limits. Any novice could walk into a round with those cases and feel completely confident. Needless to say, with some juicing of one's queries, AI could produce some really excellent cases. Which means that, instead of learning to write cases, one would learn to use AI to write cases. This may or may not be a valuable skill—will anyone other than fiction authors actually write anything in the future?—but it certainly doesn't provide much education to a student in literal writing. It is, to writing, what asking AI to draw a picture is to art. It is not even close.

Finally, there's going into the round and debating. Here let us imagine the completely usual process of teams entering a round and immediately sharing their cases. (The art of flowing, I am told, is akin today to the art of etching Egyptian hieroglyphics.) What a team can do, as soon as they have the opposition case in hand, is feed that to their AI agent and have the AI agent provide logical rebuttals, complete with citations. This means that debaters don't have to consider what their opponent is saying and figure out responses: AI has done it for them. For that matter, they can ask their AI agent for some leading questions for Crossfire or CX. They can ask their agent to weigh the opposition arguments and tell them which are the strongest and which are the weakest and where is it that they should attack with the best chance of a favorable outcome. None of this communication with their agent will take them more than a few seconds.

And that is the state of AI today. (It will be getting better and better very quickly.) As for the research part, this is where the educator's skill comes into play. A debate coach in the 1960s had to teach a novice how to research. In 2026, a debate coach still needs to teach a novice how to research. The only thing that has changed is the actual "how." As for the writing of cases, again we rely on the educators. The debate coach can help students learn to write well, or the debate coach can skip that altogether and simply help students get their AI to write well. Those latter coaches will not be doing their students any favor...perhaps. But if the art of writing does go away, assigned to AI drones the way so many other things are being done by machines nowadays, well, I don't know. E. B. White's words may be prophetic: "It

is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer."
(That line still brings a tear to my eye.)

It is the use of AI in actual rounds, as an agent assisting debaters in their arguments, with which I take particular issue. Allowing use of AI in rounds means that it is not inconceivable that two teams will be facing off arguing not their own ideas and responses but the ideas and responses fed to them by their AI. This is not fantasy: it is absolutely possible. Worse still, one side could be relying on their own wits while the other side is arguing with an unseen assistant at their side, an assistant with the full access to the might and main of the internet, accessible in microseconds. If both teams use AI, what's the point of having the humans? If only one team uses AI, how is that even remotely fair?

I will be petitioning my local league to ban AI in rounds. (I'm publishing this in August, 2026.) This includes, by the way, speech. I have tested this: a basic AI agent can create an absolutely perfect extemp speech in a handful of seconds, complete with timings and citations and speaking hints. Which means that an extemper who once spent precious minutes researching followed by precious minutes preparing a speech followed by precious minutes memorizing it, can now simply spend all those precious minutes on the rough memorization of something they had virtually no hand in creating. Where's the value in that? Where is the competitive fairness? Are we ranking speakers or are we ranking AI programs?

To be honest, I think that AI is the greatest challenge that coaches face today. AI needs to be understood and used wisely by coaches. And it does need to be used: It is real, it is not going away, and there are ways of using it that will provide good education to students. But there are also ways of using it that are, in a competitive environment, cheating. Let me emphasize that. Use of AI in rounds, which is the accessing of outside agents, is as much cheating as having your teammates in the back of the room provide you responses during the round in your Google doc. The only difference is the inherent humanity. Cheating is cheating no matter how you slice it.

And what if we don't provide some guardrails against the unbridled use of AI in our activity? First off, we can just dump extemp as totally worthless as an event. And before long, as students learn to train their AI, we can dump PF, LD, CX and

BQ. (I know little of how student congress works, but I would imagine it too is in jeopardy.) If I successfully pass a rule prohibiting AI in rounds, can it be enforceable? Probably not. (Nor are virtually any other forms of cheating, for that matter.) I can only offer the honor system as enforcement. Given that I'm proposing this rule in our local Catholic Forensic League, I don't think it is too much to ask that we rely on that honor system. The students who are going to cheat are always going to find a way to do so—it's not as if cheating is unknown in our activity—but the vast majority of teams will be good citizens, adhering to the rule, and will gain the reward of achieving strong speech and debate educational goals.

Do any of us want to be around when Claude wins the TOC? In all events?

The more I think about it, the less likely I would be to allow students to use AI for the writing of cases if I were still coaching. It's not that the AI of it is somehow ethically wrong; I mean, as far back as I can recall students have been buying pre-written cases from various purveyors. It's the "not writing" of cases per se that bothers me, regardless of the source. Here's why.

The act of writing something requires you to think about that something. If it's a debate case, first you have to study the subject, then think about it, then come up with a main theme you wish to argue—that such-and-such is good/bad for this essential reason—and then you have to come up with contentions that expound on that main theme. This requires a lot of thinking on the part of the writer. Asking AI to write a case for you eliminates the need for most of that thinking. The problem here is that the lack of that thinking is the skipping of a lot of steps in your preparation for rounds. That original thinking on your part massages your brain with all sorts of information and thoughts and byways. When the round happens, that massaging makes you ready for just about anything, not just what you wrote but everything you considered and everything you didn't write. You are as prepared as conceivably possible. Delivering a pre-written case eliminates that

preparation. It also eliminates all the learning derived from that preparation. The educational value of case-writing no longer exists.

There is another advantage to writing your own case. One of the most important educational values of forensics is mastering public speaking. The speed of LD and CX undermines this to some extent but in PF, with its predominance of lay judges, effective speaking is still very important. When you write something and then present it orally, it sounds like you because it *is* you. Your familiarity with the language used, the emphases, the general style, is implicit. Public speaking is a difficult and often frightening situation; comfort with the material being presented removes much of the inherent difficulty. Being an effective speaker can definitely be a life skill learnt through our activity. Removing the prep from the speaking equation—a step in learning public speaking—is another more indirect lessening of debate’s educational value.

Meanwhile, even if you do get an AI-written case, there is the question of its reliability. You got AI to write it for you presumably as a labor-saving action. Are you going to parse it all the way to hell in back—as you should—to ensure that its citations, if any, are accurate? Are you going to use it as an outline and write your own case based on it? Are you going to practice it to death until in fact it does sound like you wrote it? All of these would seem to eliminate the efficiencies you were seeking in the first place by not writing the case yourself, while at the same time still eliding the educational benefits that writing it yourself would have granted.

Nevertheless, the NSDA and NCFL are perfectly happy with you using AI to write your cases. It is, in a word, no skin off their noses if you skip the educational basics. After all, most of the activities they support are IEs and Congress, and the numbers behind those activities are far greater than the total number of debaters. And AI is a messy subject at best, so why not avoid it if you can, despite the fact that the 2026 Sept-Oct PF topic goes at it at the roots? I wonder how many educators across the country are really well-informed on the subject.

There is one legitimate albeit depressing argument in favor of using AI to write cases. The world students will be venturing into in the coming years will indeed be a world of AI. AI will do most of the writing of a non-creative (and, God forbid, even creative) nature. Reports, memos, brochures, proposals, etc.: most people are

already not particularly good at writing but presumably good at their jobs, so when their jobs require writing, why wouldn't they use a shortcut? It could be said that learning mastery of AI from secondary education will be of value in the long run. But this is not mastery of AI, it is simply learning one application of AI, and not a particularly desirable one at that, for all the reasons stated above. I would like to live in a world where everyone is capable on their own of writing workable prose for memos and reports and the like. I would like to live in a world that educates everyone to do that writing. This is not me being a luddite, any more than if I wanted all art to be created by humans as expressions of humanity. Casual writing is, to some extent, an expression of personality. Do we want to lose that by making all casual writing machine-generated?

I would hope that the NSDA and NCFL, and educators in general, are hotly debating the use of AI. Actually, I know that a lot of folks are. But if the forces against AI in education lose the battle, it is education's loss, and ultimately humanity's loss. There really isn't much to debate about that.

It occurs to me that the people who should really be marching the streets in protest against the use of AI in debate are the people who run businesses selling debate support materials. The most elementary AI does it fast and free; I mostly use Google's Gemini for quick and dirty results, and as often as not those results, while quick, are far from dirty. I use Claude for more complicated stuff, but to be honest, I don't use AI for much of anything except travel guidance. Why would I? I mean, there's not much call for it on the golf course...

Back in my coaching days, the first step whenever a new topic was released was a brainstorming session. We would try to read the collective mind of the framers and figure out why *this* topic, especially if it wasn't all that clear on face. (There were some real stinker LD topics back in the day; what you get now is prime grade A by comparison.) And then we would just bat around the subject itself. What did we know about it? What did we need to find out? We decidedly did not talk about arguments or cases. That was for later, after we knew all we possibly could about

the topic itself. Good arguments come from deep understanding of the subject, not from the top of your head the minute a topic is released. After our brainstorming we'd go off and research, and the next time we'd meet, we'd start examining potential arguments. Keep in mind that we did all of this as a team; whatever was discussed was discussed in an open arena. If not exactly the marketplace of ideas it was, at least, the corner QuikMart of ideas.

Ultimately I feel our approach was a good one. Everyone learned a lot, which was the whole point of the thing after all. Coincidentally, we had decent success at tournaments, which was *not* the whole point of the thing, but not a bad side result nevertheless.

Goodbye to all that.

I gave my handy dandy Google Gemini this: *Give me 10 tags for both aff and neg for contentions for the Sept-Oct 2026 NSDA LD topic.* I could not even remember the topic when I made the query; that's how prepared I was.

Ten seconds later I got back what I've copied and pasted verbatim below. I'll just point out a couple of things before you read it. First of all, it gave me exactly what I asked for. Second, it eliminates any need on my part to think of reasons for either an aff or neg; that work—the thinking—is all done for me. Third, it's not bad. It's not that I like or dislike any of the arguments, but as likely as not, these are the arguments that would be in play, short of really nutty off-case stuff. Fourth, there's that tag at the end: "If you want to build full cases out of these, let me know if you would like me to pair any of these tags with specific **philosophical frameworks** (like Kantianism, Utilitarianism, or Cap K) or help write the **link and impact chains** for a specific side." Whoa!!! Take 3 tags from column A, pick one framework from column B, choose six side dish impacts from column C.

Earlier I discussed how AI-written cases eliminate the competitive and educational benefits to be derived from writing them yourself. I also suggested that AI is the search method du jour, and educators needed to figure out what that means. What you see below is the thing that needs to be figured out, because I don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing. What I do know is that it is THE thing. This is not your computer searching for articles/quotes/facts on a subject following your guidance. This is your computer, first and foremost, telling you what the subject is. That is

beyond what we used to think of as research. Remember, I got this without even knowing offhand what the topic actually was.

There's a lot to chew on in this.

*The September-October 2026 Lincoln-Douglas debate topic selected by the [National Speech & Debate Association](#) is: "**Resolved: Outer space colonization is a moral imperative.**"*

Affirmative (Pro) Contentions & Argument Tags

- ***Extinction Insurance:*** Colonization prevents permanent human annihilation from global catastrophes.
- ***Existential Hedge:*** Spreading human consciousness secures long-term survival against planetary risks.
- ***Scientific Renaissance:*** Off-world laboratories accelerate breakthrough technologies and medical cures.
- ***Resource Abundance:*** Asteroid mining solves terrestrial scarcity and climate exhaustion.
- ***Cosmic Duty:*** Humanity possesses a unique obligation to seed the universe with moral agency.
- ***Economic Expansion:*** New interplanetary markets drive infinite post-scarcity growth.
- ***Inspiration Driver:*** Space futures re-engage youth in science, unity, and grand ambition.
- ***Demographic Survival:*** Overpopulation relief eases structural strain on Earth's ecosystems.
- ***Post-National Harmony:*** Space governance fosters cooperative cosmopolitanism free from old borders.
- ***Value-to-Life Metric:*** Expanding sentient life infinitely maximizes total universal goodness.

Negative (Con) Contentions & Argument Tags

- ***Earth Neglect:*** Space spending diverts vital capital away from immediate terrestrial suffering.

- **Imperialist Spillover:** Off-world expansion reproduces colonial violence, exploitation, and inequality.
- **Ecological Imperialism:** Extraterrestrial mining despoils pristine celestial environments.
- **Corporate Dominance:** Unregulated space enterprise empowers unaccountable monopoly power.
- **Safety Distraction:** Colonization is a high-risk gamble that fails to protect vulnerable populations on Earth.
- **Lock-in Risk:** Spreading flawed human institutions locks systemic injustices into the cosmos.
- **Resource Sink:** Astronomical financial costs drain resources better used for climate crisis mitigation.
- **Techno-Solutionism:** The myth of escape de-chains society from fixing environmental collapse at home.
- **Exploited Labor:** Space industries rely on dangerous, highly stratified labor conditions for workers.
- **Biosecurity Hazard:** Interplanetary transport risks introducing catastrophic space pathogens to Earth.

*If you want to build full cases out of these, let me know if you would like me to pair any of these tags with specific **philosophical frameworks** (like Kantianism, Utilitarianism, or Cap K) or help write the **link and impact chains** for a specific side.*

As noted above, for all practical purposes neither NSDA nor NCFL meaningfully ban AI. NSDA specifically allows it during debate prep time! If I haven't pointed out the problem with that to your satisfaction by now, it's never going to happen.

Out of curiosity, I asked good old Google Gemini to tell me the pros and cons of AI in high school debate. It summarized it thus: *Using AI in high school debate*

offers powerful research acceleration and practice capabilities, but it risks eroding core analytical skills, increasing academic dishonesty, and worsening competitive resource gaps.

No kidding.

Here's the rest of it:

A discussion on how debate competitors weigh the real-world advantages and pitfalls of generative tools:

Arguments For AI in High School Debating

- ***Research Efficiency:*** *AI helps students rapidly parse dense texts, summarize long articles, and brainstorm alternative angles or counter-arguments during prep time.*

Well, that's my original argument against it, that instead of using your prep time to prep, you can have AI prep for you. I do agree that it can be useful for that parsing and summarizing, but I'm on the fence with the brainstorming, at least insofar as it harms real-life human brainstorming.

- ***Accessibility and Practice:*** *Under-resourced debate teams can use AI as a sparring partner to simulate opposing viewpoints and practice rebuttal delivery when human coaches or teammates are unavailable.*

I hadn't thought of that. It's a real benefit.

- ***Real-World Readiness:*** *Proponents argue that debate must reflect the modern technological landscape; learning to leverage and audit AI safely prepares students for future academic and professional environments.*

That's the one that may be true and at the same time may be the most specious, that we're preparing students for a world full of AI. The question is, *How* should the world be full of AI?

Arguments Against AI in High School Debating

- ***Erosion of Critical Thinking:*** *Relying on AI to structure arguments or write blocks bypasses the deep analytical struggle required to genuinely understand a topic.*

Part of my main thesis, of course.

- ***Fabricated Evidence and Hallucinations:*** *Generative tools frequently invent fake citations, misattribute data, and produce false facts, which undermines competitive integrity and rigorous source verification.*

I haven't talked about this in any depth, the possibility of bad sources, which I am told is a big problem when teams do AI research. Frankly I think this is easily solved: in a word, verify! Go to the source material yourself.

- ***Inequity and Pay-to-Win Dynamics:*** *Access to advanced, premium AI toolkits can widen the competitive gap between wealthy school programs and underfunded public school teams.*

At the moment the folks out there that provide case materials for a fee are among those with a lot to lose with AI. On the other hand, this is where we get away from the basic Q&D Gemini approach and into specifically designed AI materials for a fee. The merchandisers are certainly already working on that. Before long you will indeed see Chat1AR at an app store near you. I've only scratched the surface of AI's potential [mis]uses in high school forensics.

*Would you like help drafting a specific **pro-AI** or **con-AI** case brief for a resolution, or do you need tournament rules regarding ethical AI disclosure?*

You know, the last place I would look for the ethics of AI is AI itself.

Which is about all I'm going to say on the subject. If you're reading this, you obviously have an interest in the subject. As an educator, how will you use AI so that your students can benefit from it? How do you avoid the pitfalls? Tough questions with no easy answers. But you need to not merely be thinking about this but prioritizing your thinking about it. Given that every Google search can kick off with a Gemini AI response, students are already in the middle of it. AI's ability to undermine education is clear as day. Its ability to render high school debate a meaningless exercise is also pretty clear.

Choose wisely, my friend.