

# ESU INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC SPEAKING COMPETITION 2025-26

International Participant  
and Educator Handbook

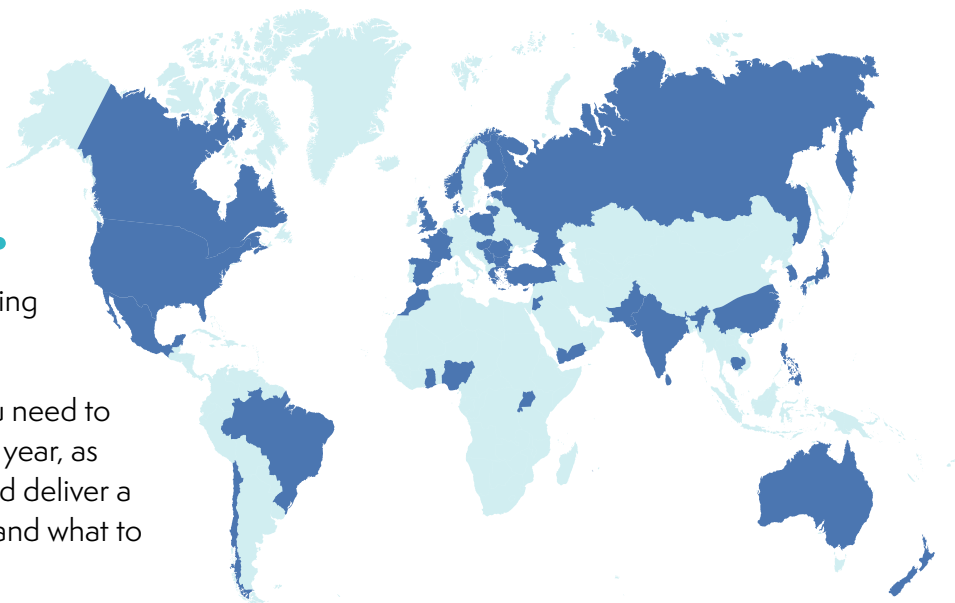


ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION  
discovering voices

# Welcome...

...to the ESU International Public Speaking Competition (IPSC) 2025-26!

This handbook contains everything you need to know about taking part in the IPSC this year, as well as guidance on how to develop and deliver a great speech, how you will be marked and what to expect throughout the competition.

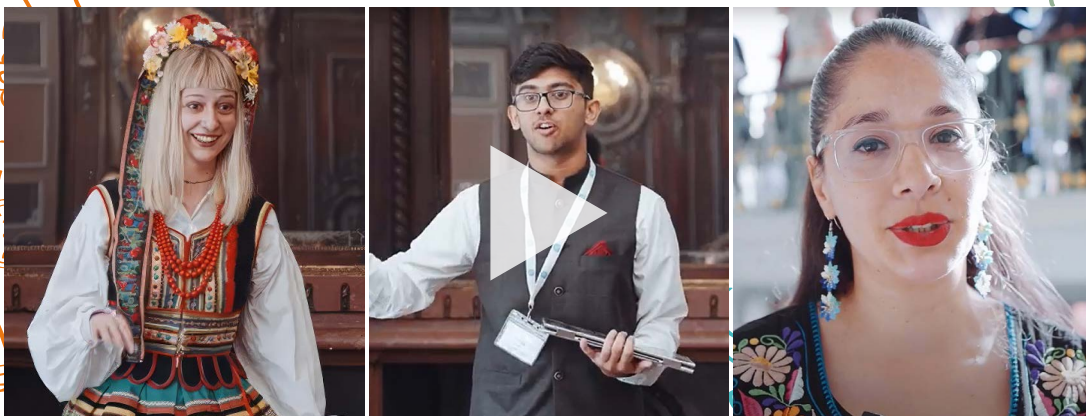


## ABOUT THE ESU IPSC

The English-Speaking Union (ESU) is a unique global organisation. An educational charity with reach in over 50 countries worldwide, we champion dialogue and discussion, equipping young people with the communication skills they need to thrive and build a more collaborative world.

Founded in 1980, the ESU International Public Speaking Competition (IPSC) is the largest public speaking competition in the world. Reaching around 100,000 young people each year, the IPSC brings together the best young speakers, showcasing the highest standards of public speaking through friendly competition. We are a non-political organisation, open to all regardless of nationality or background, and the IPSC is testament to how public speaking, conversation and friendship can bring people together from across the globe. We champion diversity and celebrate cultural exchange. The IPSC is a truly transformative experience for the young people who participate, and the friendships made over the course of the competition often last a lifetime.

## ESU IPSC WEEK 2025 HIGHLIGHTS



## ALUMNI NETWORK

By taking part in an ESU public speaking competition, you have joined a thriving global alumni community full of likeminded people. We would love to hear your story and keep in touch – to do so, [please sign up to our mailing list here](#) and look out for your first alumni newsletter!



# HOW IT WORKS

The competition operates over two stages. During the first stage, feeder competitions for the IPSC take place around the world as regional and national public speaking competitions.

## DURING NATIONAL COMPETITIONS

Participants deliver a speech connected with the theme set out by the ESU:

### NATIONAL COMPETITION AND IPSC GRAND FINAL SPEECH THEME 2025-26

The light of a candle  
Is transferred to another candle —  
Spring twilight  
*Lighting One Candle, a haiku by Yosa Buson*

The winner of each national competition is then invited to London to participate in IPSC finals week, a week of cultural exchange and competition with their fellow national champions from around the world. For details of your national competition, contact your national competition organiser.

## DURING IPSC FINALS WEEK

Participants take part in oracy workshops and have plenty of chances to explore London and make the lifelong friendships with their fellow national champions that this competition is known for. On the Thursday, national champions take part in impromptu speech heats and prepared speech heats, which together make up the semi-finals of the IPSC.

### IPSC SEMI-FINAL PREPARED SPEECH THEME 2025-26

'The power to question is the basis of all human progress'  
*Indira Gandhi*

The six best speakers from the semi-finals are selected to take part in the grand final of the IPSC, hosted at the historic and iconic Royal Institution in London on the Friday of IPSC finals week. The grand final speech theme is the same as the national competition theme (this year, Lighting One Candle by Yosa Buson).

## 2025-26 TIMELINE

**September 2025 – April 2026:** National competitions take place.

**Monday, 13 - Saturday, 18 July 2026:** IPSC finals week in London!

**Friday, 17 July 2026:** Grand Final of the ESU IPSC 2026, hosted at the Royal Institution, and live-streamed on YouTube for our international audience.

You will be able to access the [livestream here](#) in due course.



# THE SPEECHES

The ESU International Public Speaking Competition follows a structured format designed to showcase both spontaneity and preparation.

The format and structure of rounds may vary between national competitions, so we advise that you check the guidelines provided to you by your national competition organiser carefully.

For the semi- and grand finals at IPSC week in London, the following guidance applies:

## PREPARED SPEECHES

- Speeches should be five minutes in length
- Speeches must be connected in some way to the given theme, as provided by the ESU
- Participants should not use amplifying microphones, unless the space requires it
- Speeches should be followed by three to four minutes of questions
- Questions may come from members of the audience or members of the judging panel

## IMPROMPTU SPEECHES

- Speeches should be three minutes in length
- Participants are given a choice of three topics and 15 minutes to prepare
- Participants are given a quiet room, a dictionary and writing materials (pen, pencil, paper, cue cards etc) for the duration of the 15 minutes as they select their topic and prepare
- Participants may not use any printed or electronic materials for the purpose of research

## RULES FOR PREPARED AND IMPROMPTU SPEECHES

- Participants are not allowed any props or visual aids
- Participants should respond to each question individually
- Participants may use cue cards or a device for notes

## USING ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

We do not impose strict rules across our international network and instead provide flexible guidance to help national organisers navigate the use of AI during competition heats. We appreciate that the absence of prescriptive rules may invite some variation between competitions, however we trust that national organisers will apply these guidelines thoughtfully to suit their unique contexts and ensure fairness across events.

Overall, we recommend treating AI similarly to the use of search engines or online resources. We understand that the use of AI can be particularly difficult to monitor during the audience question portion of the prepared speeches, as audience members may use their phones to differentiate questions for the speakers. We suggest that the MC encourages the audience to refrain from using mobile phones and other devices throughout the competition.

For prepared speeches, participants may use notes on their phone instead of traditional cue cards. However, we recommend reminding participants that using a phone can appear less formal, and some judges may prefer the use of paper notes.

The impromptu speech round at the IPSC demonstrates that a participant is not simply delivering a memorised or AI-generated speech. We encourage participants to apply the same principles of originality in prepared speech rounds.



# PREPARING FOR YOUR SPEECH

## INTERPRETING A THEME

- Each theme is chosen purposely to leave room for interpretation, so we encourage you to explore the theme and choose a relevant topic to explore in your speech.
- You should not use the theme itself as your speech title, nor try to guess any hidden meaning; there isn't one. Instead, focus on developing a personal interpretation that is meaningful to you and reflects your own interests.
- Originality and creativity are key to making your speech stand out, especially as the judges will hear many other speeches on the same theme.
- You are free to interpret the themes however you choose, as long as your speech is clearly connected to the designated theme.
- It is not necessary to be persuasive, however you should have a clear purpose throughout.

## CHOOSING A TOPIC AND TITLE

- Everyone is assigned the same theme for their speech, but choosing a specific subject or topic within that theme is essential. It's usually more effective to select a topic you're interested in first, then find a way to connect it to the theme.
- When considering potential topics, ask yourself: Am I interested in this? Will it engage the audience? Can I research it effectively? And can I cover it clearly within the time limit?
- Aim for a balance between what you know and what you're eager to learn. A topic you know too well might be difficult to condense into a short speech, while one you know too little about can be hard to tackle confidently.
- Avoid overly technical or obscure subjects unless you can explain them simply and briefly.
- Keep in mind that relevance makes even complex ideas compelling, so choose a topic that connects meaningfully with the audience.

## BRAINSTORMING

This process may help you get into your topic:

- **Initial Brainstorm (theme-based):** In 60 seconds, write as many words/ideas as possible related to the theme. Use search engines, dictionaries and thesauruses to explore keywords from the theme.
- **Secondary Brainstorm (topic-based):** After choosing a topic, spend five minutes writing down everything you associate with it. This can help you identify key arguments, organise your ideas clearly, and reveals information that can be used when listening and responding to audience questions.

## RESEARCH

- Use a variety of sources.
  - **Fact-based:** Encyclopaedias, databases
  - **Academic:** Journals, reports
  - **Opinion-based:** News articles, reputable commentary
- Cross-check information, especially statistics (don't rely on a single source).
- Ensure all evidence is current and credible.
- Anecdotal evidence (stories, personal experiences) - while these are typically less persuasive, they can be effective for empathy or entertainment when used sparingly and with clear intent.

## RHETORICAL DEVICES

These techniques help make your speech memorable and persuasive:

- **Repetition:** Reinforce key ideas by repeating important words or phrases at strategic moments.
- **Parallelism:** Use similar sentence structures to create rhythm and emphasis (e.g., 'We will work hard, we will dream big, we will succeed together').
- **Metaphor & Simile:** Connect abstract ideas to familiar images for clarity and emotional impact.
- **Rhetorical Questions:** Engage your audience by prompting them to think (without expecting a direct answer).
- **Rule of Three:** Present points or examples in threes to make them easier to remember.

## ARGUMENTATION & DEVELOPMENT OF CONCEPTS

Organising and expanding your ideas strengthens your case:

- **Clear Thesis:** Define your main point in one concise sentence. Everything in your speech should support it.
- **Logical Flow:** Arrange points in a sequence that builds understanding (e.g., problem → cause → solution).
- **Evidence Integration:** Support each claim with data, examples, or reasoning.
- **Counterarguments:** Briefly address and refute opposing views to show depth and credibility.
- **Concept Deepening:** Use definitions, comparisons, and real-world applications to help your audience fully grasp your point.

## USING ANECDOTES

Personal or illustrative stories can bring your speech to life:

- **Purpose-Driven:** Choose stories that directly support your argument or theme.
- **Concise & Relevant:** Keep anecdotes short and focused – avoid unnecessary detail.
- **Emotional Connection:** Aim to spark empathy, humour or curiosity.
- **Transition Smoothly:** Link the story to your broader point so it feels integrated, not random.

## PRACTISING YOUR SPEECH

Rehearsal helps you refine content, structure and timing before the competition:

- **Full Run-Throughs:** Practise delivering your entire speech aloud several times. This helps identify awkward wording, unclear sections and areas where you may rush or run over time.
- **Refining Structure:** Make sure your introduction hooks the audience, your main points flow logically and your conclusion leaves a strong final impression. Adjust or cut content to keep within the time limit.
- **Editing for Clarity:** Replace complex or unclear phrasing with simpler alternatives. Check that transitions between points are smooth and natural.
- **Test with Others:** Present your speech to friends, family or teachers. Ask for feedback on clarity, engagement and pacing, and use their suggestions to improve your delivery.
- **Simulate Conditions:** Practise standing up, using notes and making eye contact so your rehearsal feels closer to the real event.

# BEING A GREAT SPEAKER

## GUIDANCE ON THE ESU FOUR KEY SKILL SETS


The ESU's Four Key Skill Sets provide the basis on which all speeches are marked. The judging criteria used by ESU judges is available on page nine of this handbook, and a detailed breakdown of how participants can excel in each skill set is below.

### EXPRESSION AND DELIVERY

- **Verbal Communication:** Varying pitch, tone and pace helps engage the audience and emphasise key points. Well-timed pauses add impact and signal transitions in the speech.
- **Non-Verbal Communication:** Body language, facial expressions, eye contact and purposeful movement all play a vital role in engaging the audience and make a speaker appear confident and sincere.
- **Linguistic Skills:** Using clear, consistent and accessible language, as well as avoiding slang, jargon and overly complex vocabulary help to ensure the message is understood by a diverse audience.
- **Confidence and Style:** Confidence comes from preparation and being self-assured, and a speaker's unique style helps them connect authentically with the audience.
- **Using Notes:** Notes should guide, not dominate; speakers should memorise key sections but speak naturally using brief prompts to stay on track.

### REASONING AND EVIDENCE

- **Statement of Intent:** A clear statement of intent at the start of a speech helps the audience understand the purpose of the speech and follow its structure. This makes the speaker's message more accessible.
- **Empirical Evidence:** Evidence should support, not replace, the speaker's reasoning. Reliable and relevant data enhances credibility when explained clearly.
- **Examples and Analogies:** Arguments can be strengthened with relatable analogies or real-world examples, which are often more persuasive than unfamiliar statistics. Referencing familiar situations or systems helps audiences grasp complex or abstract ideas.
- **Reasoned Analysis and Logic:** Speakers must explain why their argument is valid through clear reasoning and logical progression. Each point should build on the last to form a coherent and persuasive overall case.
- **Dealing with Conflicting Evidence and Opinions:** Acknowledging and addressing opposing evidence shows depth of understanding and builds credibility. Rather than ignoring contradictions, strong speakers explain why their position still holds stronger merit.
- **Credibility:** Credibility comes from logical, structured arguments, not necessarily expertise. A speaker who shows balanced understanding and argues convincingly will earn trust and engagement from the audience.



"I have changed. I now believe that we can change the world. I now believe that humanity can move mountains. These people are set to change the world in their own countries and I'm excited about that."

Mohamed Suhail, National Champion  
for Mauritius, IPSC 2023



## ORGANISATION AND PRIORITISATION

- **Structure:** Well-structured speeches keep the audience engaged and help them follow the speaker's reasoning. Using categories, themes, and clear signposting enhances clarity and impact.
- **Outline:** A strong speech follows a clear flow - a purposeful introduction, a logically ordered body and a conclusion that ties everything together. Regardless of speaking style, structure supports clarity, argument development and audience understanding.
- **Using Notes:** Organised notes make it easier for speakers to follow their structure and stay on track during delivery. Whether using palm cards or full sheets of paper, the goal is to support smooth transitions, reinforce key points and avoid reading word-for-word.
- **Timing:** Participants should manage their time deliberately, ensuring each section of the speech receives appropriate attention. Practising with time blocks and using tools like timers or cues helps avoid rushing or neglecting important content.

## LISTENING AND RESPONSE

- **Answering Questions:** The question period is an opportunity to demonstrate depth of knowledge and defend the arguments made with clarity and composure. Once a speaker has listened carefully to the question, it's best to pause before responding and answer questions directly, avoiding repeating parts of their speech.
- **Responding in Real Time:** Rather than relying on prepared answers, speakers should engage with the specific question asked, keeping answers relevant, focused and supportive of the original argument.
- **Managing Complex or Unclear Questions:** When faced with a long or confusing question, the speaker should consider breaking it down or asking for clarification. This helps ensure both they and the audience fully understand what's being asked before responding.
- **Keep it Concise:** Answers during the 3-4-minute question time should be succinct and engaging; lengthy or overly detailed responses can cause the audience to lose interest.
- **Maintain Delivery Skills:** All the techniques from Expression and Delivery (e.g. confident body language, eye contact and tone of voice) apply just as much during the question period. Speakers should stay calm and avoid becoming defensive, even when challenged.





# JUDGING CRITERIA

The judging criteria for national competitions should be similar to or the same as the IPSC finals week judging criteria outlined below. For advice on your specific national competition, please contact your national competition organiser. In both the semi-finals and grand final, national champions will be assessed based on the ESU's Four Key Skill Sets. Judges use marksheets with the following guidance:

## EXPRESSION AND DELIVERY

- Communication is clear in an appropriate style
- Good command of voice, pitch, pace and tone
- Non-verbal communication (including body language, hand gestures, facial expressions etc.) is used well
- Speaker gains the interest of the audience from the start

*Impromptu speech: up to 40 marks | Prepared speeches: up to 35 marks*

## REASONING AND EVIDENCE

- Speech has appropriate and sufficient content
- Points and ideas are analysed, thoughtful and relevant to the overarching theme/argument
- Particular credit should be given to those who consider alternative viewpoints/evidence and are able to provide sufficient responses

*Impromptu speech: up to 40 marks | Prepared speeches: up to 35 marks*

## ORGANISATION AND PRIORITISATION

- A clear structure to the speech
- A clear introduction, main body of the speech and conclusion
- A clear structure to the speech signposted from the beginning of the speech
- The speaker gives more time to their best/most convincing points
- Between 2:30 and 3:30 minutes long (impromptu speeches) or 4:30 and 5:30 minutes long (prepared speeches)

*Impromptu speech: up to 20 marks | Prepared speeches: up to 15 marks*

## LISTENING AND RESPONSE

- Engages well with the audience when answering questions
- Demonstrates additional knowledge on their topic outside of their prepared speech
- Open to new ideas and opinions

*Prepared speeches only: up to 15 marks*

## TOTAL MARKS AVAILABLE

Speech	Expression and Delivery	Reasoning and Evidence	Organisation and Prioritisation	Listening and Response	Total
Impromptu Speech	40	40	20	0	100
Prepared Speeches	35	35	15	15	100

## TIMING

For each speech, a timekeeper will give an audible signal to indicate that 30 seconds remain, again to indicate that the participant's time is up, and finally to indicate that the speaker has exceeded the speech time by 30 seconds, at which point they must conclude their speech immediately. Participants whose speeches are too long or short by over 30 seconds may be penalised.

# ADDITIONAL GUIDANCE AND RESOURCES

## HOW TO GIVE THE BEST SPEECH OF YOUR LIFE

Click [here](#) for guidance from IPSC alumni, who came together at IPSC 2025 to give their top tips on giving the best speech of your life.

## GET INSPIRED

Watching past speeches can be particularly helpful. You can find these on our IPSC [playlist](#) on our YouTube Channel.

## EXPLORE MORE FROM THE ESU

For more [resources](#), to read our [equity policy](#), or to [learn about your fellow alumni](#), head to our website.

## NOT SURE WHERE TO START?

Every national competition organiser has access to more resources to share with their participants. For example, our public speaking workshop series includes six flexible workshops, each designed to develop one or more of the ESU's Four Key Skill Sets. They are ideal for building confidence and sharpening essential public speaking skills in a clear, structured way, and can be easily integrated into English lessons or run as part of a public speaking club, making them a versatile resource for any setting. Contact your national competition organiser for access to this resource.

We are thrilled to have you with us this year. We wish you the best of luck in your national competition, and hope to see you in London for IPSC finals week in July.



"This was an incredible week filled with cultural exchange that will forever change me as an individual. I leave this week making friends and memories to last a lifetime. Never before have I been surrounded by such passionate, kind, and well-spoken young people ready to take on the challenges facing our world."

**Rishabh Barve, National Champion  
for the USA IPSC 2025**

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