

Seminar on Equity: How to not be offensive in debate rounds!

1. Use formal and appropriate language – always. Avoid using offensive words just to prove a point. For instance, DO say ‘African-American’, DON’T say the N-word – even in a round about Huckleberry Finn.
2. When making an argument of the form, “Group X is less capable of/not as well suited to Y,” be sure to EXPLAIN the CAUSALITY. Suppose you want to use the fact that African-Americans are typically not as educated as white Americans in a case. Don’t just say, “African-Americans are generally not as educated as white people are” and move on. That sounds flippant and can easily come off as offensive, even if it is not intended that way. What you should say is, “African-Americans have been forced into positions of serious economic disadvantage. Poverty is a cycle that is hard to break. Poverty is correlated with lower educational attainment. As a result, African-Americans are typically less well-educated than white people.” When you make your argument this way, you show understanding, you make a better argument, and you avoid being offensive.
3. Give other debaters the benefit of the doubt. If someone said something that clearly came out wrong, but probably wasn’t said with malice – let it go. Don’t accuse people of being ‘racist’ or ‘sexist’ in a round. It puts people on the defensive and lowers the quality of the round for everybody involved.
4. Don’t make potentially offensive or highly controversial arguments gratuitously. You don’t get bonus marks for saying something ‘avant-garde’ – you just run the risk of making people uncomfortable. Don’t reference the Holocaust unless it’s appropriate (hint – that’s almost never). Don’t call something slavery if it isn’t slavery. Don’t try to argue for genocide just because you can. You will always be rewarded most for being reasonable.