# What Trump and Clinton must do to win Monday's first presidential debate.

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Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump will go head to head in the first presidential election debate on Monday. Brian Klaas writes that debates matter; just one gaffe can derail a candidacy. He writes that to win, Clinton should knock Trump off script, address her email scandal head on, and showcase her steady temperament. For Trump to come out on top he must stay relaxed, soften his image, and lower expectations.
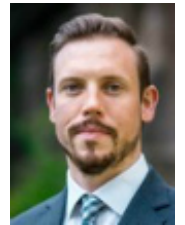
In the fictional TV show, *The West Wing*, intellectual heavyweight President Jed Bartlet delivers a knockout punch to his less sophisticated, more bombastic Republican rival during the presidential debates by asking him for "the next ten words," beyond the ten word sound bite that his staff had coached him to say during debate prep.

"Give me the next ten words." Bartlet goads. "How are we going to do it?"

Hillary Clinton should be watching these re-runs for inspiration as she gears up for the first presidential debate against Donald Trump, to be held on Monday night at Hofstra University in New York. Her debate advantage lies with two things: policy knowledge and the ability to stay on script even when goaded.

Since early August, when all signs pointed to Clinton coasting to victory, the race has tightened. And while the state-by-state Electoral College – which actually decides the presidency – still favors Clinton, many national polls show a dead heat. In this context, the debates are even more crucial.

Throughout modern American political history, just one second in a debate can derail a candidacy that has been chugging along for 18 months. Whether it was Nixon's sweaty fidgeting during his debate with JFK; Michael Dukakis answering like a robot when asked a (horribly out of bounds) question about whether he would support the death penalty if his wife were raped and murdered; or George Bush Sr. checking his watch out of seeming disinterest while being asked a question by a voter, the debates can make or break campaigns. Small gaffes can tilt results in razor-close elections. Big gaffes can upend the polls completely and re-orient the race.

In the 2016 contest, virtually nobody believes that Donald Trump is a better debater than Hillary Clinton. When it comes to matters of substantive plans, policy detail, and experience, he is an amateur compared to his seasoned rival. And, there has never been a more stark contrast in the amount of policy detail offered by two major presidential candidates at this late stage in the race. But that doesn't mean that Trump can't emerge from the debates poised to defeat Clinton at the ballot box in November. Instead, everything in the debates – gaffe or glory – will be determined by the degree to which each candidate is able to play to their strengths off-the-cuff, in the limelight, while being watched on live television by roughly 50 million people.

For Clinton, she needs to do three things. First, she needs to knock Donald Trump off the script that he has been on for the last few weeks. When he is off-script, he says ugly things and is more gaffe-prone than any presidential candidate in recent American history. For Clinton, that means drawing inspiration from Jed Bartlet's playbook by pressing Trump for ever-more detail, ever-more precision when he dodges or ducks a question. "We're going to win," is not an adequate answer to a question about national security and counterterrorism. If the moderator gives Trump a free pass when he gives sound bite answers lacking sufficient detail, Clinton should stop the debate and refuse to move on until Trump has given the information that voters deserve.

Second, Clinton needs to address the persistent e-mail scandal head-on early, and ensure that she appears convincing, earnest, and compassionate throughout the debate. Even though independent fact checkers have consistently shown that Clinton tells the truth far more often than Trump, Clinton's standing with voters is still damaged regarding her trustworthiness and honesty. The trope that Clinton is too robotic and calculating is overblown, but it's one that could nonetheless harm her White House prospects if her debate performance feeds that narrative.

Third, Clinton needs to showcase her steady temperament, her experience, and her presidential gravitas as much and as often as possible. With the recent bombings in New York dominating the headlines across the United States, the race is gravitating toward national security. While that may seem like good news for Donald Trump – who has aimed to paint himself as the law and order candidate – Clinton should take solace in the fact that many more Americans believe that she, rather than Trump, is "ready" to serve as Commander-in-Chief. Clinton should highlight not only her plans for national security and counterterrorism, but also remind voters that she sat in the Situation Room two chairs away from President Obama during the raid that killed Osama Bin Laden.

For Trump, his strengths are different. As a reality television icon, Trump is far more comfortable under stage lights than Clinton. He needs to exploit that advantage by staying relaxed and not going "off the leash," so to speak, or "off message." After a catastrophic August, Trump's advisers have kept him on-script using a teleprompter. There will be no teleprompter in a live debate, so staying relaxed and sticking to talking points are key to his success. The more "normal" Trump's candidacy seems, the better it will be for him when it comes to winning over undecided or swing voters.

Second, Trump needs to lower expectations. His campaign is already doing so on two fronts, both by insinuating that the moderator is almost certainly going to be unfair to Trump, and by suggesting that Clinton is a much more formidable debater. While the latter seems a strange thing to admit for a would-be president, it is part of political strategy that all campaigns use to ensure that the post-debate media narrative teems with talk of "momentum" or "exceeding expectations." (The media, by the way, should avoid being played by such a simple, hollow strategy; Trump and Clinton are running for the toughest job in the world so how they perform matters in absolute, not relative to expectations terms).

Third, Trump needs to soften his image and appear presidential. A majority of Americans in a recent YouGov/Economist poll said they would use the word "racist" to describe Donald Trump. Even more said they believed he was "dangerous." It is truly unbelievable to find ourselves in a situation where the majority of Americans believe those words describe a major presidential candidate, on the cusp of being the 45th President of the United States. If that is going to happen, Trump needs to appear presidential and strive to distance himself from his own ugly or erratic statements that he has made throughout the campaign.

When the lights come on Monday night in New York, they will showcase two candidates who are neck-and-neck in the battle for the White House. But when they dim, we may have a drastically changed race. And sadly, a lot of the determinants of who becomes the most powerful person in the world can pivot on gotchas and gaffes. It's sure to be a wild ride.

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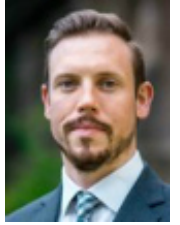
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Dr. Brian Klaas is a Fellow in Comparative Politics at the LSE. He focuses on democracy, global politics, political violence, voting, and elections. He is the author of the forthcoming book: "The Despot's Accomplice: How the West is Aiding & Abetting the Decline of Democracy." In 2010 he managed a successful campaign for Governor in Minnesota and oversaw debate preparation.