**6 ways President Obama can win the first presidential debate**

*By The Week's Editorial Staff | The Week – Tue, Oct 2, 2012*

Mitt Romney is getting a lot of [unsolicited advice](http://theweek.com/article/index/234073/6-ways-mitt-romney-can-win-the-first-presidential-debate) on how he can turn around his lagging White House bid in the ["do or die" first presidential debate](http://theweek.com/article/index/234023/the-first-presidential-debate-do-or-die-for-mitt-romney), but President Obama has at least as much on the line on Wednesday night. And while Romney flexed his debating muscle in 20 Republican primary debates over the past year, Obama's in for something he's "rarely faced since taking office," [says Jonathan Tobin at *Commentary*](http://www.commentarymagazine.com/2012/09/30/if-obama-plays-not-to-lose-presidential-debate-thats-what-will-happen-romney/): "A direct and sustained face-to-face challenge from a determined opponent," in a (mostly) unscripted situation where almost anything can happen. So, here are six things Obama can do — or avoid doing — to win the crucial first debate against Romney:

**1. Obama should play it safe...**Romney goes into the debate needing a decisive, campaign-shifting win, but Obama doesn't, Rice University's Paul Brace [tells the *San Francisco Chronicle*](http://www.sfgate.com/politics/article/What-Romney-Obama-need-to-do-in-debate-3905670.php). In fact, his big task is: "Don't screw up. It's that simple." Luckily for the president, "his debating style happens to be almost perfectly suited" for that mission, [says Gerald Seib in *The Wall Street Journal*](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390443862604578030330341030930.html?mod=googlenews_wsj). Judging by his "smooth and polished" performance in the 2008 presidential debates, we should expect an unruffled, low-heat, "no-drama Obama" to take the stage. That makes for poor political theater, but "boring probably would suit him just fine."

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**2. ...But not too safe**Romney and Obama both view debates "as a minefield to be tiptoed through, not a platform for showmanship and persuasion," [says Alan Schroeder at the *New York Daily News*](http://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/shake-hands-swinging-article-1.1170722?localLinksEnabled=false). But playing a "conservative game against Romney" would be a missed opportunity. With at least 50 million people expected to tune in Wednesday, imagine if Obama went bold, unveiling a surprise plan for his second term or making "an impassioned case not just for himself but for a Democratic Congress" as well, thrashing the do-nothing GOP-led House. "With the whole world watching, it's a shame to waste the megaphone."

**3. He should frame every issue as a choice**Obama is winning because he deftly managed to make this election a choice between himself and Romney, [says Hilary Rosen at *CNN*](http://www.cnn.com/2012/09/29/opinion/rosen-obama-debate/index.html). He should keep that up in the debate, framing "virtually every answer as a choice, not a defense" of his policies. Romney is "smart and a skilled debater," and he will try to keep the focus on the past four years. Obama shouldn't play along. "Every issue presents a choice for the American people. And on an issue-by-issue basis, the people are mostly with the president."

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**4. Obama needs to show some humility**These face-offs aren't won or lost on substance, [says Albert R. Hunt at *Bloomberg View*](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-09-30/obama-s-penchant-for-arrogance-is-bigger-debate-foe.html). "The very few game-changers in debates occur when a candidate makes a mistake or exposes an unattractive personality trait." For Obama, that's "arrogance." In 2008, he had respect for opponent Sen. John McCain, but he reportedly sees Romney as "an out-of-touch stiff without core beliefs, willing to say or do anything for political advantage." Obama's biggest danger is that he'll let some of that scorn show on stage. If he's too dismissive or rude toward Romney, he risks his biggest asset: Likability.

**5. Keep his answers concise**This is a tough task for a "former constitutional law professor," [says Richard S. Dunham at the *San Francisco Chronicle*](http://www.sfgate.com/politics/article/What-Romney-Obama-need-to-do-in-debate-3905670.php), but, Obama, "don't sound like a professor" on Wednesday night. The president, if he isn't careful, has a tendency to get a little long-winded and wonky. In the debate "he needs to simplify his explanations and talk about real people rather than statistics and theories." Wading into the thickets of policy "works if you're Bill Clinton," [says Democratic consultant Harold Cook](http://www.sfgate.com/politics/article/What-Romney-Obama-need-to-do-in-debate-3905670.php), but it "doesn't tend to work for any other living human being."

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**6. He should relax and enjoy the fight**Probably the best advice for Obama is, "don't listen to hacks like me," [says Aaron Zelinsky at the *Hartford Courant*](http://articles.courant.com/2012-09-28/news/hc-op-zelinsky-debate-advice-for-obama-0930-20120928_1_first-debate-past-debates-debates-matter). "The strongest thing you have going is that the American people like you, and they don't like Romney," so don't blow that by trying to be someone else. By all means, "be presidential," but also stay relaxed. Obama may not have spent as much time preparing for the debate as Romney, [says Catherine Poe at *The Washington Times*](http://communities.washingtontimes.com/neighborhood/ad-lib/2012/sep/28/how-president-obama-could-lose-debate-mitt-romney/), but he'll be ready enough. So, Mr. President, go out there, be sunny, and have fun. "If you show us how much you enjoy the give and take of the debate, you can win."