

Training Guide for University Debating

Tips, Tactics and First
Principles.

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Introduction.

This is the third edition, updated and expanded yet again, of my guide to university debating. It is designed to help debaters and adjudicators of all levels improve their understanding and skills. Ultimately good debating is about having good ideas – because you will never know all of the facts or details of every situation, but you can learn enough key ideas to equip you for any circumstance. In this guide I refer to that concept as ‘first principles’, and that term covers both knowledge of fundamental philosophical concepts, but also basic logic and rhetorical tactics.

There are really two types of debaters. There are those who think debating is just a hobby, something that’s fun and looks good on a CV, but isn’t really very important in the grand scheme of things, and then there is another group.

The second group think debating is more than just trophies, travelling overseas or having the best matter files. To this second group, debating actually has some inherent meaning and importance – not because the outcome of any given debate ever really changes much, but because in its totality, debating changes everything. Unlike any other hobby or sport, debating – if done well – will shape your personality, your intellect and your beliefs. And if we ever want to live in a world where decisions are made on the basis of logic and persuasion, not force or intimidation, then we need to take things like debating seriously.

For that reason I think it’s critical that people learn to debate well. The debaters at DLSU (Philippines) have a motto – “make the game beautiful” – and while I doubt that my involvement ever made debating prettier, I’d like to think I always debated with integrity. Every debater needs to find their own style, and while I certainly don’t want everyone trying to sound like me in debates, I would like to think that most debaters will eventually realise the importance of what they are doing, and the skills that they’re learning. I sincerely hope this guide will go some way towards that goal.

Before I let you get to the good stuff, I’d like to issue a brief disclaimer. Although I’m happy to see this guide distributed widely, I’d like to request that any reproductions of this work in any format carry a proper attribution of its source, and that any distribution be done strictly on a not-for-profit basis. I don’t imagine that this will be much of a problem, since very few of us have ever made much money from debating (in fact in my experience its been quite the opposite) but I’m not seeking to profit from this work and so I’ll be damned if anyone else will!

I would also like to thank all the people, past and present, who helped me draft this guide and who helped me develop my skills. That is quite a large group of people, and so to avoid offending anyone I might leave out I won’t name names, but I think all those former mentors, team-mates and foes know who they are.

Finally, there is one more critical factor to becoming a great debater – having fun. If you don’t enjoy it you’ll never stick around long enough to master all the lessons this guide is trying to teach. So remember that while it’s important to always try to give each debate you’re all, at the end of the day it’s just Easters. Make some friends, go to a room party or two, and most important of all – enjoy yourself!

Chapter One: Definitions.

Definitions are crucial. If you get it badly wrong, then it's unlikely that anything else in the debate will go well. Luckily getting it right is usually very straight forward.

Under either “semi-divine” or “most reasonable” definitional rules (the two most common rules for university competitions), the fairest and most effective way to define a debate is the same. Apply two tests:

Most Reasonable Definition:
Context & Spirit of the Motion.

Context. Simply put, what is happening in the world or a region that relates to the topic? It could be that a new law is being debated by a government or organization. It might be a conflict has flared up or been the subject of significant media attention. Maybe it's just that a long-standing problem has recently gotten worse, or that the media has decided to focus public attention around a particular issue.

In any case, if a significant event has occurred that seems to be related to the topic, then those issues should be the focus of the debate – subject to the second test.

Spirit of the Motion. This means, “what sort of debate was envisioned when this motion was chosen?” This test relies on the assumption that topics are chosen for a good reason – namely that a particular issue or conflict would make a good debate. Part of assessing the ‘spirit’ of the motion is being sure that your definition will generate a good, reasonably balanced debate, with interesting/important issues that are complex or sophisticated enough to be sustained over the course of the debate. There is no point defining the debate to a very controversial issue, which nevertheless is basically a single argument issue, and cannot be effectively extended into a debate with multiple speakers’ - each raising new issues.

So, if the context to the debate suggests that a certain issue or situation should be the focus of the debate, *and* that would be sufficient to meet the spirit of the motion, then assuming you applied the tests correctly, you have a good definition for the debate.

NOTE: it is important to be aware of the cultural and political differences that can exist between participants at a given tournament. For example, when assessing the context to a debate, if you are at a national tournament, then issues that are dominating the domestic media are naturally a reasonable basis for deciding the context to your definition.

However at an international competition it can be more difficult to avoid operating under the assumption that issues that are controversial in your country are also controversial in other countries. Of course this doesn't mean that all definitions must be about the US or some other 3rd country so as not to disadvantage yourself or your opponents, but incorrectly assessing the context of the debate is a sure-fire way to violate the “unfairly place-set” provisions of the rules.

The basic test of whether a place-set definition is fair is not whether or not your opponents *do* know anything about that issue, but whether it is reasonable to assert that they *should*, based on the competition and the experience of your opponents.

For example it is reasonable to assume that debaters *should* have a working knowledge of the political situation in Israel, because it's frequently reported on in the media. However, the conflict in the region of Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan is far less widely known by even the most well read members of society.

So if a topic relates generally to separatist conflicts, and significant events have occurred in both Israel and Nagorno-Karabakh (context test), then it would be fair, and wise, to define the debate as relating to Israel because it is more likely to yield a good debate (spirit of the motion test).



Naturally, with a more tightly worded topic then applying the tests might indicate that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the appropriate definition, but make sure you are fairly applying both tests and not just looking for an opportunity to show off your knowledge of obscure places.

The more vague or 'open' the topic is, the greater the number of 'legitimate' (or technically valid) definitions there are available to you. So your obligation is to pick a definition that is firstly very clear (don't *ever* debate vague principles and ideas – trust me, it won't be a good debate – nail the principle down to something specific and practical – as you will see in the example below) and then choose the definition that will give the best chance of creating a good debate; which is a definition that you can reasonably assume your opponents can understand and respond to properly.

Otherwise the result might be a definitional challenge (which ruins the debate and your speaker scores) and/or angry and confused adjudicators. Plus you'll get a bad reputation as a team that plays dirty – even if you didn't mean it!

Example: "That we spend too much money on the stars".

Since 'stars' could relate to astronomy or celebrities you can reach a fair definition by applying the two tests.



(1) Context: Has there recently been a significant event in either field (eg, the explosion of a space shuttle, or a controversially expensive film contract)?

Basically, has there been something in the media that relates to this topic? If only one meaning of the term 'stars' has a strong contextual basis, then most likely the definition should go in that direction. In either case, apply the second test.



- (2) **Spirit of the motion:** if there is a relevant context to the debate, then ask yourself which definition will yield the best debate? Which has the most interesting, controversial, debatable issues? Which has issues that both sides *should* be aware of?

If one answer stands out on both tests, then you have a winner. In the event of a tie (think carefully, make sure it really is) then either is a good definition, but make an extra effort to set the debate up clearly and explain the relevance of the definition.

What do you need to ‘set up’ a debate correctly? Well you need a good definition, and you should explain the context you used to form that definition (as well as the definition itself) in the first minute of your speech. As part of establishing the context you should *always* explain what the status quo is, because as you will see later, your understanding of the status quo might not be the same as other people in the room (for reasons of culture, religion, political views, etc) but if you explain your understanding of the status quo, then everyone will understand where you are coming from when you set up your model.

This might sound like a minor point, but making sure both sides agree on what the status quo is can often be incredibly important. One reason is because the nature of the status quo defines how ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ line your case is – which is the subject of the next chapter.



Chapter Two: Hard/Soft Lines and Models.

The terms ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ in reference to a definition or model are an indication of how profound the change is that is being proposed.

A very small modification to the status quo is *soft*, while a big change is *hard*. The status quo might be in terms of legal principle or in terms of people’s attitudes.

NOTE: Generally speaking these terms do not imply how difficult it is to argue for that level of change – since often it is easier to argue a ‘hard line’ rather than a ‘soft line’ – but we’ll get to that later.

Once you have determined the ‘strength’ of your line, it should be relatively easy to create your model (which is the subject of the next chapter).

Example: For the topic “That this house supports euthanasia,” below are different definitions you might choose.

Soft line ----- Moderate line -----Hard line

Restricted to incredibly sick people, who are *very* close to death, and who have no hope of cure or a decent standard of living. Patients need the consent of multiple doctors and psychologists. Passive euthanasia only – deny food/medicine

Allowed to the terminally ill, who have very low standard of living and little-to-no hope of a cure.

Doctor & psychologist consent. Doctor assisted euthanasia allowed

Available to anyone diagnosed with a terminal or debilitating or degenerative illness, whether physical or mental.
Need medical consent.

Doctor assisted or self-administered.

A smart team will stay somewhere between the moderate and the hard line in *every* debate, because it’s both the fairest thing to do, and is the tactically sound choice too.

Fairness: The problem with the soft line is that will virtually always fail both tests of a good definition. It will rarely be a contextually based definition or model, because a plan so close to the status quo would rarely be controversial enough to illicit serious media attention or public debate. Obviously in terms of the spirit of the motion, a soft line is highly unlikely to yield a good, complex debate with a range of important issues. It is by definition not particularly controversial, and therefore is a poor choice to debate (see “ultra-soft lines” in Chapter Seven)

Tactically: A harder line is usually easier to defend because it is more philosophically consistent, and more closely bridges the gap between the scale of the problem and the scale of the solution.

Also a hard(ish) line pushes you further away from your opposition, and that means you’ll need to argue why your model has more benefits, but is also the correct ‘norm’ by which this issue should be addressed (see Trends, Norms and Tipping Points).

Forcing yourself to make these kinds of arguments is good because it ensures your case is sophisticated and well developed.

The single biggest problem with running a soft line, is that you will run out of (smart) arguments. Just like with a truistic definition, it might seem like logically a truistic definition is best, but in terms of filling 6-8 minutes with intelligent analysis, it's just impossible if what you are saying is simply, irrefutably true. So running a hard line means both teams will have a better debate, because they will both have the scope to make strong arguments, with sophisticated analysis. But don't push this rule too far, or you'll end up running 'insane' definitions...

The extreme ends of the spectrum – the status quo and insane definitions.

(1) Status Quo: simply put, the Aff should never run the status quo unless compelled to by the topic (which usually would mean it was a bad topic). There is nothing more to say about it – just don't do it.

(2) Opposition teams can run the status quo, but there are several factors that need to be weighed up before you make the decision to do it (see Chapter Three).

Obviously the status quo is attractive to teams who are not well prepared for that particular topic. This is because any decent Aff will explain the status quo in their set-up before outlining their alternative and a smart (but ill-informed) Neg can use that information, but portray it as knowledge they had all along.

However this needs to be weighed up against the fact that the Neg does not in fact know much about the details of the status quo, and risk being caught out in a lie or misrepresentation of the status quo by the Aff. They also risk being made to defend alleged 'harms' of the status quo which may be exaggerated or incorrect, but which the Neg team will not be equipped to refute effectively.

Conversely, if the Neg invent their own counter-model then there are pro's and con's.

The benefit of counter-proposing an original model is that will negate much of the Aff's pre-prepared criticisms of the status quo. The downside is that an original model concedes that the status quo is a failure and therefore weakens the burden of plausibility (the likelihood based on current trends that their model will ever be implemented) on the Aff. In other words it's more difficult to argue that the Aff's new model won't work or will never happen, if the Neg's own model is also novel and therefore vulnerable to exactly the same criticism. But since one side's model is usually more ambitious than the others, weakening the burden of plausibility can be disproportionately beneficial to one team (usually the Aff).

Of course 'plausibility' is a relatively weak argument. All but the most ridiculous models must still be analysed as though it were viable through an 'even if' discussion (for example, proposing a hardline euthanasia model is almost impossibly idealistic when judged against the current norms and trends in society, but if you get hung up on that fact you will forget to engage in the debate!).

- (3) Insane lines: Although hard lines are good, and usually there is a positive relationship between the ‘hardness’ of the case and its moral and practical consistency, there is a point at which this relationship breaks down. Past a certain point a definition or model stops being ‘hard’ and becomes insane.

There are a few ways to judge if your line is ‘insane’. The first is the laugh test. If the opposition (and audience) laugh when you propose the case, it’s usually a good sign that you have stepped across the line (it may be the way you explained the argument, but nevertheless it’s a good indication). Secondly, if anyone in the team feels seriously uncomfortable making the argument, then that’s a bad sign. Debaters should be flexible and willing to argue counter-intuitive positions, but if a reasonable person is offended or disturbed by your case, then you have a problem.

It’s fine to argue for things that are unlikely to happen, even things that are *highly* unlikely to happen, but you should think carefully before arguing in favour of something that is *incredibly* unlikely to happen.

The best test is to remember that the model is not the debate. Your model simply exists to clarify and focus the terms of the debate. If you are spending all your time defending the reasonableness of the terms of your model, then you have probably gone too far (or debating against terribly pedantic, inexperienced debaters).

Using the previous example of euthanasia as a guide, the insane line might be: providing ‘suicide pills’, on request to any adult or child following the initial diagnosis of a serious medical problem, which they could use at their discretion. It’s just too far fetched.



Chapter Three – Search for a Super-Model

There seems to be a fair bit of confusion about what a model is, how to construct one and what to do with it once you have it. Models are an extremely important and useful part of debating, so let me try to clear up all those questions.

The first question is *what is a model?* The answer is simple. A model is a specific set of practical actions proposed by a team in a debate. So it means that instead of just arguing that a certain idea is good, the team actually set up a particular type of system that they support for reasons that are linked to various parts of the model.

For example, the "*heroin trials*" debate (i.e. "*That we support safe heroin injecting rooms*") is one where there is room for a range of models, because there are many important questions about the practical application of the idea. For instance, teams should choose between a model of government supplied heroin or a 'user supplies' system – i.e. a 'no questions asked' policy about where a user obtained their drugs as long they use them in the safe injecting rooms.

Both these models have strengths and weaknesses. The government supplied model will generate criticism on the grounds that it turns the government into a drug dealer, as well as questions of how long the government can afford to maintain such a system (especially if the number of users grow as a result). However this system does effectively put many drug dealers out of business and it also means that users will always get pure heroin and not the 'dirty' varieties often found on the street (which is a major cause of overdoses). So you see the choice of model is extremely important, because it can change the focus of the debate, and bring in (or cut out) various issues.

Building your model.

There are many ways to construct a model, the easiest of which is to steal someone else's! The vast majority (if not all) the debates you'll do are real, contemporary issues. That means that they are being debated in the public arena right now. So it's perfectly legitimate for you to take the side of one of the groups who are publicly lobbying on this issue. Take the republic referendum held a few years ago. At that time debates about a republic were obviously common and the model you picked was critically important. But thankfully the Constitutional Convention produced a wide range of models representing the ideas of each of the republican groups represented at the convention. So by keeping up to date with the news, and becoming aware of the various proposals being suggested by different groups in society, you have ready-made models just waiting to be debated!

Alternatively, you can modify an existing model. So once you've stolen a model off a political party or whoever, you might be able to think of ways to improve it or expand it. That's fine too. Just make sure that you're really clear about how your version of the model is different to the group that you stole it off.

The only other way to come up with a model is to invent it from scratch. This can be time consuming, but rewarding in many ways. What it requires is for you and your team to really talk about the issues in the debate. Remember that most debates stem from 'a problem', either a real or perceived problem and if you understand the problem, you might be able to come up with a solution. The best thing about invented

models is that they are original. That means that your opposition won't be prepared for them (whereas they can be prepared for a common model) and you have a chance to have a truly unique debate, on issues that you have established.

I strongly encourage teams to come up with their own model, because it shows research (no matter how smart you think you are, there is no substitute for learning the details of an issue), thought and a genuine attempt to tackle the issues, however I have one warning. Keep it real. Make sure your model is realistic and practical. By realistic, I mean make sure that you are taking into account the way people really behave, otherwise your model will be hopelessly flawed (for example the counter-model to attacking Iran is not "world peace" because at this point in history it is simply unrealistic). By practical I mean that it should be possible given the resources that currently exist. Don't propose a model that would cost trillions of dollars, or require technology that doesn't exist, or is highly unlikely to exist anytime soon.

How to use your model

The model should always be presented by the first speaker, before they present their substantive arguments. This is because you want your model to frame the debate, and structure which issues are important to this debate. You can't do that if your model comes out at second speaker. Nevertheless the important thing to know about models is that they are not the 'be all and end all' of debates. There are precious few debates where a good model will win a debate all by itself. The model is a tool to structure debates and focus them around important issues. It is the analysis of those issues that will be the deciding factor in most debates. A model makes a debate clearer because it tells the audience precisely what the debate is *about*, but you still have to show why that's a good thing, and why the benefits of the model outweigh the inevitable costs.

Final Tips on Models

- Negative teams can have a model too. They're called a counter-model and are just as effective as an Affirmative team model.
- Don't get too hung up on how much a model costs (in monetary terms) as long as the benefits of the model are worth the cost, (and the cost is realistic) then it's really not that important. Lots of programs cost the government a lot of money, but they are important and worthwhile.
- A good way to attack a model is to look at what assumptions the team have made when they constructed it. Did they realistically assess how individuals and groups act in society? Is it really the role of the government (or other organisation) to do what is being proposed?
- It is OK for opposing teams to concede some of the benefits of a model as long as they show why the problems the model will create are worse than those benefits.

Models are a great way to show your ideas are practical and possible, and in any case where you're proposing to significantly change something, a model of some description is a must. But again, the model is pretty useless without strong arguments to back it up – and that's the subject of the next chapter.

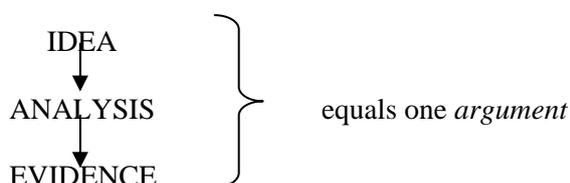
Chapter Four: Making Arguments from First Principles.

Before we get to first principles theory, you need to know the difference between an argument and an assertion. In simple terms an assertion is something that is stated as true, without enough analysis to demonstrate that it is reasonable to believe that the statement is likely to be true. It's a statement of fact, without proof of its validity.

To avoid using assertions, you need to understand the anatomy of an argument¹.

The 'Anatomy of an Argument'

Whereas an assertion is simply a statement of fact (or in slightly more sophisticated terms, an assertion can include simplistic/superficial analysis – see 'Casual Causation' below) a proper 'argument' has the following structure:



Different people will use different labels for the various sections of an argument, but this basic format is necessary to have a properly formed argument.

IDEA refers to the concept or proposition that you seek to prove – it might be a principle, such as “the government has an obligation to provide free education” or it might just be something that would be helpful to your side of the debate, such as “the death penalty is an effective deterrent for criminals”. Either way, it's nothing on its own – it *may* be true, or it might not. The point is that you and your team want people to *believe* that it's true.

So how do you make them believe it? Well you start with some ANALYSIS of why it is likely to be true – why it is logical and reasonable to believe that it's true. This involves saying (out loud or in your head) “why?” and “because” a lot! But I'll give you an example in a moment.

Finally there is the EVIDENCE. I put it last for two reasons – first because it's the least important, and second because it should be the last thing you worry about – focus first on having the right IDEAS about what your side needs to argue, and then spend your time coming up with smart analysis to make it sound reasonable. If after that you have time for thinking up evidence and examples, then that's great.

EVIDENCE can be statistics (boring, but can be helpful – like the unemployment rate before and after a policy, or the percentage of people affected by a particular problem, or the costs of a proposal) or quotes (not direct quotes, but knowing what important people have said about an issue). But at university level evidence is more commonly presented by case study or analogy. So having an example of a similar situation or policy can be very handy if you can clearly draw the link back to the issue at hand.

¹ See Appendix Three for a similar discussion, just with a simpler example!

NOTE: It really should go without saying, but it's important to note that you should *never* invent evidence – firstly its just poor form. You should have enough respect for your opponents not to try and cheat or cheapen the debate. Also it's stupid. The more experienced debaters/adjudicators get, the better equipped they become at spotting lies. It's pretty humiliating to have someone show that you were lying because they know the real details of a given situation. Don't take the risk of it happening to you!

Let's bring all that together by using a common motion as an example. On the affirmative of "That we should stop protecting our local film industry", it would be handy to be able to show that small-budget, local productions can compete with big budget imports – since fear of competition is the rationale behind government protection (i.e. IDEA – 'local media can successfully compete against imports').

How would you go about demonstrating an IDEA that is a little counter-intuitive? Well you'd need some logical analysis mixed with relevant examples. For instance:

"The fear of unrestricted foreign media – particularly American – stems from the belief that bigger budget productions are inherently more attractive to viewers. Although it's true that people do enjoy special effects laden films and TV, there is plenty of reason to believe that even without government protection, local media can survive and even prosper. Why? Because beyond the superficial desire to see things blow up, what really attracts viewers is media that is relevant to their interests and culture. For instance one of the most popular shows on the ABC is Gardening Australia – it consistently out-rates the news, and every other competitor that rival networks have run against it. It might seem like an odd choice for a hit show, but it has very loyal viewers because it's relevant to their interests.

Similarly the ABC had a major hit with the drama series Seachange – which was not only well written, but it so accurately tapped into the mood of the times that it sparked the real-life "seachange" and "treechange" phenomenon's, in which city-based people move to beachside or rural towns to enjoy the same laidback lifestyle they saw on the show.

At the other end of the scale there is Neighbours – although it's often ridiculed, it is one of the most consistently popular shows in Australian television history and has launched the careers of many Australian actors and artists – you might think its lame, but to 15 year olds, it's relevant.

None of this should be surprising, since although American culture is very popular, people from all over the globe respond to stories about their own country, and their own culture. Australian media doesn't need government protection to be competitive, it just need good writers and talented actors – which the evidence shows that we have in abundance."

NOTE: The argument doesn't have to rigidly follow the structure outlined above – but you should be able to clearly identify the key elements of the 'anatomy of an argument' within that example.

Making Cases from First Principles

As a novice or even intermediate debater you will constantly feel like you don't know enough to debate most topics to their full potential – and unfortunately that's probably true. But how to you fix that lack of knowledge? You focus on first principles.

First Principles has two key elements:

- (1) A good understanding of the principles of logic (i.e knowing how to show that an argument is logically flawed without knowing any facts about the issue).
- (2) A good understanding of the key concepts that form the fundamental 'clash' in the debate - (see Appendix One for a basic list).

Simply put, you can't prep a good case without having good and consistent IDEAS about a topic, and short of being an expert on every issue; these two elements are the best way to generate those ideas in prep.

NOTE: The language isn't that important. Don't worry about learning the labels/jargon used in Appendix One, it's the IDEAS that are important.

None of this is meant to suggest that you shouldn't try to keep up with the news, and even go further than that and specifically research issues that you think might be useful – of course you should do that. But that's a process that will be on-going throughout your debating career. At the start you want to give yourself the best possible chance of building good cases on a wide range of issues – and first principles is the best way to do that.

The case prepping method outlined in Appendix Two is designed to show you how to build up a case by approaching it from first principles – incorporating both logical progression of ideas, as well as being able to identify and understand the philosophical clash that lies at the heart of any debate.

There are few short cuts to learning first principles. The best ways are to read and to pay attention during debates/adjudications. All debates are built on a foundation of conflicting ideas and theories about how to solve problems – like how to best run the economy (e.g. Keynesian or Neo-liberal?) or the best principles for a political system (e.g. communitarian or liberal?), etc. These ideas might sound complicated, but for the purposes of debating you just need to understand the key concepts in each theory.²

So what is an example of first principles theories in action? Well many of the 1st P theories relate to disputes over the 'proper' role of the government – and you can learn the fundamentals of dozens of debates by just mastering a few simple concepts.

² For more examples of how specific 1st P theories relate to a range of debates, see the matter articles in the Members section of the MAD site, on democracy and secularism (etc) www.monashdebaters.com

First Principles – The Role of Government

At some point everyone learns about liberalism (“small ‘l’ liberalism, not the Liberal Party). Obviously because Australia is notionally a ‘liberal-democracy’, the concept of liberalism must have a lot to do with how we conceive of the proper role and responsibilities of government. But what does it mean? Well, liberalism means “small government” – giving individuals as much freedom as possible (as long as that freedom wouldn’t be used to hurt other people). So true “small ‘l’ liberals” believe that when given the choice between banning something or merely regulating its use, governments should choose to regulate it, because banning something implies that the government is telling you what sort of behaviour is acceptable or beneficial for you – proper liberals think that wrong.

So while it might save lives and money if we banned smoking and drinking, true liberals would argue that these things should be regulated (e.g. preventing children from using them) but otherwise if people want to choose to do something that will do them harm, that’s their choice. The key is “informed choice” – so long as adults fully understand the choice they are making, and then they should be free to make it. For example, everybody knows that smoking is incredibly dangerous. If they still want to smoke, then the government shouldn’t stop them, because it’s an ‘informed choice’.

Conversely there are people who are sometimes called “communitarians” or more broadly, “socialists”, who take the opposite view. They favour “big government”, a government that actively involves itself in shaping the choices that people can make, in an effort to create a society that promotes the “social good”.

It was ‘big government’ socialists who decided that wearing a seatbelt should be compulsory and that getting immunised for diseases should be compulsory. That’s the government telling you what’s best for you – saying “We’re not going to take the chance that you’re stupid enough to ignore the obvious benefits of wearing a seatbelt, so we’re going to make it a law and then punish you if you don’t do it.

This clash between “big government” and “small government” is a constant theme of Australian politics. In practice people don’t always support one philosophy consistently, but both sides are always represented in public debate.

Think about it. Regards of whether the topic was about gun control, gambling, pornography, drugs, smoking, (etc), the *core* of the debate is the same – big government versus small government. On top of that core clash you would include any specific knowledge you might have of the harms or benefits of the thing in question, but each debate would be a clash of the same two principles.

Once you learn a few 1st P ideas, you’ll start to see them underpinning every debate you do. Even if no one ever mentions the names of the theories involved, you’ll see how the logic of those ideas permeates every argument made. It would be great if you became an expert on drugs, guns, gambling (etc) but in the meantime, learning these two 1st P ideas will allow you to build a strong case in any of the innumerable ‘role of government’ debates. It will also help you devise rebuttal.

Chapter Five: Rebuttal from First Principles.

Once you understand the anatomy of an argument, it should be relatively simple to see how best to attack an argument. Appendix Three explains in detail how to best damage and hopefully destroy an argument in the most efficient and effective way.

But in just the same way that you can (and should!) use ‘first principles’ to construct your arguments, there some fundamental, logical principles by which you can attack arguments. So even if you don’t know anything about the evidence they used, and you’ve never heard that type of analysis before, if you listen carefully and take good notes, then you might find one of the following flaws has occurred in the argument.

5 common flaws with arguments which anyone should be able to spot regardless of how much you happen to know about a topic – this is just logic.

- 1) Assertion – the argument is in fact not an argument at all, it’s simply an assertion, and as such there is no logical reason given to believe that it is true. Simply point out why there has not been any/enough analysis to demonstrate the validity of the assertion and then provide a reason why the assertion is not obviously or intuitively true.
- 2) Contradiction – The argument may be valid, but it is in contradiction with a previous argument. To be a real – or ‘full blown’ contradiction, it must be the case that it is *impossible* for the two arguments in question to both be true simultaneously. So it cannot logically be both *cheaper* and *more expensive* to do a given thing. Don’t go calling every argument you hear a contradiction or you will look foolish. If it is in fact a contradiction then that can cause massive damage to an opponent’s case, but if it isn’t, then the false accusation can cause massive damage to your credibility!



But spotting – and pointing out – a contradiction is only the beginning, if you want to fully exploit it you have to explain to the adjudicator exactly how this compromises the credibility of their case.

So don’t just say “first they said their plan would be really cheap, and now they say it would be really expensive, but is worth the money – that’s a pretty blatant contradiction”, follow it up with some analysis, like; “so which is it then? One of them clearly doesn’t really understand the nature of this situation – if a cheap program can be effective, then why is this she trying to tell us we’ll need to spend lots of money to resolve the problem, but if she’s right and it would take a lot of money to make a dint in this problem, then everything the first guy said is rubbish. Hopefully their next speaker will tell us which of his team mates knows what they are talking about, and which one was just making stuff up”.

You need to make it as uncomfortable for them as possible, and try and force them to not just retract the statement, but concede that a number of their arguments are irrelevant (they usually won't say that out loud, they'll just stop mentioning all the arguments on one side of the contradiction – that's when you know they're in trouble and you should listen closely to how they defend themselves – if they stop mentioning certain arguments then attack them for abandoning a chunk of their case).

NOTE: The most important thing is that you can clearly explain the contradiction – it's critical that the adjudicator understands and believes you – so explain it carefully, and keep an eye on the adjudicator to see if they understand you.

As you can see, a contradiction is such a serious flaw in a case, so if an opponent accuses your team of running a contradiction it is very important that your side respond as soon as possible and attempt to demonstrate how the two arguments in question are not contradictory.

- 3) Casual Causation – Essentially this is a lack of analysis. It occurs when someone tries to draw a link between two events, without showing how the former event actually caused the latter event to happen.

A classic is when people argue that the introduction of the death penalty for murderers causes a reduction in the number of murders. Never mind the fact that there are instances in which introducing the death penalty has preceded a *rise* in the murder rate, there is simply not reason to believe – *prima facie* – that the death penalty is a deterrent. There may have been a reduction in murders the following year for any number of reasons (it depends entirely on why people commit murder in the first place). Between 1996 and 1997 there was dramatic drop in the number of murders in Australia – but the death penalty was abolished here in the 1970s. So what happened? Well in 1996 there was the “Port Arthur massacre”, when Martin Bryant killed 35 people in Tasmania. Immediately after that incident the Federal Government instituted strict, uniform gun laws, which saw thousands of guns handed in as the result of a “gun buy-back” scheme and it became much harder to legally buy a gun and keep it in your home. Without wanting to say too much about gun control, the point of this example is that there can be many reasons why the crime rate – especially the murder rate – goes up and down. So be careful not to be too quick to assume that one factor is more important to the outcome than another, unless you have the analysis to show why that is the case.

- 4) False Dichotomy – This a particular type of mischaracterization of a debate or problem. It occurs when someone says that there is a choice to be made, where the only options are ‘A’ or ‘B’, when in fact they are not the only choices available.

This can occur because a speaker is trying to assert a self-serving dichotomy (in effect they are saying, “this debate/argument is a choice between doing something positive to address this problem, or simply letting things get worse” – in a decent debate this won't be true, it's almost always a choice between two options designed to improve a situation. Or a speaker can offer a false dichotomy because they are stupid/lazy and don't understand the debate/your argument properly.

Either way it's important to recognise when someone is attempting to falsely divide the debate into two positions, one of which is either not what you are arguing, or not what *anyone* would argue. Be very clear at all times about what your team is trying to prove and you should be able to deal with this situation easily enough.

- 5) Straw Man – This is another type of misrepresentation or mischaracterization of an argument. Basically the straw man is when a team set up an argument (which you have not made, and don't intend too) and then proceed to rebut it.



Sometimes this happens when a speaker takes an extreme example of your proposal, sometimes it happens when they misrepresent something you said, sometimes it happens when they were hoping you would argue a certain thing, and you actually proposed something slightly different. It doesn't really matter why, it's important to point out when a team is not engaging with your case, because if you let a straw man argument be beaten to death without pointing out that it's not your argument in the first place, a weak adjudicator can assume that it was part of your case. Also it's important to point out when your opponents are not engaging because that's a critical part of having a good debate.

NOTE for adjudicators: The 5 'first principle' rebuttal techniques listed above are really just logical flaws that can exist in an argument. As such, 'the average reasonable person' should be able to spot them (a 'reasonable' person is persuaded by logical arguments and not convinced by illogical arguments) and so even if an opposition don't spot a contradiction or an assertion, if you do you should penalise the speaker that made those arguments.

So if you hear an argument, and you're convinced (this is where taking good notes is important) that its contradictory with something else said by that team, you should penalise the speaker/team for that mistake. If their opponents also spot the flaw and point it out, then you should reward them in the same way you reward any good piece of rebuttal – but regardless of what the opposition do, logic is logic and if an argument is clearly illogical then it should be marked down.

This isn't a controversial idea – we don't adjudicate from the perspective that "I'll believe anything I'm told unless the opposition rebut it effectively" – that would be a crazy and unreasonable way to judge. If a team said in a debate that Australia had the highest unemployment rate in the entire world, even if their opposition was stupid enough to believe them, you should still penalise them because that is obviously not true. Logical flaws are no different – they create an obvious flaw that renders an argument either irrelevant (in the case of something like a straw man) or significantly less persuasive (in the case of an assertion).

But don't take this too far. Adjudicators are not the 'logic police', so don't go crazy searching every argument for a logical flaw. But if you were properly taught the rules (as set out in the Australia-Asia Debating Guide) then you should be evaluating each argument based on the "cornerstones of matter" – logic and relevance, and these 5 categories are examples of the first part of that equation.

Rebuttal – Remember the “Even If” argument?

In the previous chapter I showed you to build up a proper argument, and Appendix Three shows you how to use that knowledge to tear apart an argument – targeting one of the links in the argument chain. There is of course another, simpler way of discrediting an argument, and ironically it’s so simple that the more experienced most debaters become, the less they tend to think about arguments in this way.

The simplest form of rebuttal is: Accept the premises, deny the conclusion.

Too often debaters – especially good debaters, who are used to thinking about issues and arguments in fairly complex ways – forget to apply the simplest and most powerful test: what would happen if the model was implemented exactly as your opponents suggest?

Might sound a little too simplistic, but it’s basically just an “even if” argument that most debaters are taught very early on.

Of course there are benefits to attempting to show that a problem is more complicated than your opponents seem to realise, and yes it’s good to show that their model is just too unwieldy or poorly designed to ever be implemented in the way they suggest. But that still leaves the most important question for any debate – what if it was?

For example, consider the topic “That the African Union should have a standing army” – essentially a topic about whether peace keeping/peace enforcement in African countries should be done by African or international forces.

The affirmative team will do what the topic requires of them and the standard negation will be to laugh at the idea and say its not viable because of the limitations of African militaries – limited resources, poor training and discipline, (etc) in comparison to EU, US or other international forces. That’s probably all true, and should be said, but the more powerful arguments lay in the opposite direction.

Rather than explain why it can’t be done, and won’t work, it’s worth considering what would occur if it *did* happen. If African states invested heavily in defence - building well armed and disciplined forces that could contain neighbouring conflicts.

The likely outcome is that states which have weak democratic institutions will now have powerful and well organised militaries, making civilian rule difficult (think Fiji by analogy). Furthermore, interventions might become permanent, with ‘peacekeepers’ exploiting their relative power (such as when ‘intervention’ forces plundered the Congo for decades).

These sorts of arguments are far more difficult for your opponents to predict or defeat, and that’s why you should consider “what if we did that” before you get too caught thinking about why “that’s impossible”. You might always be able to make use of this tactic, but it’s a great habit to get into if you want to become a top debater.

Chapter Six – Case Construction Tactics

Once you know how to choose the right definition, pick a ‘medium-to-hard’ line and then construct analysis-rich arguments, then case construction is really just about how to bring all those things together in a way that is consistent.

Most of you will be familiar with the ‘traditional’ case prepping method (brainstorm for the first 10 minutes, then compare notes to come up with a definition and a model... etc, etc) and that system is fine for beginners because it’s very clear, simple and easy to follow. But experienced teams don’t prep like that, and like training wheels, the sooner you gain the confidence to move on to a more sophisticated process the better. My system (explained in Appendix Two) is based around maximum communication between teammates and a truly collaborate process which is meant to help you be more creative when thinking up arguments, while simultaneously improving consistency amongst speakers (which is usually lacking in inexperienced teams, and is absolutely vital when debating strong teams).

In addition to having prep techniques that help you develop more innovative arguments, there are some tactics that you can employ to improve your team’s consistency and responsiveness to challenges. The first tactical decision to make regards **speaking order** and the second is a technique I like to call “**filters**” and then finally there is the issue of making **tactical concessions**.

In addition to those concepts, it is also vitally important that teams properly contextualise their cases – to not only explain the factual context of the debate, but to help build momentum for their argument, and set the tone for the debate. Three factors that are useful to contextualising a case are **trends, norms** and **tipping points**, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Speaking Order and Filters.

Speaking Order - It’s difficult to generalise about speaking order, because each team has its own strengths and weaknesses, but there are some things worth considering.

Ideally speakers should be capable of competently performing any of the speaker roles (even if most people have a favoured speaking position) and young debaters should set themselves the goal of gaining that level of flexibility and skill as soon as possible. Being able to speak in any position is crucial to developing a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of debates, which will improve your debating skills (through better understanding of tactics and case construction) and is also a crucial part of become an elite adjudicator.

All things considered equal it is my view that the more knowledgeable person on a given topic should speak second. There are two good reasons for this. Firstly, it helps with consistency – because the first speaker can be briefed on the issue in the prep and then because the 2nd speaker was the principle source of that information they should be well placed to avoid contradictions or inconsistencies as the case expands. Secondly this configuration gives the team maximum flexibility when responding to the initial attacks of the opposition. Since this person is the most knowledgeable on the issue, they are best placed to reposition the team following the opposition’s speaker.

I think this is a good rule for teams of all skill levels, but especially for teams at the ends of the spectrum – very inexperienced teams and very experienced teams. Intermediate teams might find it more difficult to identify which speaker is the most knowledgeable, and speakers at this level might have limited capacity to be flexible in terms of speaking roles (whereas at the novice level speakers might feel more comfortable in a given role, but few would actually have a significantly higher level of competence in that role than they do in any other).

Of course a good set-up to a case is absolutely vital, and great care and attention should be given to a first speaker during prep to ensure that they are ready and able to fully explain all aspects of your definition and model. There is no point having maximum flexibility at second speaker if the case has been badly presented from the start. Again – all things considered equal – the most knowledgeable and confident person on a given topic should probably speak second.

Finally a note about speaking third; a disproportionate number of former high school debaters consider themselves to be ‘natural’ third speakers. That’s not necessarily a problem, and every good team needs a strong third speaker, but the reality of university debating is that in most cases, third is the last place to have your best speaker. Especially in 3-on-3 styles, the strength of the case and the sophistication of the analysis early on are absolutely vital, and if it’s not done well then a brilliant 3rd speaker will be unable to save that team from any decent opposition. Speaking 1st and even 2nd can seem daunting or even boring sometimes, but at this level a great 1st speaker is much more valuable to a team than a great 3rd.

Filters – A filter is simply a ‘test’ that you establish (either explicitly or just amongst your team mates) by which you will gauge your sides reaction to any question or argument raised by the opposition. So it’s a ‘guiding principle’ if you like, by which your team will navigate throughout the debate.

Applying a clear filter/s to your case has two benefits, the first of which is that it generates consistency – anytime the opposition ask whether your plan will include a certain group you will know immediately what the correct/consistent answer should be, even if you hadn’t considered it during prep.

Secondly, and this is especially useful when debating with very inexperienced speakers with which you need to spend a lot of time building up their understanding of the fundamental issues in the debate – filters give them clear boundaries and confidence when delivering rebuttal.

What are some examples of a filter in a debate? The topic “*That intellectually disabled children should be taught in mainstream schools*” was run at ADAM in 2005 and my team successfully employed a simple filter to keep our case clear and consistent –allowing us to defeat a team with a higher (average) level of experience.

The filter was simple and drew on the most obvious and relevant analogy – as the affirmative team, we set as our guiding principle that we would not accept any restrictions on intellectually disabled children, which is not the norm for physically disabled children.

With that in place my team could focus during prep on developing ideas and persuasive analysis. This meant that we didn't spend *much* time thinking about the opposition's arguments, but instead had a well-developed case.

During the debate we were challenged on issues like; violent students, severely disabled kids, the cost of specialty staff and upgrades to facilities to accommodate the intellectually disabled, and every time my team answered confidently and consistency – even though we hadn't discussed many of those issues. We don't tolerate extremely violent physically disabled children in the mainstream system, moreover, we don't generally put severely physically disabled kids in mainstream schools (but the vast majority do get in). Equally we wouldn't tolerate a child in a wheelchair being denied access to a mainstream school because the government didn't want to pay for a ramp or a special aide teacher – so why apply different rules to the needs of intellectually disabled kids?

NOTE: This is not to suggest that our case was flawless, or our opponent's case had no merit, but running every argument through a clearly defined filter helps to keep your responses consistent and relieves the stress on inexperienced speakers.

But can a negative team make use of filters? Absolutely they can and a good example would be the topic "That we should ban pornography which features violence or coercion" used in early 2006 in a MUDS internal comp.

This is a difficult topic for the negative team; you need to clearly establish what sort of pornography you are prepared to defend. Not everyone is knowledgeable about various kinds of hardcore pornography and it's not an area where people will be easily able to think of examples and evidence. But the filter is fairly obvious, a smart negative would set as their test that we should only accept restrictions on pornography if the same principle was the norm for mainstream media. This gives the Neg a chance to spend their prep time preparing the best possible free-speech/pornography case they can think of, without worrying too much about how they will cope with the arguments that will obviously be raised by the Affirmative.

This filter deals eloquently with the issue of violence – dealing with it the same way as with other media – namely that it should be assessed, classified and if necessary access can be restricted (such as with R rated movies) but that's not the same thing as a ban. However there is a limit to how much violence a mainstream movie can get away with, and it should be the same – so grotesquely violent pornography can be banned, but just like ultra-violent movies, this is a minority, and lots of violence is still allowed to be shown, and violent pornography shouldn't be any different.

Just like the previous example, using this filter throws the onus back onto the opposition to show how the analogy is inappropriate – so in the first case they would need to show why intellectually disabled children cannot be treated under the same principles as for physically disabled children, and in the second case the Aff would need to show why pornography is so special that adults are unable to process it in the same way as they can watch violent action and horror movies without turning into serial killers. It's harder than it might seem! There isn't always a convenient and simple filter for every case, but it's a trick you should have up your sleeve because where appropriate it's a simple but powerful tool.

Tactical Concessions – Tactical concessions are in the same tactics family as filters – because in both cases the issue is knowing how to choose your battles. It’s not possible or advisable to try and rebut every argument made by your opposition – it’s always better to prioritise the arguments and focus on attacking the most potent ones your opponents made. But which arguments should let through? Well there are two answers to that – those that are weak/stupid, and those that can simply be conceded. Obviously weak or irrelevant arguments should be ignored if dealing with them was an unreasonable distraction from more important issues (although sometimes its worth pointing out quickly how stupid an argument is to discredit your opponents, but you’ll still only win the debate if you deal with their strongest points).

But the second option is to make a tactical concession. This is simply admitting that you happen to agree with a proposition put forward by your opponents. Some people think it looks weak to agree with your opponents too often. I think that as long as you’re smart about it, then tactical concessions make you look reasonable and allow you to focus attention on the true areas of clash in the debate.

When should you concede an opposition’s argument?

- (1) Concede if you would look stupid if you didn’t
- (2) Concede if it makes an argument you can’t win go away.

So what are some examples? Well in 90% of debates both sides should agree with the existence of a problem (you can still strongly disagree with the proposed solution). In a debate about drugs, it would seem churlish to deny that there is a drug problem, or in a debate about ‘rogue states’ like Iran or North Korea, it would look silly to pretend that these states are not dangerous – but admitting that doesn’t mean that any particular course of action is automatically the right response.

The second rule is more difficult to implement. Conceding in order to make problematic arguments ‘go away’ (in other words, lose relevance in the debate) is a fine line. Often it’s better to concede that there is a moral imperative to act (in response to some sort of problem or situation) than it is to fight it. But be careful.

If you are going to defend the status quo, and an opposition is foaming at the mouth about how terrible the current situation is, then it would be a bad idea to concede that and then propose no change to the situation. But if both sides have agreed that there is a problem, and both sides think the status quo needs to change, then don’t let your opponents go on and on about how morally superior they are. Concede that there is a moral imperative to act, then remind the adjudicator that your side has a plan to tackle the problem too and your opponents are really just wasting time talking about an issue that everyone agrees on.

Trends, Norms and Tipping points.

When building a case the very first thing you should do is clearly establish the context in which the debate occurs. This means discussing some of the factual circumstances that have led to the debate, but can be made more potent by developing a sense of urgency – a need to implement your particular policy *now* (see Chapter Ten).

How can you do this? Well it's critical to first understand the nature of the problem (see Appendix Two – step one) so that you can describe why something is a problem. But simply pointing out a problem is often not enough, to make the case really strong you need urgency, why should this plan be done now (especially if its something that has been debated many times before, like the death penalty, or euthanasia, etc). Well one part of the answer can be to point to trends, norms or tipping points.

Trends – The trends are the current direction of policy
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Following the terrorist attacks of 9-11 there has been a clear trend developing of governments passing increasingly restrictive 'anti-terrorism' laws (detention of suspects, intrusive investigation powers, increased penalties) in the name of public safety. It's clear from the way that Australia has modelled some of its most recent 'reforms' on laws based in the UK, that there is a widespread trend emerging.

Some trends can be very broad, so since the early 90's there has been a clear trend amongst Western governments to pursue economic policies based on 'neo-liberalism' (privatisation, reductions in trade barriers, deregulation of industry). That's not to say that this process has been universal, but it clearly happening in the majority of cases and regardless of whether it is good or bad, it is the reality.

Maybe you want to propose a policy that would be a change to this trend, perhaps even reverse it. That's fine, but it's important to understand the trends because that will help you understand what sort of problems your proposal will be likely face.

It's perfectly fine to use the development of a trend as the impetus for a policy. So you might say as part of your set up "there is a clear trend developing over the last decade for the United States to act militarily without the consent of the United Nations (Bosnia, Iraq, etc) and we think it is critical that we make reforms to the international system so as to encourage the US to act more multilaterally, and to strengthen the relevancy of the UN. We would do this by reforming the UN in the following way...

Or "As we have seen from the recent trend of massive corporations (World Com, Enron, HIH, etc) going bankrupt as a result of the serious mismanagement by Directors, we think its time to institute far harsher penalties for Directors who deliberately run companies into the ground. Therefore we will be proposing the introduction of laws to make Directors personally financially liable for acts of deliberate mismanagement that they conduct..."

But equally there is nothing wrong with proposing a case which would be an extension of a current trend; you can use analysis of a trend to add momentum to your argument. So for example;

“Over the last 10 years we have a clear trend emerging whereby parents are increasingly being given access to reproductive technologies as a means to better plan their families and ensure healthy babies (IVF, pre-natal genetic screening, etc) and so we think that it is simply the next logic step to give potential parents access to the next generation of reproductive technology - which involves genetic manipulation of the foetus. Therefore we support a parent’s right to genetically modify their unborn child.”

This is an example of how you can use a ‘trend analysis’ to make something which is objectively *very* controversial, appear to be simply the next step along the path which society is already on. It is analysis that will form part of the core of your case - genetic modification is not that different in terms of principle, from what we already allow (if we allow a foetus to be screened for genetic diseases which might lead to the parents making a decision to abort, then why not allow parents to use technology to ensure that the foetus is healthy in more ways than simply avoiding disease?).

If you can demonstrate that the relevant trends are pointing in the direction of your team’s logic, then the task is that much harder for the opposition.

Norms – Norms are the status quo, or what people are willing to accept now (the trend might be moving in any direction but at any given moment a particular position will be the commonly held ‘norm’).

For instance it is a norm in our society that citizens have equal rights. This seems simple enough, but it wasn’t always the case. Less than a century ago it was the norm (globally) for women to be denied the right to vote, 50 years ago it was the norm in Australia for Indigenous people to be denied the right to vote. Since those times we have seen a growing trend towards greater equality but as it stands, the norm is that neither group has reached a position of full equality. The extent to which society accepts inequality is the ‘norm’, while the direction things are moving is the trend.

Norms can be highly culturally specific. In Norway and Japan many people view the consumption of whale meat as being little different to any other meat, but in Australia the norm is for people to view whales as worthy of special protection.

Norms can also be influenced by economic factors (poor and rich people can have very different ideas about norms) religion, ethnicity, nationality, etc.

It is important to understand norms for two reasons. Firstly it’s necessary to understand how ‘hard’, ‘soft’ or ‘insane’ a particular argument/model is (because this is largely based on how different people perceive your case to be from the norm). Secondly, at international tournaments norms are critical because your opponents and opposition will usually be from quite different backgrounds to you, and you need to understand what norms and assumptions they are likely to bring to the debate – not because you are constrained by those norms, but because you need to know how much analysis you will need to do to make a given idea seem plausible or reasonable.

Tipping Points – A tipping point is basically what happens when a ‘trend’ gains momentum to the point where a major change is the norm is likely.

Tipping points are important because they add weight and credibility to what might otherwise be seen as an unlikely or highly speculative outcome. So basically when you're setting up your case you obviously want to make it sound like the plan that you are proposing is going to work - that people are going to be fairly willing to do it and that it's going to have benefits. Sometimes this is hard to do - especially if you are arguing for something quite hardline. So if you can describe the situation - or the 'problem' of the debate - as being at a "tipping point" then you can give your case a sense of urgency and credibility. These are both powerful things to have on your side.

So what are some examples of a tipping point? Well they occur when a situation has reached a critical juncture - where policy makers are either forced to make a fundamental choice (should we abolish voluntary student unionism? Should we become a Republic?) and there is really no 'half-way' point. Or maybe a series of events have quickly moved a situation forward, making previously remote options seem more plausible. Two recent examples of debates which somewhat unexpectedly reached a tipping point are abortion and the Israel/Palestine question.

Abortion is rarely a burning issue in Australian politics, and when the conservative Howard government won control of both houses of parliament, most people would have thought the issue would stay that way. But then a cross-party alliance of MPs forced a 'conscience vote' on the legalisation of the abortion pill RU486.

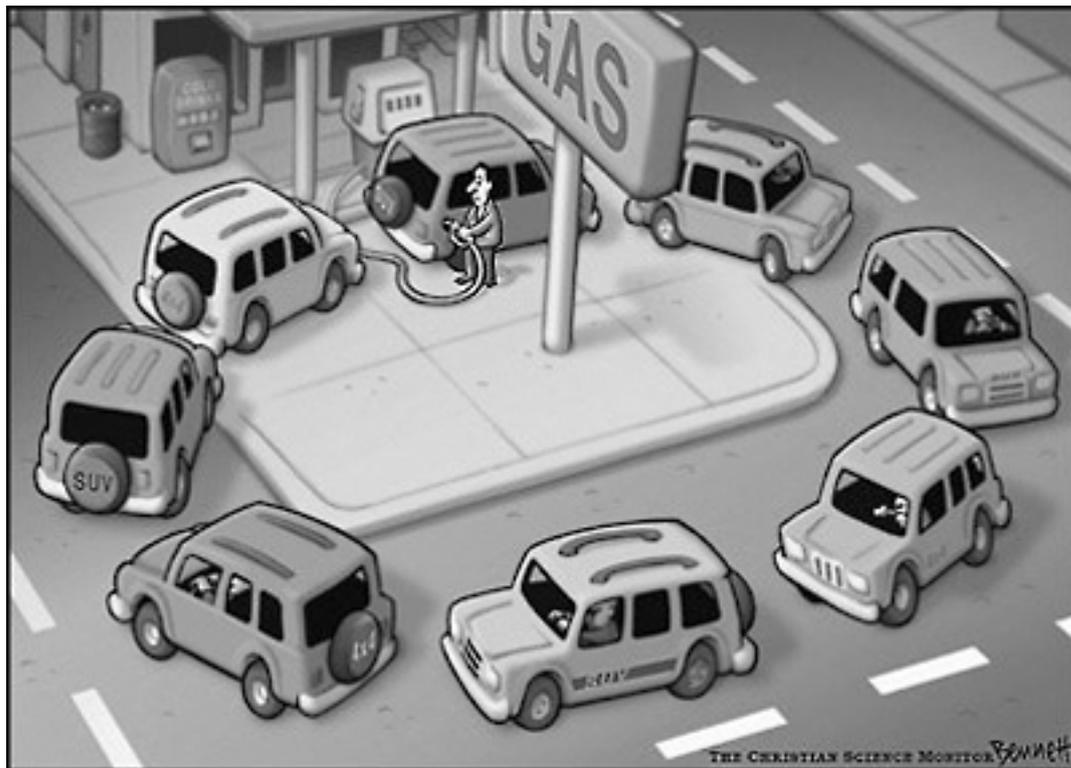
In response, MPs in Victoria's parliament agitated for a relaxation on legal restrictions to abortion under State laws and for a moment it looked like there might even be a cross-party Private Members Bill introduced to force a vote on the issue. A series of related events like that could be said to be moving us towards a 'tipping point' in the debate about abortion laws. Before the RU486 vote it was hard to imagine how the abortion debate could become a live issue in Victorian politics, but after the vote both the leaders of the major parties were forced to discuss it and state their positions.

The second example is the situation in Israel/Palestine. Until quite recently it was very hard to debate the situation in Israel because it was very clear that Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat wasn't that interested in signing a deal, and in any event the Israelis weren't interested in offering Arafat one. So it was a stalemate and any team who tried to propose a solution to the conflict had a hard time making it sound even remotely plausible that the players involved would accept their model.

But then Arafat died and everything changed. The stalemate was broken and both sides started acting in ways that were almost unthinkable a year ago. The Palestinians held democratic elections - bringing the militant group Hamas to power (a radical power shift in Palestinian politics) and the Israelis begun the previously unthinkable, unilateral program of removing Jewish settlements from Palestinian lands.

Then Israeli leader Ariel Sharon had a stroke and is in a coma, at a time when Israel was weeks away from a general election! So thanks to all these dramatic developments, some of the old reasons why peace plans were unlikely to work were gone and a lot more options were on the table. So the Israel/Palestine situation is clearly at a crucial crossroads - where decisions made now will affect the whole region for the next 50 years or more. Both the Israelis and the Palestinians seem ready to consider proposals which were impossible just months ago. This is a tipping point.

A single major event could cause a tipping point – like (to take an extreme example) if Burma tested a nuclear weapon. You can imagine how strong the sense of urgency would be to find new ways to restrict the spread of nuclear weapons technology and to do something about the dictatorship in Burma. It would make options like invasion or attack *much* more likely that they are at the moment. But usually a tipping point is the result of a series of events that propel a debate into uncharted territory.



Chapter Seven: Classic Aff Mistakes and Opp Tactics.

Many of the mistakes that Affirmative teams make when setting up debates are also the perfect weapons for negative teams to use – especially if they are squirreled or have limited knowledge of the substantive issues in the debate. For that reason they are discussed here together.

Classic Trap One: The Problem – Solution Gap.

This mistake is most common and most damaging when teams propose soft models. Basically the trap is this; usually when a team propose a soft model they will start by identifying a very real and important problem, but simply offer a soft solution – or worse still, offer a soft mechanism to simply ‘improve’ the situation. The trap however is this, it’s morally inconsistent to be consciously aware of a great and pressing problem, but then think it is defensible to do very little about it. The trap grows stronger the more the Aff push the moral dimensions of their case.

To give an obviously exaggerated example; if a team identify the context to the debate as the growing problem of hunger and starvation in the developing world, and cite a recent UN or NGO report filled with horrifying statistics of the suffering these people endure. THEN the team propose a model in which rich nations increase the amount of food aid they donate by some tokenistic amount.

It is certainly true that this tiny amount of extra food is literally ‘better than the status quo’, but there is a vast inconsistency between the scale of the problem they have identified and the solution they have offered. If they truly think the problem is that big and that important than their model is unconscionable.

A more realistic example is in a ‘euthanasia’ debate, if a team started by identifying the suffering of the terminally ill in our hospitals and the desperate need to find a way to help these people alleviate their pain and to have dignity in their final moments (a common and reasonable way to contextualise that debate), AND then they ran the soft model described on Page 3, they will have fallen into the Problem – Solution Trap.

How to exploit the Problem – Solution Gap.

There are two ways to exploit this gap – a combination of the two is most effective.

Firstly oppositions should attack the case as being unable to effectively make inroads on the problem they themselves wanted to tackle. Pretty obvious but still worth doing. You can’t acknowledge a serious problem and then propose an inadequate solution

Secondly, (especially useful if the opposition don’t know much about the topic), simply counter-propose something that would be even marginally more effective at tackling the problem (but more effective the better). The tactical advantage of this is that it totally neutralises the moral argument and in fact steals it for the opposition. It’s the perfect opportunity to hijack the debate. This is one way that teams can win debates after being squirreled. It’s a form of ‘first principles’ case construction/rebuttal. It also works sometimes against ultra-soft lines.

Classic Trap Two: The Ultra-Soft line

I've already discussed previously why it is, tactically speaking, a bad idea to for an Affirmative team to propose the status quo as their model – and generally speaking any half-competent topic selector will usually word motions so that running the status quo is impossible for the Aff. But that doesn't stop stupid or inexperienced teams from proposing very-soft line models which are almost the status quo, but not quite.

This creates a number of problems for both teams, and a decent adjudicator should expect something pretty special from the Aff if they are to win (so long as the negative team don't freak out and drop the ball).

So what do you do when the Aff run an ultra-soft case?

First you can laugh to yourself, because the Aff are in a lot of trouble. The reason why an ultra-soft case is a bad idea is because they have the strong potential to 'collapse' a debate and make it difficult for the teams to find any meaningful 'clash'. From the point of view of adjudication theory, the Affirmative team have an obligation to provide the conditions for a good debate – which basically means a good, reasonable clash (so there is a strong clash between an Affirmative team that is in favour of freedom – and which asks the negative team to defend slavery, but that is an 'unreasonable' clash and should be punished by an adjudicator because – amongst other things – it breaks the definitional rule and probably the code of conduct).

But the negative team also have an obligation to come to the party and engage in the debate established by the Aff, so long as the clash is reasonable.

However the tactical reason why Aff teams should avoid ultra-soft lines is that they don't give you enough opportunities for providing deep analysis. Almost by definition, an ultra-soft line, a very small change to the status quo, is likely to be very uncontroversial – meaning that there is nothing much to say in favour of it!

If the topic was "that all public schools should have a uniform" and the Affirmative team define it as "a common dress standard – such as no 'name brand' clothes, and no expensive jewellery, minimal make up allowed and only flat heeled, closed toe, single colour shoes". It might seem like an impossible case to lose. But you have to ask yourself, how many quality arguments can you make in favour of this standard? Can you think of enough to fill 15 minutes (1st Aff, and half the 2nd Aff) of speeches, without it getting repetitive, simplistic or boring? I'd be impressed if you could.

Even assuming that the Affirmative team have done themselves a massive disservice by running an ultra-soft line, the negative still need to be careful they don't become victims of an imploding debate – where the area of clash is small and gets smaller and smaller until there are virtually no strong areas of difference between the teams. Under those circumstances an adjudicator will have few good reasons to award the debate and will probably end up giving to the team which is penalised *less* for ruining the debate.

As a negative team, your best tactic – under all circumstances, but most especially in response to an ultra-soft line – is to *clearly create space* in the debate. That means taking up a hard line (or at least a very firm line) to clearly delineate the stance of your team from the Affirmative, and to give you a clear principled line to defend. In effect the debate ends up being more about whether or not you can clearly explain and strongly defend your line, than it is about defeating your opponents position (in a normal debate those priorities are equally important).

Of course you still need to make a strong effort to engage with your opponent's case, but the central thrust of your rebuttal tends to be that the Affirmative have based their case on the wrong principle – rather than the fact that the specifics of their case will cause some great harm.

So in relation to our example, a negative team should run a fairly strong, clear line that students should be able to wear any clothing which suits them, without being unnecessarily provocative or inappropriate (you don't want be condoning students coming to school wearing their pyjamas or dressed like prostitutes, but that still allows a very wide range of acceptable attire). The neg would then focus on why it is important that children be able to wear whatever they like – both because it's a form of personal expression, and important to the development of their personalities, plus its important for kids to learn to cope with material differences – everywhere they go after school the way they look will have an impact on their life, from job interviews and workplace, to fitting in socially – and school is a good place to learn those skills.

The attack on the Affirmative team is that any serious attempt to stifle the sartorial freedom of students is simply limiting the development of their personal autonomy, and making harder for them to learn how to interact with others in the real world. Which would be the same line you would run anyway, but the focus shifts from comparing the potential 'harms' of a proper school uniform (cost, strict conformity, etc) with the 'harms' of free dress (bullying, social segregation, peer-group pressure) and becomes more focused on whether or not freedom of dress/expression is the superior principle to guide this particular debate than the alternative of uniformity of dress.

The Affirmative team – being the soft and timid people that they obviously are - will probably try and have the best of both worlds and argue that their 'soft uniform' still gives children room to express themselves – but this is the crucial thing, now they are fighting on your terms! You need to keep your cool and simply point out that hypocrisy of their position – if they think that free expression is important they can't have what amounts to a uniform by stealth. The more they defend the need for students to have self expression, the more you can argue that students will consistently bend and break their rules and that the 'natural' position will be more like that you are proposing.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that this would be a great debate – once a team go ultra-soft its very rarely a good debate (which should be reason enough to never do it yourself) but it's a fight for survival. An ultra-soft line is an attempt to suck the controversy out of a debate, and controversy is the oxygen of debate. So the best neg tactic is anything that increases the controversy and injects in some more oxygen.

Any decent adjudicator should reward a team that is trying everything it can to save a debate from imploding and so they will hopefully be generous towards you, but you have to keep your cool and run a clear and consistent line.

Basically you should go back to 'first principles' figure out what the clash *should* have been, then figure out which line you can run that will push the debate as far towards that original level of clash as possible.



Television



High-Definition Television

Chapter Eight: General Tactical Mistakes

Mistake One: The fallacy of ‘mutual exclusivity’

The concept of ‘mutual exclusivity’ (ME) has been thoroughly overused and misunderstood by debaters of all styles. This would be bad enough, but on top of that there seems to be a relatively widespread belief that ME is a powerful rebuttal to an opponents case – when tactically speaking it can be easily and effectively countered.

The problem of ME is this – teams think that if they can show that an opponent’s model is not strictly speaking, mutually exclusive (literally) to their own, then that weakens the validity of their opponent’s case. There is some truth to this, certainly rhetorically but also argumentatively, but it’s overstated and quite simple to refute.

The first point is that ME is not a fatal flaw in an oppositions case automatically – only under certain circumstances is it even a weakness.

For example, if the topic was “That this house would legalise recreational drugs” and the Affirmative proposed a model of licensed distribution of drugs like ecstasy (essentially treating recreational drugs in the same way as cigarettes and alcohol-regulated, restricted but commercially available) the Neg might counter-propose a model that is essentially the status quo, but with greater education about the harmful effects of drugs and drug abuse to discourage their use.

Commonly the Aff would respond by say that in essence the Neg’s case is not mutually exclusive to their own, because an identical education campaign would be consistent with the aims of their own model.

While strictly speaking this is true – something can be legalised *and* there can be a broad education campaign about the harms (eg cigarettes) the lack of formal mutual exclusivity is not a fatal flaw, or even an effective attack – because *philosophically* the two models are predicated on mutually exclusive concepts: the best way to limit harm is to allow supply and encourage responsible use Vs the best way to limit harm is to restrict supply and explain that generally there really is no such thing as responsible use. These concepts are mutually exclusive.

Secondly, and flowing from the philosophical difference, there is a simple practical distinction. The Neg’s model is mutually exclusive in the sense that if the education campaign works as well as it argued that it would, then there would be no need to legalise supply of drugs as a harm minimisation strategy - if education does effectively limit harm from drugs, then the only reason why you would go further than that and legalise it is if you thought people had a right to access it (which is an argument exclusive to the Aff).

Mistake Two: The illusion of ‘sameness’.

Quite often debaters will analyse an entire category of thing, which should rightly be seen as a larger number of discrete entities that have a small number of things in common but nevertheless possessing significant difference.

Some examples include, the media, corporations, developing countries, racial/ethnic/gender/sexuality groups, etc.

In each of these cases there are commonalities between individual members that make generalisations fair and accurate. For example it's fair to say "corporations are profit driven", because any corporation that doesn't seek (maybe amongst other things) to make a profit, is not really a business – it's a charity, or community service, but it's not a 'corporation' in the colloquial sense of a private business. However that said, the pursuit of profit takes many forms – corporation's aim for different markets (eg. cheap and low quality vs. expensive and high quality) and operate under different conditions (eg. big business has large profit margins and massive resources vs. small businesses that usual run on small margins and have limited resources).

Any time an opposition talk about a one of these categories as though they are homogenous ("what women want is to be represented politically by women" or "West Papuan's don't want development, what they really want is to be free to pursue their traditional culture") even if you know nothing about the group in question, you can confidently assert from first principles that the situation is more complicated than that ("many women are more concerned with the ideological beliefs of their representatives, rather than their gender because 'women' are as a group are far from united in their views") and then provide the analysis for why these differences within the group are reasonable, important and how they will complicate the fair application of the oppositions model.

Mistake Three: The myth of the "opposition's onus" (or Push Debating)

This is one of those 'fine line' issues in debating/adjudication; when is an opposition team 'push debating' and when is it simply pointing out the obvious about the fundamental 'clash' in the debate?

Push debating can occur in many forms. Two of those possibilities were covered in the previous section dealing with false dichotomies and straw men – when an opposition are trying to force you to (or convince the adjudicator that you should) argue for something totally irreverent, or to oppose a truism ("our onus is to show that this model can work, their onus is to defend the indefensible").

As an adjudicator or debater these are simple situations that really only require you to have courage and to clearly explain why such dichotomies are ridiculous and irrelevant to the real debate, then establish what the 'true' dichotomy is, and then get back to defending your side of that equation.

But there are other, subtler forms of push debating that inexperienced speakers and judges sometimes miss, and that's when a team try to 'push' an entire case onto their oppositions – either through an unfairly skewed definition of the terms of the debate, or through the establishment of some sort of (unfair) test or criteria through which they assert the debate should be judged.

Remember – you *never* have to accept an 'onus' or a set of criteria that is placed on you by an opposition speaker. If your team has a good first speaker, then they will clearly spell out exactly what your side will be attempting to prove or which position you will be advocating for, and that's what you should be judged on.

As an adjudicator you should rightly be wary of letting competitors tell you how to judge the debate. It's fine for a team to point out problems with the opposition, or to challenge their definition or their arguments, but in the end the only criteria that matter when awarding the debate, are those set down in the rules. This doesn't mean that every time a team try to set down "criteria" for a debate, that they are trying to be unfair – but in almost every case these criteria are irrelevant.

But there are subtleties to this, and as you become more experienced you'll learn to tell the difference between a team which is trying (consciously or not) to unfair push you, and when they are simply trying to establish the parameters of a fair debate.

For example, if the topic was "that Australia should use nuclear energy" the affirmative team have the right to choose exactly how much nuclear energy, and under what conditions, they are willing to defend (that's an issue of how 'hard' or 'soft' line they choose to be) but they can't 'define' the opposition's case.

So they can't say "we should like to see the government set a target of generating 20% of Australia's electricity through nuclear power, and the opposition have to defend the status quo – of virtually total fossil fuel use – as a better strategy". That's push debating. If the negative team want to defend the status quo then that's their choice, but if they had a case based on some alternative (like green energy, or reductions in energy use, or a modification to the status quo through a carbon tax... etc, etc) then its their right to set the parameters of their case.

All you have to do as a negative team in that situation is to acknowledge the 'push', and then reject it. For example, you could say something like: "The affirmative team are eager to see nuclear power used in Australia and we reject that, but contrary to what they think, our alternative is not a dirty fossil fuel energy industry, the alternative that we will be advocating is...." and then insert your model.

Every time the affirmative try to say that your team is defending the problems with the status quo, you reply "no, we want to change the system too, just in a different way, and here is why our alternative is better than nuclear energy" and get back to the debate. Sounds simple, but it can take guts when an opposition team is yelling at you!

But there are times when an affirmative team is right to stake out the grounds of the debate – but this is only the case when the topic *forces* the negative team by virtue of the wording of the motion, to specifically defend something.

If the topic was "That the Singapore should abolish the death penalty as a punishment for drug traffickers" then the position of the Negative team is obvious – they have to defend the status quo. They could insert minor modifications (better appeals process) but they have to defend the use of the death penalty for drug traffickers in order to engage properly in the debate.

What the previous two examples show is that push debating occurs mostly when the wording of the topic is focused on what the Aff should defend, and doesn't say much about the nature of the negative teams case (such as "that we should invade Iran" – the position of the Aff is made obvious, but the Neg have several options open to them – sanctions, economic engagement, etc).

Under these conditions some Aff teams will try and push the Neg, to limit their choices. They might be doing it because they think it's in the spirit of the motion, or they might be doing it because they are trying to push them in order to gain some tactical advantage. In any event the Neg is *always* free to reject the push if they want.

But on a final note I think its worth pointing out that it's not necessarily 'weak' to accept a 'pushed' position. If the Neg want to embrace the case pushed onto them by the Aff, or they are willing to accept the test or criteria established by their opponents, then its not inherently bad to do so – so don't mark them down, or view them as weak for doing it. The issue then is simply was it tactically smart for them to do so – and sometimes the answer is yes, just as sometimes a tactical concession can help move a debate forward, or neutralise an argument (see Tactical Concessions in Chapter Five).

Mistake Four: Slippery Slopes

A “slippery slope” argument is when you attempt to prove that by doing one thing, you will also, as a by-product, inevitably do something else worse.

So you might say; if we legalise abortion even under very specific circumstances (such as where the pregnancy presents a medical danger to the mother) we will unleash forces that will eventually lead to abortion under any circumstances (“abortion on demand”).

This type of argument is incredibly common, and is a natural instinct amongst inexperienced debaters who are seeking to inflate the harm of their opponents' model as much as possible. High school debaters are notorious for making slippery slope arguments that are so extreme that they become absurd, and hence most adjudicators discourage any argument that even approaches a slippery slope. Consequently there is a now a common, but mistaken, belief that slippery slope arguments are automatically weak or invalid. That isn't true.

The problem with the way most people make slippery slope arguments is that they aren't actually proper “arguments” at all, they are in fact “assertions” and that's why they seem weak.³ Assertions are always weak - by definition – and slippery slopes are almost always assertions because people don't know *how* to do proper analysis.

NOTE: Before I explain how to develop a slippery slope into a proper – and often powerful – argument, it's important to note that this type of argument shouldn't be overused. Firstly there are effective ways to counter slippery slope arguments, and secondly they are only truly relevant under specific circumstances. So that's the trick – first learn *how* to do them, and then think hard about *when* to use them.

Making Slippery Slope Arguments Work

The key to an effective slippery slope argument is showing how strong the motivation will be for a government to take additional steps down a particular policy path after they have taken the first – but that's not automatically or intuitively true, and that's the trick.

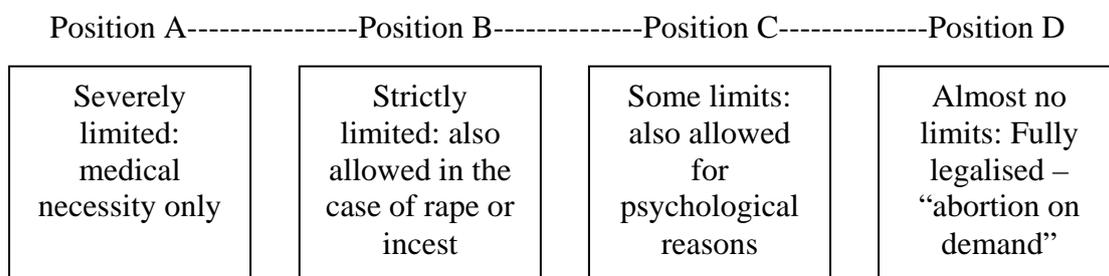
³ See Chapter Four for a detailed discussion of the difference between arguments and assertions

What you're really trying to do is to show that your opponent's model will change the social norms and begin a new trend – a trend that will inevitably lead to unacceptable conclusions.⁴

Let's take the abortion example I used before. Imagine an Aff team is proposing that abortion should be legalised, but only under certain circumstances (eg. where the pregnancy would threaten the life of the mother) – we'll call that Position A. And you want to make the argument that legalising abortion, even in such a limited way, will inevitably lead to a much wider tolerance of abortion, meaning "abortion-on-demand" – we'll call that position D.

The problem is that it is not reasonable to believe that a government would move from Position A to Position D in one step, so you have to explain what the middle steps - Positions B and C – would be, and why the trend would be to legalise those positions too. Here's an example.

The Abortion Slippery Slope



It should be obvious just by looking at each of the positions, that there is a clear progression and a continuation of logic flowing from Position A to D. Position A relies on a key concept – that the health of the mother outweighs the health of the foetus. But that's essentially the same logic that justifies each of the other positions, and you can demonstrate that:

"If we allow abortion, in cases where the health of the mother is endangered by continuing the pregnancy, then we will enshrine in law a principle that will inevitably go much further than we intend. How can we say that it is acceptable to disregard the rights and interests of the foetus if the mother's medical health is at risk, without accepting the same rationale in cases where a woman has been the victim of rape or incest? Since clearly the psychological health of the mother has a strong influence on her physical health, and we know that the victims of rape and incest often suffer from severe depression that can lead to suicidal tendencies, surely we must treat all these risks the same way.

But if we accept that the trauma of rape, compounded by an unwanted pregnancy, creates a psychological harm that is a significant health risk to the mother – then why does the cause of the psychological harm matter? If the health of the mother is the over-riding concern, then it shouldn't matter *why* a women is suffering a severe depression or why she is suicidal, all that should matter is that she is, and that if the

⁴ See Chapter Six, for a discussion of Trends, Norms and Tipping Points.

pregnancy is exacerbating that, then the women should be able to terminate the pregnancy.

Of course if the health of the women truly is paramount, and a risk to her health, whether medical or psychological is connected to the pregnancy, then surely we must extend that to any set of circumstances that endanger the health of the mother – whether they are medical, psychological, economic or social. Clearly if having a child would leave a woman impoverished, then that could represent a threat to her health. Equally if a pregnancy could result in social exclusion or ostracism, then there is obviously a risk there of depression and poor-health. So what we have here is a model that seeks to be restrictive, but which if we are to believe the arguments that sustain it, then there are very few reasonable restrictions on it at all”.

So you see the key is take it step by step, and show how logically, once you accept certain principles of the model, it is unreasonable to include the sort of restrictions that are entailed in the model. The important thing is to sound reasonable and measured – just follow the chain of logic, explain every step and keep referring back to the original arguments for Position A.

It helps if after explaining the argument you can throw in a case study, and in the example of abortion it’s pretty easy because it’s hard to think of a country which has legalised abortion in any way in which, thereafter, there hasn’t been a general trend for further liberalisation. But just because history is on your side, doesn’t mean that you don’t need to do good analysis of *why* it is true, and why it will *remain* true.

Mistake Five: Opposing Minority Rights

As a general rule you should veto topics that force you to oppose any move towards greater equality for a recognised minority group. This is because discrimination is inherently wrong and illogical, so you’ll always struggle to overcome that in a debate.

However there are times where you’re forced into opposing an increase in rights for a minority group (such as gay marriage/adoption, or cultural rights for ethnic minorities, etc) and so you need some tactics for approaching these difficult situations.

The first rule is – never oppose the aim of equal rights.

You can (and should) argue about *how* best to move society towards the goal of equal rights for all, but you’re digging a dangerous hole unnecessary if you oppose the aim of equal rights. The reason is simple; it’s virtually impossible to explain why a particular group deserve to be discriminated against without straying into bigotry or sexism, and not only are they inherently weak arguments, they also violate the Code of Conduct at most tournaments and you can get into a lot of trouble.

This is a perfect example of a situation in which a “tactical concession” is the prudent course of action.⁵ Simply concede that there is a problem – no society on earth has reached a position of full entitlement for all its citizens, and the processes by which rights are achieved are crucial to the acceptance of those rights in practice. So then the debate becomes about new issues, such as; how important is it that the society at large – the “majority” – accept the legitimacy of these new rights for the minority? And of

⁵ See Chapter Six for an explanation of tactical concessions

course then the question is; how do we engender acceptance of minority rights by the majority? In a good debate the teams will disagree on both counts.

One team will say that the acceptance of new rights is not really required for rights to be meaningful (e.g. voting – it didn't matter that many men still didn't accept women's right to vote when it was first allowed, that right was still empowering for women) and the other side will say that acceptance is crucial (e.g. equal pay provisions – an employer is legally required to offer equal pay, but if that boss is sexist then he can promote women slower, reduce their access to important clients or additional training, etc – all of which affects their pay).

Additionally the teams can dispute the best way to generate community support for minority rights. One team says that people's natural fear and reluctance to change social norms evaporates quickly once people see that new rights for minorities doesn't have to result in diminished rights for the majority) and their opponents argue that its better to continue the debate and the discussion until there is clear acceptance of change (Canada is a classic example – it legalised gay marriage after a long period of public debate, and although there will always be critics, by the time with law was based there was virtually no social backlash, and even when a conservative government was elected promising to “review” the decision, they've made no moves to restrict gay marriage because the majority of Canadians accept it as fair).

This second argument can be hard to make, but if it works then you'll win, and it's still easier to argue than 'discrimination is right'. The key is to broaden the debate – it's not just about whether Group A can do X, it's about how that group fits into the society and the long term process of change that is a true “rights movement”. You want to emphasise that these decisions (about when to grant new rights) should be made when there is something approaching a consensus – especially when you're talking about rights that require interaction with society to enact – like employment rights and social rights (adoption, etc). The worse outcome is for a right to be turned into a political football, which the right being given and taken away at the whim of the political cycle. To be truly meaningful it must be enduring, and (generally) be accepted, not a source of social division.

But I'd remind you that tactically, the best outcome for you is to avoid these sorts of debate – it takes a great deal of skill and credibility to pull off a case like this, and you're constant one wrong word/phrase away from saying something bigoted. It's a minefield best avoided.

Mistake Six: Arguing About Deterrence

In debates about 'law and order' the prospects for deterrence is one of the most obvious and intuitive concepts. For instance, every debate on capital punishment I've ever seen has dedicated a sizeable amount of time to arguing about the level of deterrence that such a punishment would generate.

But the problem is that while the notion of deterrence (increased penalties, equals decreased likelihood of offence) is intuitive, it's also notoriously difficult to prove and is a classic trap that inexperienced debaters fall into, diverting them away from more effective lines of argument.

So why is deterrence so difficult to prove? The answer lies in a quick examination of the motives behind criminal behaviour, and a brief discussion of the statistics.

When it comes to criminal motivation we can broadly generalise about two dominate themes – firstly crimes in the heat of the moment (including ‘crimes of passion’) and then pre-meditated crimes. In both of these instances the magnitude of the punishment has only a partial influence on the balance of incentives and disincentives. The reasons are simple. If the crime is committed in the ‘heat of the moment’ (e.g. someone says something nasty about your mother and you respond by punching them in the face) then by definition it’s not an act where the perpetrator has rationally considered the possible consequences. Therefore the impact of deterrence created by the possible penalty for assault is nominal at best.

In the second category of crime – pre-meditated crimes – deterrence should be strong because a rational actor will factor in the possible penalty when they plan out their crime. While that’s true, it must be weighed against the obvious problem – premeditated criminals don’t expect to get caught, that’s why they’re planning out the crime. It’s not really that hard to buy a gun, and its certainly not very difficult to shoot someone with it, but the hard part is getting away with it – what do you do with the body? How do you avoid leaving physical evidence or witnesses? So given all those complexities, if someone does then set out to commit a crime its usually because they’ve convinced themselves that they won’t get caught – that they have a full-proof plan. If you didn’t believe that you wouldn’t commit a pre-meditated crime. No one rational wants to get caught.

So again, the deterrence value of tough punishments is far less than you might otherwise expect. Of course the level of punishment has some influence as a disincentive, but it’s not as powerful a tool as it ostensibly appears. In part this is because most people don’t draw much distinction between a ‘short’ jail term (say a few years) and a long prison term. That’s because people know that prisons are pretty terrible places where drugs, violence and sexual assaults are common, and no one with half a brain wants to spend any time in there. So the difference between 5 years and 10 years in terms of deterrence value is not ‘double’, its much less.

What does work to dissuade crime is to convince people that they are likely to get caught – and suffer a serious punishment (not necessarily a harsh punishment). That’s why concealed speed cameras are so effective – people know that they’re out there, and they know that it’s difficult to predict their location, so that’s a strong deterrence. The fact that the penalty is a fine of around \$150, but if you doubled or tripled the fine you wouldn’t double or triple the deterrence. But if you double or tripled the number of hidden cameras, you would come close to doubling or tripling the deterrence.

The other reason why deterrence is so difficult to prove is because it’s very hard to demonstrate empirically a connection between tougher sentencing and reduced crime. Take, for example, the debate over the merits of the ‘zero tolerance’ policy famously pursued by the former Mayor of New York City, Rudolph Guiliani. Guiliani’s supporters claim that his aggressive crack down on minor crimes led to a major reduction in the instances of all crime – including serious crimes – in a city which had until then been plagued by disturbingly high crime rates. While crime is undoubtedly better now in NYC than it was before Guiliani’s term, does that mean that zero

tolerance can rightfully claim credit for that? Well critics of zero tolerance obviously say no, and their reasons are a good example of how difficult it is to demonstrate statistically or empirically the impact of a particular policy on the overall crime rate. Alternative explanations for the drop in crime relate to the economy (which was rising out of a recession – meaning more jobs and more tax dollars to spend on social services) and the availability of drugs (there was a shortage in supply of crack cocaine) which is why there was also a fall in crime rates in other American cities that didn't implement zero tolerance.

Does that necessarily mean that zero tolerance had no impact at all? No, probably not. But what it does mean is that you can waste a lot of time in a debate trying to win that argument (and you'll almost always fail to do so – at best you'll break even with your opponents), when instead you could be focusing on other arguments that support your case, which you can actually win through superior analysis and persuasion.

So what does this all mean for using deterrence as an argument in debates?

Well it doesn't mean you should never use it (although I rarely do), but what it does mean is that you need to A) be very careful and selective about when you use it, and B) it should rarely be a high-priority argument.



Instead of deterrence, it's much more effective to argue that harsh punishments are *appropriate* in light of the crime that has already been committed, rather than focusing on trying to prove that it will deter future crimes.

Chapter Nine: Manner

What is good manner? Unfortunately, there are very few convenient tests or tactics with manner (although the next chapter has some tips for intermediate speakers). But that's not to say that good manner can't be taught and so it must be possible to describe it. I'd stress that there is no single definition of good manner. You can be loud or quiet, you can be funny or serious, and in some speeches you might do all those things. If you made up a list of the best debaters in the world, it would include people with range of styles. But that said, I think good manner is the right combination of three things; Persuasiveness, Credibility and Conviction.

Persuasiveness – Persuasiveness means making your message appealing to the audience. It incorporates all of the obvious things you learned at school; make eye contact, project your voice.... etc. But that's like saying that driving a car is just a combination of turning a wheel and moving your head. It sucks all of the art of out it.

The art is in the psychology of persuasion. For instance it's vital that you understand the difference between intuitive and counter-intuitive arguments.⁶ Running a counter-intuitive argument is not bad *per se*, but it is harder. If you don't acknowledge when you're running a counter-intuitive argument you'll never make it fly in the debate.

But how to you make a counter-intuitive argument work? Well you have explain it carefully and use strong analysis but from a manner point of view its crucial that you choose your language carefully, don't overcomplicate things any more than is necessary, and most importantly *look* at your adjudicators while you're saying it. You have to learn to read the faces of your judges, and if it doesn't look like they understand you, then you need to slow down and try again until they get it.

Credibility – Learning to have *gravitas* is difficult, because it's linked to personal maturity, which you can't rush, but in the meantime there are some ways to project the maximum amount of credibility that you're currently capable of.

Rule number one: Take it seriously, don't undermine yourself.

Too often inexperienced speakers do everything possible to emphasis how inexperienced they are. That's just counterproductive. Don't ever talk your speech down while you're giving it. That sounds obvious but it's astonishing how many debaters will make an argument, and then they'll say something like "that didn't really make sense did it?" I'm not sure if it's just a result of nerves, or some misguided attempt to be endearing, but either way you should stop it immediately.

Another classic example is deferring to your opposition. So an opponent will make some arguments that sound good about say economics, and the next speaker will say something stupid like "well I don't know as much about economics as the last speaker, but I'll have a go at rebutting her argument anyway". This is a double hit – it weakens your credibility and it *increases* your opponents' credibility!

⁶ A counter-intuitive argument is something that people will initially find difficult to accept – something that seems to conflict with their gut feeling.

I can't stress enough how much damage this does to you. It seems like a small thing, but it can be devastating. The reason is because talking yourself down can act as a subtle but powerful confirmation of any negative perception of you that an adjudicator might already be harbouring. This is especially true for ESL speakers and young female speakers. I wish it wasn't like that, and of course many adjudicators are fair and unbiased in terms of manner, but a significant proportion of them operate under the general principle that the older you are, the more credible you are, and that generally men are more credible than women.

Equally, inexperienced adjudicators (even unbiased ones) are nervous about complaints (they don't have the personal relationships or status to survive negative feedback from teams) so if a judge is struggling to decide between teams, the one that doesn't sound like they think they're winning is the team that will often end up losing the debate. Again, it shouldn't work like that, but occasionally it does.

Rule number two: *NEVER* talk down your speech, yourself or your ideas.

Broadly speaking, the better you're doing at a tournament, and therefore the higher up the tab you move (which increases the quality of your adjudicators) the less important those stereotypes are, but while there has been enormous improvement in the adjudication culture over the years, it's still not perfect.

Rule number three: Sound like you know what you're talking about.

So that means one of two things – either *actually* know what you're talking about, (by working hard on learning first principles as well as specific knowledge), or *sound* like you know what you're talking about (the first is better). You can sound credible by avoiding simple mistakes – like make sure you get the names of things right – including pronunciation, and use them confidently. If you're not sure whether the name of the Chinese President is Hu Jin Tao or Wen Jao Bao, take a guess, but whichever you choose, say it confidently!

The only sure way to build up your credibility is to really know what you're talking about, but that takes time. Meanwhile, focus on being confident, and remember that your adjudicators/opposition will rarely know anything about you – if you look confident, and sound confident, they'll usually think you are confident!

Conviction – is probably the most under-rated facet of manner. Basically, if you don't look like you care about the topic and you care about the arguments that you're making, then why should anyone else care? Remember that adjudicators suffer from all the same things that you as debaters endure at tournaments – they're tired, they can be bored, they can dislike the topics – if you don't do everything you can to make the debate engaging and appealing then you can't expect them to make much effort either.

There is a fine line between sounding passionate and sounding ridiculous, but:

Rule number three is: "I'm here to persuade" *not* "I'm trying to win a debate".

What's the difference? The difference is everything. It's the difference between high-school and university debating; and it's the difference between being a good *debater*, and a truly great *speaker*.

Trying to persuade means engaging in the issues first and foremost, and again, you should be trying to project the image that you care about them and that you genuinely want other people to believe you – not just so that you and get another win for your team, but because its *inherently* important to you that people believe you on this issue. Alternatively you can try and win the debate, and that means doing everything you can point out to the adjudicator why your team has scored more points, and everything you can to make your opponents look bad, instead of making them look wrong. My advice is; don't tell adjudicators how to do their job, just focus on doing your job – being persuasive. The rest will take care of itself.

So that means avoid referring to the fact that you're having a debate – so don't say high school-like things, such as “welcome to today's debate, the topic is” or “As the first speaker it's my job to explain the model...” just get to the issues as fast as you can. Use your context and set-up to explain the debate – that's why you should contextualise at the start of first speaker's speech. In team splits, talk about how your case expands logically; instead of it appearing like you've made some arbitrary distinction. Sound professional, sound sophisticated and sound genuinely interested.

Again these are subtle things and individual instances of “debate speak⁷” (talking about the debate, instead of talking about the issues) don't matter much, but cumulatively they have a big impact. They remind the adjudicator that this is just a contest, and the teams are just trying to score points. You can still win when that happens, but you'll never really learn to “persuade”, instead you'll just learn how to be better than other team – and sometimes that's not saying very much.

People often ask how to “put teams away”, in other words, how to win by large margins – and the key to scoring big wins against good teams, is manner. If you can master these three facets of manner, then when coupled with a strong case (which all good teams have by virtue of experience) you will be able to smash opponents, not just beat them.

But it takes patience and of course lots of practice!



⁷ See Jeremy Brier's excellent article in Edition 4 of the Monash Debating Review

Chapter Ten: Advanced Manner - Momentum and Urgency

By the time debaters reach the intermediate level of experience they are well versed in the need to begin their cases by establishing the ‘context’ to the debate. Most see this as simply a ‘harm reduction’ strategy, (i.e. if you don’t include a context the adjudicator will criticise you and think you don’t know much about the topic) and while that might be true, context setting is also a strategic opportunity to position yourself and your opponents in the debate at its earliest point.

NOTE: The aim is to go beyond a mere recitation of recent facts (although demonstrating your awareness of pertinent contemporary events is important) and to generate a sense of **urgency** and **momentum** – which will propel your case and hamper your opposition’s capacity to advocate a status quo case.

The aim is to generate an atmosphere of crisis – either impending or escalating – to justify firstly the rejection of the status quo, and secondly to set up your model as the most effective solution.

This is relatively easy, and even intuitive, in situations where a topic is in reference to a well recognised crisis – such as “that we should withdraw troops from Iraq”, or “that the West should intervene in Darfur”. Categorising the status quo as a disaster (or impending disaster) in these cases is advantageous for a number of reasons:

1. It discredits the status quo, either forcing your opponents to abandon it in part or in whole (when in most cases they were probably going to run a largely unmodified version of it as their case).
2. Even when your opponents do run an alternative model, if it would be slower or less effective than yours then the urgency point will erode their legitimacy.
3. It provides a useful defence against some of the flaws in your own model (“when the situation is this desperate we can’t worry about getting approval from the UN, by then everyone will be dead, we have an obligation to act urgently...”).
4. Grabbing and holding the moral high ground will give you a rhetorical advantage and make your opponents seem insensitive.

But the task of generating momentum and urgency is much more difficult when the topic is less contemporary and more of a ‘classic’ – one you might have done many times over a number of years.

In these cases, to overcome the lack of an explicit driver to create a sense of urgency, you need to reach up to the next level(s) of abstraction to link your model into a more general trend. What does that mean in practice? Lets look at the mother of all classic topics – ‘That we should legalise euthanasia’.

Sometimes this topic is set in reaction to specific events – such as the arrest of a doctor for performing euthanasia, or because something has sparked a public debate on the issue. In those cases you’d rely heavily on those instances to give urgency to your case. But given that euthanasia is usually not a matter of focused public debate, but is a very common topic, you need to have a fall back.

One example of how you might open a debate on euthanasia is this:

“Modern medicine has made many miraculous achievements – including new ways to detect problems early and treat diseases more effectively. It’s a wonderful thing, but unfortunately there are unintended consequences, which are partly responsible for our current aging population crisis. Diseases that were once deadly have now been reduced to chronic afflictions, consigning the terminally ill to a more drawn out decline than was previously imaginable.

That’s why we need to give people control over when they die – because you shouldn’t be forced to endure pain or indignity, just because science now permits it. And with our aging population it’s a problem that is getting worse every day. To restore the balance we need to assist people who choose to die if...”

This example highlights how you can generate urgency and momentum in a variety of ways simultaneously – firstly the ‘modern medical marvels’ angle. This is the driver for change, because it’s simply a fact that some diseases, such as particular strains of cancer, that used to kill in a matter of months, can now be held off for years, but not painlessly or permanently. Obviously no one can advocate an end (or roll back) of medical advances because the benefits clearly outweigh the costs, so everyone is forced to accept that there is a problem.

Secondly, the ‘modern medicine’ angle creates a rationale for the development of new social/legal norms regarding euthanasia. It’s entirely conceivable that 50 years ago there was little justification for euthanasia because the terminally ill didn’t suffer long and being a smaller proportion of the population they could be well cared for in hospitals or hospices. But this is a *new* angle to the euthanasia debate, meaning that previously accepted social norms need to be reconsidered (this helps overcome the fact that euthanasia has historically been rejected by most democratic societies).

Thirdly, the ‘aging population crisis’ is a deliberate attempt to insert the term ‘crisis’, in a way that seems objective (the notion of an ‘aging population crisis’ is well established in public discourse, alongside others like the ‘skills crisis’ and the ‘global credit crisis’). By linking your case to broadly acknowledged social phenomena you gain credibility, and limit your opponent’s ability to downplay the urgency of the situation.

Finally, the ‘aging population crisis’ helps you build momentum – it means there is already a problem (‘modern medical marvels’) and it’s getting worse.

So you see that it takes a bit of creativity and some careful phrasing, but when done well you take a stale debate and turn it into a pressing issue. Immediately putting your opponents on the defensive and establishing a powerful central theme that will permeate your entire case.

NOTE: Following through is critical – once you’ve declared a crisis you can’t back down! Your tone and your arguments must constantly reflect the need for urgency. Otherwise you’ll surrender the moral high ground, and look foolish!

Over to you

Now it's your turn to conjure up a rationale for urgency in situations that would seem devoid of contemporary context. Your task is to write the opening 100-150 words of a first affirmative speech. There are many 'right' answers, but your answer will be 'wrong' if it; a) doesn't create a sense of urgency and momentum, b) is too much of a stretch, and you would end up looking silly if you actually said that in a debate.

Some suggestions (which might be directly useful, or might just get you thinking about the options) for trends, problems, crisis which you might like use are: aging population, skills crisis, inflation/budget crisis ('razor gang'), global terrorism, climate change/drought/rising price of food, wall-to-wall Labor governments/weak oppositions

1. *That prisoners should have the right to vote* (hint: earlier this year the US prison population grew to account for 1 in every 1000 American citizens)
2. *That we should reinstate the death penalty*
3. *That we should abolish the States*
4. *That we should grow genetically modified foods*
5. *That Australia should increase immigration*

Appendix One - First Principles Exercises

In 50-100 words describe the key features of the following philosophies/concepts.

Governance

- 1) *Liberal* democracy (some liberal democracies are more liberal than others)
- 2) *Social* democracy (see Scandinavia).
- 3) *Guided* democracy (see Singapore)
- 4) Dictatorship
- 5) Communism
- 6) Regionalism ('pooled sovereignty')

Economics

- 1) Keynesian
- 2) Neo-Liberal

Environment

- 1) Humanist ecology (Sustainable development)
- 2) Technological ecology
- 3) Deep-green ecology
- 4) Tragedy of the Commons

Morality

- 1) Kantian (people as ends, not means)
- 2) Utilitarianism – (preference and hedonistic)

Legal

- 1) Social Contract theory
- 2) J.S.Mill's Harm principle
- 3) Aims of the Criminal Justice System
- 4) Zero Tolerance ('broken windows')
- 5) Retributive Justice
- 6) Restorative Justice ('harm minimisation')

Others

- 1) Game Theory

Science

- 1) Precautionary principle

Security

- 1) Collective Security
- 2) Just war theory
- 3) Cooperative security
- 4) Golden Arches peace theory
- 5) Democratic peace theory

Business (Corporate Governance)

- 1) Stakeholder model
- 2) Shareholders only
- 3) Corporate Social Responsibility

Politics

- 1) Liberalism
- 2) Socialism/Communitarianism
- 3) Secularism

Australian Politics

- 1) Federalism vs Unitary government
- 2) Bi-cameral vs Uni-cameral
- 3) Subsidiarity vs Centralised power
- 4) Party discipline (Aust Vs USA)
- 5) Mandates

Feminism

- 1) Liberal feminism
- 2) Radical feminism
- 3) Developing-world feminism
- 4) Power feminism

Development Theories

- 1) Dependency Theory
- 2) Import Substitution
- 3) Export Promotion
- 4) Capital Controls
- 5) Liberalisation (free trade)

International Relations

- 1) Rationalism
- 2) Realism (and Neo-Realism)
- 3) Neo-liberal Institutionalism (multilateralism)
- 4) 'Soft Power' Vs 'Hard Power'
- 5) 'Constructive engagement' Vs Sanctions

Appendix Two: Secret Topic Prep (Can and should also be used for preparation in general!)

Note: This is a lightly edited version of a text written by Nicole Lynch.

Preliminaries:

Listen to the topic – write it down with the correct wording and **DON'T PANIC!!!** Then... take a deep breath and *start talking!* (you and your team shouldn't stop talking til your done!)

1. Identify the Controversy

Think about the following questions: What is the context of the debate? What is the status quo and/or what event related to the topic has occurred recently? Has something been proposed in relation to a controversy? (eg. by a government, by an interest group?) What is the issue that this debate is all about?

This step should help you understand why the topic was set in the first place – why it's an issue that people are discussing (or should be discussing!). When it comes to the first speakers speech, this step should help you set up the debate, let the audience know what the debates about and why it's a debate worth listening to.

2. Form a dichotomous statement about the debate.

Form a statement about the debate that can be answered yes or no. This should set up the divide between the two teams in the debate – both agreeing and disagreeing with the statement should be valid positions so that there is a genuine clash between the sides so that a good debate can occur. Avoid restating the topic – the statement can be the backbone, or main contention, of your case.

3. Define the terms of the debate

Your context should already make it clear what it is that the topic 'means' in terms of what any unclear or ambiguous terms are relating to. Thus, setting up a definition does not mean going through what each word in the topic "means" – you should have already made this clear, it means defining the terms of the debate:

Model Debates – in a lot of debates, defining the debate means proposing your solution or "*model*" for solving the controversy. The details of your model should include the scope of the debate (eg. the first world? Australia? Schools?) and give the debate a clear structure thorough which your arguments can be analysed.

Empirical Debates – these are debates where you're not arguing for a solution but merely evaluating something – eg. that our celebrities are no good. Your definition of the topic in these kinds of debates should set up the benchmarks by which you'll be assessing the issue. The definition stage is critical because it sets your team (and sometimes the other team too) clear markers against which your arguments can be evaluated.

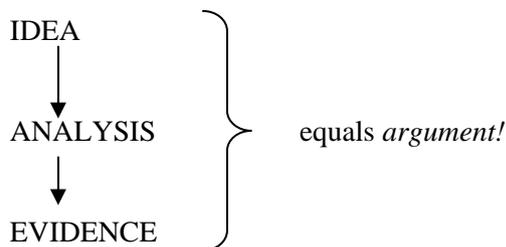
Remember – you should never try to win a debate by your definition (either model or benchmarks). Your aim should be, in defining the debate, to set up a good strong structure *through which* both teams can wrestle with each others arguments

4. Make a 'wishlist'

Think of things you'd like to prove for your case – anything that would be beneficial to your side of the debate – things that if you could prove would make it easier to win. If you're stuck for ideas, think of the groups involved in the issue – what their interests would be and how they are Affected by the issue (or would be Affected by your proposal).

5. Cut your wishlist down, and form the remaining ideas into arguments

Now it's time to transform your wishlist into a case. This is where your ideas get transformed from mere assertions to actual arguments. Remember the form of an argument:



With your whole team working together, you should be able to come up with the best (being the clearest and most logical) analysis and the best evidence (examples, statistics etc) for each of your arguments. Ask yourself at this stage whether you have made all the links to explain how you reach your conclusion so that someone who'd never even thought about it would be able to follow your reasoning (and be convinced by it!)

Once you have expanded your wishlist, read through them carefully and identify ones that are un-provable and get rid of these. Anything that you can't logically prove at this point should be cut – it's a waste of valuable speaking time to pursue arguments that won't help your case and it means you'll have less time to develop your stronger arguments. Prioritise your arguments so that you know which are the strongest/most important and which merely strengthen it – cut the weaker ones if you have too many and be prepared to defend your important arguments!

6. Do your team split

Finally, as a team work out the logical progression of the arguments and thus, which speakers will be covering which material. Then speakers can finalise their notes for their own speeches in the final few minutes.

Some final comments...

You and your team should be talking to each other for the vast majority of your prep time – if you construct your case according to the method above, every member of the team should be clear as to what the key clash in the debate is, what your team is proposing and the details of your teams arguments. This is important so that your team presents a consistent, logical case that fits together well. It is also a good tactic, because although only one speaker will be presenting any single argument, any speaker may use that argument in rebuttal (or have to defend it from attack) and might have to summarise or clarify an argument during the debate – so understanding all your teams material is vital – and collaborative preparation of your case is the way is the best way to do this. Plus it means that if anyone is hazy about anything at any point, they have two other people to consult with to smooth out the bumps before they get to the debating room! Three heads are better than one!

Finally, also remember that this method is all about actually debating. Don't work through all the steps and then stand up to give your speech and completely forget what you've just talked about! The structure of your teams case should follow the structure of your prep – when you identified the controversy at the start of your prep – it was so you knew what the debate was about and why it was worth debating: don't launch into your arguments before you enlighten the audience, and the adjudicator and your opposition what the debates about to! If they're all on the same page as you, your arguments are likely to make a whole lot more sense and the debate will work better!

Appendix Three: Surgical Strike Rebuttal – Minimal Fuss, Maximum Damage.

In order to effectively evaluate the weakness in any given argument, you need to first understand what a ‘good’ argument looks like. In almost every circumstance a ‘good’ or well-structured argument will take this form:

(1) IDEA

The IDEA is simply the point you are trying to make. It’s just a heading, a title, it might be true, but that’s something for you to prove later. So for example, in the debate “That we should ban smoking in pubs and clubs”, the first affirmative speaker might have as the IDEA for one argument, “that banning smoking will improve the profits of the businesses involved”. Now that may be true, but it hasn’t been proven (or even tried to be proven) yet, it’s just an IDEA. IDEA’s are often the things you mention when you are signposting your speech.

(2) ANALYSIS

Once you have an IDEA, the next step is to provide the analysis to prove it. Basically this is where you show logically or analytically that the IDEA is likely to be true (its hard to really “prove” things in debates, but you can show something is highly likely to be true). You can do this by demonstrating that logically the IDEA is true when taken in the context of the topic, or you can offer a series of reasons to support it.

When formulating your ANALYSIS the key word to think of is *because*, every time you come up with an IDEA, say “this is (likely to be) true *because*...” And you will be doing ANALYSIS. You should keep explaining *why* or *because* until you think you are saying things so obvious that they don’t need to be said. But assume that the adjudicator is either fairly dump, or slightly hostile to you, or both. So you have keep explaining the point, keep saying “because...” until its impossible for the adjudicator not to accept your argument as at least valid.

Using the previous example of banning smoking, a speaker might say, “banning smoking will actually generate more profits for businesses (IDEA), *because* (here begins the ANALYSIS) it will attract more customers. At present many potential customers are put off going out to pubs and clubs, or cut short their visits *because* they are put off by cigarette smoke, which they know is dangerous to them”. Etc, etc, you could explain this in more detail but I think you get the point. However, although this ANALYSIS is partially persuasive on its own as a justification for the IDEA, it would be stronger if it had some evidence. Which brings us to the last step (note my excellent use of signposting!)

(3) EVIDENCE

The third step, EVIDENCE, is usually the easiest. This is the stage where you provide something like a statistic, a survey, a case study or an analogy to give greater credibility to your IDEA and ANALYSIS. Partly because it’s the easiest to do, it’s also the least important link in the chain of an argument, but it’s a good to thing to have⁸. So to finish our example-argument one piece of evidence might be a survey conducted by ASH (Action on Smoking and Health) that demonstrates how a significant number of people would spend more time in smoke-free pubs and clubs.

But back to rebuttal...

Ok now that you know what a good argument is, you can effectively destroy it. The argument chain is weakest at link three – EVIDENCE – since it’s always easy to dispute the evidence presented by your opposition.

⁸ See William B. Panlilio’s article in MDR Edition 3 for a very sophisticated discussion of why this is true.

For example you could criticise the study conducted by ASH - since as an openly anti-tobacco organization it would probably be biased in the way it conducted the survey. But attacking the argument here is a poor strategy. Because the opposition can repair the chain by providing more evidence (which you attack, then they give more and it's a stalemate) or by simply haggling over whether ASH is a good source is evidence. So booooring...

Attacking the argument a little higher, at the ANALYSIS, is more difficult but also more effective. If you can demonstrate that the ANALYSIS is illogical or based on assumptions that are not true (or unlikely to be true) then you heavily damage the credibility of the whole argument. This is the most common sort of rebuttal by experienced speakers. However it's usually not a fatal blow. For example you might say that smoking is not really a reason why people choose not to attend pubs and clubs, since less than a quarter of the Australian population smoke, but nightclubs and pubs are full of non-smokers every weekend. Unfortunately for you, a clever opposition can rebuild their ANALYSIS by giving other reasons, or explaining the logical links in a different way, that weakens your rebuttal.

So finally we get to the top of the chain, the IDEA. This is usually very difficult to attack since often they are reasonable ideas, it just that your team has to argue that they are not true in the context of this debate. But sometimes you can attack the idea, and if you can do it effectively, it's a fatal blow to that argument. So in our example, you can attack the idea that banning smoking in pubs will be good for business by arguing that firstly you don't think that's true (and attack the analysis) but even if it is, you say "it's not the most important priority in this debate". Smoking is a legal activity, consenting adults have the right to do lots of things that are harmful to them (like drinking the alcohol served in pubs and clubs) and the government can't ban it simply because it might make more money. People's liberties are more important than a nightclub owners profits". If the adjudicator accepts that sort of argument (or any other attack on the IDEA) then the other links in the chain are irrelevant. Obviously its not that simple, the opposition will defend their idea, and you need very good reasons to show that an entire IDEA and the argument that flows from it, is irrelevant. But if you think the IDEA is vulnerable, you should attack it, because it's effective and it's efficient.