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—1934—

Preparation



The Big Picture

To win a debate, you must do two things:

1. Give good reasons why your side of the motion is true, and
2. Show why your opposition's reasons are wrong (rebuttal).

We will discuss rebuttal in our next presentation. For now, we are concerned with the first point. Your group of prepared ideas about why your side of the motion is true is known as your case. To prepare a case, you need to do three things:

1. Decide what the words of the motion mean for the purposes of this debate. This is known as your definition.
2. Think of some reasons why your side of the motion is true. These reasons are known as your arguments. As debaters, we try to join our arguments together into a single case approach.
3. Divide your arguments between your first and second speakers, so that each speaker knows what he or she has to present. This process is known as the split.



Step 1: The Issue and Definition



Finding the Battleground

All great historical battles had one thing in common: both sides came to the right address! This section is about Step 1 in your debate preparation, finding where the battleground should be (identifying the issue) and setting the battle at that location (defining the motion for the debate).



Finding the Issue

The first step in preparing any debate is working out the issue. Your team should agree on the issue before proceeding to any other preparation. Often, this will be very easy; the motion itself will tell you the issue. The first principle is simple: where there is a clear issue, debate that issue!

For example, let's take the motion "This House believes that the government should ban smoking." Wouldn't it be clever to say that "smoking" means "smoking marijuana"? Wouldn't it be crafty if "smoking" was a reference to campfires in National Parks? In a word, no! Although these other issues might make for interesting debates on other occasions, the motion in this case clearly refers to tobacco smoking. This is how most people would read the motion, and this is therefore the issue that you should debate.



On other occasions, however, the issue will not be absolutely clear. The second principle of issue-spotting is that, in these cases, you need to find the issue that is most obvious, most relevant, or most debatable. Above all, remember to debate about an issue. For example, suppose you have the motion “This House believes that the carrot is better than the stick,” which is obviously intended to be a metaphor. If you read the motion literally, you would spend an entire debate discussing the pros and cons of carrots and sticks! In this case, the most debatable issue is whether incentive (the carrot) is more effective than the threat of punishment (the stick).



On rare occasions, there is no issue that appears most obvious, most relevant, or most debatable. For example, consider the motion “This House believes that it’s not whether you win or lose but how you play the game.” Is this a debate about sports? Or about life generally? The issue seems to be whether the means justify the ends. Is it therefore a debate about politics? Or perhaps even about whether terrorism is ever justified? The answer is given by a third principle: where there is no obvious issue, you must choose an issue that the motion could refer to. For example, any of the issues suggested above would be an acceptable interpretation of the motion. In this case, the best approach would probably be to select the general philosophical issue (whether the means justify the ends). This matches the general philosophical nature of the motion itself and minimizes the chance that you and your opposition will be debating about completely different issues. You can always use specific material (for example, sports or politics) as examples.



However, you should not always select the most general issue. For example, let's take the motion "This House believes that big is beautiful." The most general issue here is whether big things are better than small things, but there is really nothing to debate on this issue: the entire debate would become a long list of big and small things that are "good" and "bad" respectively. In this case, you must choose another issue. For example, the issue could be whether we should welcome globalization (by which cultures, institutions, and economies become "big"). Alternatively, it could even be a debate about the role of advertising and popular culture on our self-images; the proposition team could argue, "Big is beautiful, so the government should ban unrealistic body images. This is the issue of the debate." Instead of automatically choosing the most general issue, the better approach is to select the issue that you consider most debatable from both sides. Unfortunately, it is not possible to be any more specific than this.



There is one vital rule about unclear motions: no matter how difficult the issue is to identify, you must identify one issue and one issue only! For example, the motion “This House believes that big is beautiful” could be about globalization, or it could be about media portrayals of body images, but it cannot be about both. Each issue could provide a great debate, but a messy combination of issues will not. Pick one central issue and stick to it!



For example, consider one school debate on the motion “This House believes that two superpowers are better than one.” The proposition team debated about whether the world was more stable and peaceful with one political and military superpower (that is, the United States), or with two (that is, the situation during the Cold War, where both the United States and the Soviet Union were superpowers). The opposition team, however, tried to debate about many issues—their case ranged across issues as diverse as politics, economics, and pop culture, as they argued that having fewer of something is better than having more of that same thing. Apart from missing the real issue, the team had made a massive strategic mistake by trying to deal with more than one central issue.



**Having decided on the general issue of the debate, it is time to decide on the specific and precise meaning of the motion: you need a definition
(For 'definition' go to presentation 2)**



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Thank you!

