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The Definition

What Is the Definition?

It is impossible to debate without first understanding what the motion means. Therefore, both teams need to decide what they think the motion means for the purposes of the debate. This is known as the definition.

Not many debating motions involve complicated words. Therefore, the purpose of the definition is not to tell your audience, adjudicator, and opposition what a word means in general. Instead, the purpose of the definition is to explain what a word means for your debate. We examine the best ways of achieving this purpose below.

In all debates, the proposition team must present a definition of the motion: a clear statement of what the team understands the motion to mean. The first proposition speaker presents this definition early in his or her speech.

Essentially, by defining the motion, the first proposition speaker is saying, "We think that this is what the motion means for the purposes of our debate. We think that both teams should debate on the basis of this meaning."

How to Define a Motion

Above all, both teams should try to be as clear and simple as possible when defining the motion. This involves a number of techniques. Define terms in the motion, not every single word. There is nothing wrong with defining individual words. However, you should choose the terms and words to define. There are two reasons for this:

1. Defining many words (such as "a" or "the") is both confusing and a waste of time (for example, there is no need to say, "We define the word 'a' as an impersonal indefinite article that precedes nouns commencing with consonants"!).

2. Often, words can take on very different meanings when they are grouped together. For example, suppose the motion is "This House believes that we should support political correctness." "Political correctness," of course, has a specific meaning as a term. However, if youdefine the two words separately, you will be arguing about whetherit is good for a politician to be correct. This argument is clearly not the issue of the debate—in fact, a definition like this would be unreasonable.

Do not define metaphorical terms literally.

Remember, the definition is not an exercise for its own sake—it is your chance to explain what your team understands the motion to mean. Therefore, if you believe a motion is metaphorical, you should define the motion with its metaphorical, not its literal, meaning. In the example "This House believes that the carrot is better than the stick," we've already noted that this motion is a metaphor. It would make no sense, therefore, to define a carrot as (for example) "an orange vegetable." Instead, you would need to explain that the word "carrot" is a metaphor for incentive, and "stick" for punishment.

Do not make definitions too complicated.

This technique is sometimes expressed as a simple rule: Do not give a dictionary definition. Doing so creates a risk of defining words wrongly (for example, by defining metaphorical terms literally, or defining groups of words one word at a time). More importantly, though, it removes meaning from your definition. The adjudicator does not want to hear what a dictionary says about a word—the dictionary was not written with your motion in mind! Instead, you should explain what you think the terms mean for the specific motion that you are debating. Of course, you may refer to a dictionary to determine the meaning of a word in the motion.

However, you should then rephrase that definition as you want it to apply to your debate.

Be prepared to give examples to explain your definition.

This is not necessary in most motions. However, in some motions, even your definition won't clarify the meaning of the words. For example, suppose the motion is "This House believes that the United Nations is too reluctant to stand up to dictatorship." In this case, no matter how carefully you choose words to define "stand up to dictatorship," you will not give an effective or tangible explanation to your audience. It is important also to provide some examples—such as, "For example, the United Nations can stand up to dictatorships by authorizing military intervention, by diplomatic pressure, by economic sanctions, and so forth."

Thank you!