



Haydarpaşa Lisesi

1934

Part 4



Find the clash. The arguments flow from there.

Every debate is an opportunity. But are you ready to seize it with your team? As an individual speaker, you can help your team win some debates. But it is difficult for you to sustain your team's success over time alone.

How do we do this? Let's examine this using a structured approach.

We will look first at long-preparation debates, where you might have up to a week to prepare. We will then discuss short-preparation debates involving just an hour to prepare.

Long-preparation debates

In long-preparation debates, we can gain access to lots of information and resources. This can help a great deal if we are not familiar with the motion we are set.

But it can also hurt!

Why so? With up to a week to prepare, we are likely to try to get our hands on as much material related to the motion as we can. If so, we will probably end up with a mountain of material to read.

In trying to sieve out what is relevant from the mountain of material, it is easy to lose sight of what we need in order to win. To do this, we must recognise the clash in the debate.

In debates, it is easy to fight over **everything** our opponents say. We could contest whether all the examples they give are true. We could dispute all of the arguments they raise. We could even argue that they have defined the debate wrongly.



You will probably pick at least one of these options in every debate. In fact, you often have to dispute most of your opponents' arguments and examples successfully to win. But in doing so, it is easy to stray away from what the debate motion lays out as a challenge to both teams.



Clash: An illustration

Motion: This House Would make voting in national elections compulsory.

In debates on this motion, data on voter turnouts in national elections across different countries will almost always emerge.

Proposition is likely to claim that voter turnouts in countries where voting is compulsory are higher than for those where it is not. Proposition might then conclude that compulsory voting will encourage higher voter turnout and promote greater interest in the political process.

On the other hand, Opposition might suggest that Proposition's statistics are false. Opposition might offer many examples in response. Opposition might even challenge Proposition on the question on the methods used in collecting data that links compulsory voting with higher turnouts of votes on Election Day.

If the debate begins as such, both teams will end up fighting over a load of examples to try and show that they can bring more people to vote on Election Day. But the clash in the motion would have been totally missed.

Why so? The real clash in the debate is one of principle.

Proposition's principle is that voting is a civic duty we owe to our community because we have benefited from effective government policies that have brought us peace and stability.

Opposition's principle is that democracy is about maximising our ability to make choices and this extends to whether we want to vote or not.

Voter turnout is just one of many possible sources of evidence that both sides could draw on. But proving that voter turnout will increase, or decrease, will not help unless you do two things:

(A) Link it to a core principle that your side stands for; and

(B) Justify the importance of the core principle you are meant to defend.

We could have the debate about voter turnouts that I mentioned. But it strays very far away from the intentions of the people who set the motion **AND** the judges in the debate. It is also likely to leave the debaters **AND** the audience with a sense of disappointment.

Hence, it is far better to recognise the clash in the debate and focus your arguments around it. Finding the clash also allows you to find many **relevant** arguments for your side. You can also predict the strongest grounds your opponents could rest their case on.



Is finding the clash all I need?

NO. I think teams should use strong examples or data from the material they read. But research should not be the **ONLY** thing you pay attention to in preparing.

Anecdote Time

This was a lesson I learnt at great cost myself.

When I started out on long-preparation debates in secondary school, I always tried to read as many articles and books as I could about a motion. I did this often without thinking about the fundamental ideas that lay at the heart of everything I was hastily trying to read.

While I could remember many examples and ideas after reading, I often did not know where exactly to use them in a debate. That was time used inefficiently. **Don't do this.**



What else do I need?

You cannot start building an argument with an example. You need an idea or principle to do that.
Remember three words: ARGUMENTS BEFORE EXAMPLES.

Arguments before examples: An illustration

Motion: This House Believes That Governments should pay parents to have children.

Let's say we were Proposition for this debate. Here is an example we might use:

Singapore has experienced low total fertility rates since the mid-1970s.

If we were in Proposition, we might make the argument below:

Governments should pay parents to have children because this will improve the quality of life of children in society.

- If governments pay parents to have children, parents will have more money to take care of their children as they grow up.
- This means parents can afford to spend more on the education and healthcare needs of their children.
- Such greater spending is likely to improve the quality of life for such children both in their growing years and when they become adults.
- Since we all want our children to have the best possible shot at life, governments should pay parents to have children.



Arguments before examples: An illustration

The earlier example appears relevant to the debate motion here. But we can use it *only* if it fits within the ideas or principles we have come up with.

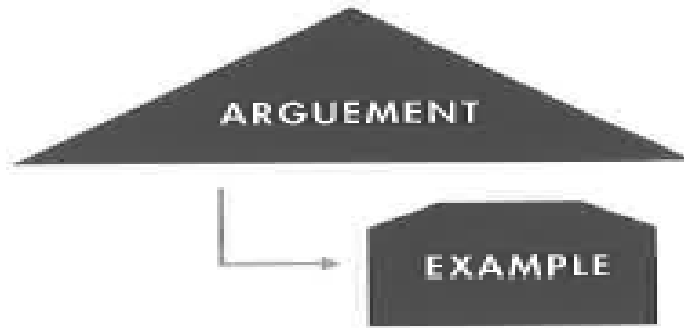
Since the abovementioned example falls *outside* the scope of the ideas we have thought of, we must think of new ideas which can accommodate it.

What idea could we use here? Perhaps we could argue that governments should pay parents to have children because this will encourage more people to have more children. If we use this idea, the abovementioned example becomes relevant.

See the diagram below for visual reinforcement:

Arguments before examples: An illustration

See the diagram below for visual reinforcement:



This point deserves to be emphasised.

Once you start the huge load of reading on current affairs that many debaters have come to enjoy, it is tempting to think that a debate is just about citing some examples you have read.

It is not. It never will be.

How can I use this to prepare?

With a week to prepare for a motion, teams should begin by brainstorming ideas for their case on their own, without access to research material. This creates the space to think of your own ideas and keeps debate preparation fun.

It also lets you take a fresh look at a debate motion, especially one which is considered an old topic, or a 'chestnut' as such debate topics are affectionately termed. Examples of 'chestnut' topics include whether the death penalty should be abolished.

Ideally, you should brainstorm and come up with some basic arguments within an hour, then try to spar another team (usually from your own school) on the motion so your ideas can be tested quickly in the setting of a competitive debate and then get a sense of areas you can improve or be cautious about subsequently.



Thank you!
