

# Refutation: Disputing Definitions

**O**NE OF THE FIRST THINGS you may want to disagree with in a debate, is the Affirmative's definition of the resolution. An Affirmative team has the right to define the resolution, but they also have a responsibility to define it fairly and reasonable. Consequently, the Negative team is entitled to dispute all or any definitions that they consider unfair or unreasonable.

The actual moment at which the Negative team raises its objections to an Affirmative definition varies according to the type and style of debate. In bilingual debates, any dispute about definition takes place at the very beginning, before the first Affirmative constructive speech. These disputes are settled by the moderator. In unilingual debates, there is more variety. The rules of some parliamentary tournaments allow the opposition to interrupt the Prime Minister's first speech on a point of order, make their challenge to the definition immediately and have it ruled on by the speaker. Alternatively, the first opposition speaker may dispute the definition during his first address and the speaker may rule on it then. In most Academic and Cross-Examination debates, the moderators stay out of these arguments, requiring the teams to dispute the terms of the definition within their speeches. In any event, challenges must be made before the end of the first negative speech. Before the debate begins, make sure you know when you should make any challenge (when the moderator asks "Are there any questions regarding the rules?"). By simply asking this question, you may discourage the Affirmative from sneaking in an unfair definition.

When deciding whether or not to challenge a definition, bear in mind:

1. Affirmative teams may be tempted to define terms in such a way as to make their task easier.

a) They may overstate or undervalue key terms of the resolution such as "good", "success", or "failure". For example, in the resolution "The modern Olympic games are a failure", the Affirmative could win more easily if a "failure" was interpreted as "not achieving all of one's goals" rather than "one's major objectives" and if this interpretation was accepted by the negative.

b) They may result to tautologies. For example, "Is Canada a great nation?" would become tautologous if "Canada" is defined as "the great nation in which we live" (A equals A).

c) They may be vague or unclear, either deliberately or accidentally. A vague definition allows the Affirmative to shift their position during the debate in response to your attack. For example, with the question "Should the U.S. take military action against countries that harbour terrorists?", they might define "military action" as "an undertaking by the armed forces". This sounds reasonable, but in reality is rather broad and unspecific. It could include anything from nuclear devastation to the dropping of propaganda leaflets from B-52's. In policy debates a vague definition is sometimes accompanied by an equally vague plan. An inexperienced Affirmative team may hope to win the debate by stressing the obvious problem, or the need to punish terrorists and their supporters, and avoiding the difficult issue of how this would be done. When the Negative points out the disadvantages in nuclear attacks, invasions, or large commando raids, the Affirmative retreats, claiming "that is not what they meant:.

Towards the end of such a debate, the Affirmative reveals a more moderate interpretation of “military action”, suggesting that “naval blockades” or intercepting airliners carrying known terrorists” is the sort of thing they had in mind.

An Affirmative team is unlikely to win with such an approach, but may succeed in frustrating the Negative. In Cross-Examination debates, the first question period is an excellent opportunity to pin down exactly what is within and what is outside of the Affirmative’s definition.

d) They may squirrel, that is, interpret the resolution in a deliberately unusual way just to make things difficult for you. For example, “Teachers should have the right to strike” means “Teachers should be allowed to administer corporal punishment”. although some latitude is allowed in impromptu debating, squirreling is widely frowned upon. Included here would be definitions that take a too literal approach to metaphorical statements. With “A stitch in time saves nine”, one cannot define “stitch”, “time” and “nine” independently, with no regard to the context.

e) They may define a term too narrowly. For example, with “Cartoons are detrimental to society” they might define cartoons as “animated films”, hoping to discuss the violence in T.V. cartoons, while you might wish to make reference to the positive contributions of political cartoonists in the newspaper.

2. Judges are often bewildered and annoyed by debates that focus too much on questions of definition. If they expect a discussion of native rights, they will be disappointed by a debate that deals mainly with the true meaning of the word “better”. You should therefore accept definitions that do not significantly affect your chances of winning, even if they are not what you had expected. When preparing a debate, decide with your partner the sorts of definitions you can accept and try to anticipate likely

problems.

When challenging a definition, follow this procedure:

1. Restate the affirmative’s definition.
2. Explain which parts you disagree with.
3. Explain why (unclear, tautologous, etc.).
4. Explain how the debate will be affected by accepting this wrong definition.
5. Propose your own definition.
6. Support this on the basis of authority and/or common usage.
7. Explain how the debate will work better with your definition.
8. Restate a full definition of the whole resolution as it is acceptable to you team.

#### A sample challenge to a definition.

The resolution is that “The modern Olympic Games are a failure”. The Affirmative team has defined the resolution thus: the international athletic competitions, summer and winter, held every four years, with some interruptions, since 1896, have not achieved all of the goals of their founders.

The first Negative speech would begin: “Mister Moderator, the Affirmative has defined the resolution before us today as (see above). The negative must take issue with one key word in this definition: it is ‘all’. By defining a failure as something that occurs when all one’s goals are not met, the Affirmative is assigning to ‘failure’ a value that it simply does not possess. The effect of such a rigid definition of this term would be to render the Affirmative’s case much easier, and the Negative’s much harder, than seems the intent of the resolution. Accepting such a definition would mean that if the Affirmative could show that just one minor

objective of the games had not been achieved, while the vast majority of worthy goals had been met, then they would win the debate. And since no one would be foolish enough to pretend that the Olympics have been a completely unqualified success, there would be little for the negative team to argue.

Consequently, we propose what we consider a more reasonable and evenhanded definition of failure. A failure is an attempt that achieves less than half of its significant objectives.

Such a definition conforms with normal Canadian usage. For instance, a student in school or university who successfully solved nine out of ten problems on a math test, would not consider ninety percent a failing grade, but would have failed with forty-nine percent or less.

By accepting our definition, Mister Moderator, the debate will consist of an honest comparison of the strengths and weaknesses of the modern Olympics, where one team attempts to show that the disasters outweigh the triumphs, and viceversa. This, surely, is the intent of the resolution.

The resolution, then, means "The international athletic competitions, summer and winter, held every four years, with some interruptions, since 1896, have achieved less than half of the significant objectives of their founders."

This may sound somewhat detailed but it should. Refuting a definition can sometimes be crucial to winning the debate. Your attack on a definition should be as clear, specific, well-organized and substantiated as all other forms of refutation. This skill needs practice. To begin, try to prepare your own attack on each of the false definitions contained in number 1. b)-e) above.