

# Excerpted from Some Elements Of Debate

## Analysis

Having decided what sort of debate the resolution dictates, you must then analyse the resolution. Think through what it means. I suggest that you ask yourself the following questions in preparing to write your debate:

1. What do you understand the resolution to mean?
2. What is the reason for the resolution (if it is a proposition of policy)?
3. What are the consequences of the resolution?
4. What are the alternatives to the resolution (the consequences of not adopting it)?

Having decided what the resolution itself means, what do you therefore understand the *affirmative* case to mean?

What do you therefore understand the *negative* case to mean?

More analysis will be necessary later, when you assemble your arguments. For now, the understanding you have will enable you to research the topic. Note that all you must prove is that your plan succeeds at what it was designed to do. You do **not** need to answer the following arguments:

1. “The plan is **illegal or unconstitutional**.” Every policy debate considers two states of affairs - normally the difference between present conditions and a particular change to present conditions. In debating a policy resolution it is always assumed that if the affirmative plan is illegal or unconstitutional, the necessary changes to the existing system will be made so that such a plan will be legal and constitutional. (CSDF Rule 10) Debaters should not contest this point, though they may refer to it under “feasibility”.
2. “The **should** argument ...” Many debate resolutions contain the word “should”. (For example, “The Children’s Aid Society should be abolished.”) This wording does **not** allow the affirmative to argue that abolition doesn’t necessarily have to happen and that it merely ought to be done. The affirmative must argue that abolition take place. It is improper for the affirmative to rely on the word “should” to dilute the debate.

## Definitions

You now know what the resolution as a whole means; presently you must define any controversial terms.

Every word in a resolution may be of special significance and have an unusual meaning. For your preparation, you should consider the meaning of every word and whether there is a strategic advantage to be gained by an unusual definition. In the debate, however, only those words which you determine to be crucial to your argument or essential to the resolution should be defined in detail.

Rule 16 of the CSDF Rules provides that the judges will accept the definition that is “best supported by evidence and reasoning”. This means that if there is a disagreement about the meaning of certain words in the resolution, and if it makes a difference to the outcome of the debate, then the side whose definitions are best supported will win. Of course, those definitions which are “reasonable” require less support than unusual or unexpected definitions. (While debates seldom turn on the issue of definitions, you should always be prepared to deal with a dispute over them.)

There are no limits on how you define the resolution, as long as you can persuade the judges to accept the definitions you offer. It is unfair, however, to give yourself an advantage which is not inherent in the resolution by:

- (a) defining a **tautology** (defining the resolution so that it is logically true). For example, “All black ravens are black” is tautological because whatever “black ravens” means, the statement must necessarily be true. The same

logical offence is committed if a debater otherwise defines what he is trying to prove. So, “Canada will benefit from a continental energy pact” is a tautology if the government defines “continental energy pact” to mean “any energy-sharing agreement inherently advantageous to Canada”. The resolution then becomes “Canada will benefit from an energy pact inherently advantageous to Canada”. It is appropriate to argue that in fact, any of the proposed energy-sharing agreements with the United States would be advantageous to Canada and therefore Canada should enter a continental energy pact. But you must reach this conclusion as a result of argument, not definition.

(b) Defining a **truism** (defining the resolution so that it is a statement of unarguable physical fact). For example, “No one lives forever” is true *as a matter of fact*. Similarly, it does get dark at night, people may be killed in war, and resolutions which do no more than argue the truth of these statements are unfairly defined. So it is unfair to define the resolution “Women are better than men” to mean “better able to bear children” because this is true as a matter of fact. Similarly it is unfair to define “Canadian TV is better than American TV” so that “better” means “has more Canadian content”. It is appropriate to argue that the more Canadian content, the better the TV programming, but one cannot achieve that result simply by definition.

(c) **Defining away an absolute term** of the resolution (defining the resolution so that a statement of certainty is reduced to a statement of probability). For example, “All men are stupid” cannot be defined to mean “There are a lot of stupid men”, nor can “The Insanity Defence be abolished” be defined to mean “The Insanity Defence should be limited.” If the resolution uses “all”, “always”, “none”, “never”, “abolished” or other absolute words, substituting “most”, “some”, “rarely”, “occasionally”, “usually” or “limited” for them is unfair.

On the other hand, the definition does **not** have to include anything more than is in the resolution. The resolution “The book, *1984*, is wrong” does not have to mean that every single statement in the book is wrong; it is enough to prove the book as a whole to be wrong. Similarly, “All men are stupid” must mean “All men” but it doesn’t require that they behave stupidly all the time or in every respect. “Unemployment is the most serious problem facing Canada” must mean “more serious than every other problem” but it needn’t be “more serious in every province than every other problem”; it is enough if it is true for the country as a whole.

### Strategy

Three strategic considerations arise, namely:

#### 1. Which terms should be defined?

Define in detail only those terms that are crucial to the resolution as a whole or to the case that you are making. Do not define obvious or trivial words unless they are relevant to the argument you present as defined. So, for example, the resolution “A woman’s place is in the home” may be defined with special emphasis on the word “a”. (If this is defined in the singular sense, the affirmative could argue that “one” woman’s place is in the home; such a life is not for everyone, but it is right for some women; in other words, a woman who wants to remain at home should be allowed to do so.) Because this strategy turns on the word “a”, that term should be defined; otherwise, no definition would be appropriate. Terms such as “Canada”, “this province”, “this House” and “the” are other examples of words which will only rarely be defined. Time spent on definition may be necessary for strategic reasons but otherwise it is wasted time.

**Caveat:** You should at least paraphrase the entire resolution if you do not define all of the terms in it. If the affirmative fails to define terms in the resolution “expressly or by clear implication”, under CSDF Rule 17 the negative has the right to impose any reasonable definition it wants for terms not defined by the affirmative, and the affirmative then has to prove the resolution as re-defined.

#### 2. How should terms be defined?

a. If there has not yet been a definition, you should first identify the key words in the resolution, define them, and then conclude with a paraphrase of the definition which is short and clear. There are several different means of defining key words:

i. Substitute a synonym or formal meaning for a resolution term (either one of your own or from a dictionary or other source). Remember that words have specific meanings depending on how they are used and if you are debating a legal subject, for example, the meaning given in the *Criminal Code* may be more relevant than that

used in an ordinary dictionary. Similarly, medical terms may require resort to medical dictionaries and so forth.

ii. Exclude what you don't mean. For example, "When we speak of retraining the unemployed, we don't include those who are unemployed for fewer than three weeks."

iii. Use an analogy, example or comparison. For example, "Coal mining is no longer in much demand and if an unemployed coal miner is to get work, he may have to learn new skills."

You may employ different means for defining different terms of the resolution, or you may use the same means of definition. The important thing is to produce a paraphrase of the resolution which is immediately understandable by your audience and can be easily referred to throughout the debate. "Canada should enter a continental energy-sharing arrangement" is not as clear as "Canada and the United States should share their energy."

b. If the immediately preceding debater has defined the resolution, you should then begin your remarks with either of the following:

i. "We agree that the resolution means ..." (and paraphrase it shortly in your own words). This prevents the other team from sneaking in an unusual definition, the significance of which is not made clear until the final speech. If the other team later tries to attach significance to a word defined in that way, your team can always rely upon its re-definition by paraphrase.

ii. "We reject the definition given by the debater who last spoke. We think that the resolution means ..." (It may be sufficient to simply re-define by paraphrase or it may be necessary to direct your attention to re-defining those key words *that are in dispute*. Except to the extent that a resolution is re-defined by paraphrase, never re-define individual words the definitions of which you accept.)

### 3. Challenging Definitions

Although you should always substitute your own paraphrase of the resolution to protect yourself, you should challenge opponents' definitions only if, because of their unfairness, they prevent you from making an argument you wished to make. If the definition is unfair (but so far as you are aware does not preclude you from making your arguments), content yourself with a comment such as, "We think that the definition is unfair, but we're not here to quibble over terms. For our purposes the resolution simply means ... (re-defining it by paraphrase)."

If the definition is unreasonable and *does* prevent you from making your argument, challenge it firmly. The judges must not be left wondering whether you accepted or rejected the definitions. Say "The affirmative definitions are wrong (or unfair, or unreasonable). The negative defines the word "continental" to mean ... (give your definition and source)." Provide some reasoning to support it, such as "If the word 'continental' simply meant 'all-Canadian', it would be unnecessary. Canada already has an energy policy that deals with domestic energy-sharing."

The purpose of defining the resolution is to provide a common limit to the arguments presented and to explain to the judges what ground the debate will cover and what the resolution means. The judges must not be in doubt as to what you are discussing.

You should therefore arrive at the debate prepared to define every key word (in case this proves necessary) and to paraphrase the resolution as a whole.

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