

# Coming to Grips with the Resolution

Many debaters have trouble coming to grips with a resolution, particularly if it contains a general philosophical statement, or a values statement. Let me suggest 3 strategies to solve that problem.

## 1. Yardstick cases

In any debate, of course, there will be reasons for and against the resolution. The difficulty occurs when the debate *just* becomes a list of reasons or a list of examples.

That is not very effective analysis, because the judge doesn't know how to weigh the case: do the three affirmative examples outweigh the two negative examples? Even if the examples or reasons chosen are good ones, it is difficult for a judge to assess their relative importance. All reasons are not equal. A debate is not won simply because your side has more reasons than my side; the judge also has to assess the importance of the different values. Elections are expensive, but the judge might still prefer them to no elections at all. So one reason — democracy — may outweigh another reason — cost.

I call these “yardstick” cases, because the affirmative, to advance the debate, needs to offer the judge a yardstick by which to measure whether the value is desirable or the change should be made. You know if the affirmative team failed to do this, because the debate simply becomes a list of reasons.

Consider the resolution that we should lower the voting age. The affirmative can simply produce a list of reasons in favour and the negative a list of reasons opposing. A better strategy is for the affirmative to identify a principle or a standard which the judge and audience can use in deciding whether to lower the voting age. It may be, “Are 16 year olds responsible enough to choose their political leaders?”

While this could be a good debate, it really just re-states the resolution. It doesn't give us a yardstick for the judge. What do we mean by “responsible enough?” Unless the affirmative team comes out and answers that question, the debate can be pretty muddy. A major mistake made by high school debaters is not to define explicitly the yardstick which the judge should use in deciding the case.

When the resolution or your case statement requires the judge to assess something, you need to come right out and tell the judge how to do that.

You might say, “16 year olds are responsible enough, because they are as well educated as older voters, they are as concerned about politics as older voters and they are subject to taxes and legal penalties which are equivalent to those faced by older voters.” What you are saying is that “responsible enough” = educated, concerned, and subject to taxes and penalties.

This is not simply a question of substituting a dictionary definition. The words, “responsible enough” are an idea, and they do not appear anywhere in the resolution. What

you are trying to do is to give the judge a tool to decide when voting age should be lowered (or raised): that the age should be set based on education, concern and liability for taxes and penalties.

Two more points. This is something the negative or opposition can use as well as the affirmative. Either side can suggest what measurement the judge should use in assessing the competing arguments. While it is useful to introduce the idea at the beginning of the debate, sometimes it emerges only in the final rebuttals. Whenever it comes forward, if the measurement is reasonable, then it can often determine the debate.

Second, this is different than just listing the reasons your team will present (although in this particular example, this is the list). What you are doing is naming the characteristics that determine “responsibility”.

This distinction is important. A negative team can agree (for example) that sixteen year olds are as well educated as older voters, but disagree that education is an appropriate standard to decide responsibility. A debate which focuses on the measure used to decide the resolution is a very good debate indeed.

## 2. The fundamental question

Another technique for analysing a resolution is to identify a fundamental question, the answer to which requires the resolution to be decided in your favour.

For example, the resolution, “Marijuana be legalized.” There are a variety of questions, the answer to which might lead to a yes or a no to the resolution. Consider:

- Should alcohol, tobacco and marijuana be treated the same way?
- Has the prohibition against marijuana been effective?
- Would the legalization of marijuana cripple organized crime?
- Would marijuana offer the government an important source of revenue?

You will quickly see that these are quite different issues to consider, in deciding whether or not to legalize marijuana. In each case, what you are doing is giving the judge a yardstick to use in deciding how to award the debate.

Two important observations: naming a fundamental question does not end the debate. There is still lots of room for argument and disagreement over whether the legalization of marijuana would cripple organized crime, for example. And the choice of one question does not preclude the other team from settling on a different question. The negative will agree that legalizing marijuana would provide the government with revenue, but still argue against it. However, by using the device of a fundamental question, you focus the debate on one

specific issue which the judge can consider in depth.

Instead of weighing three or four reasons on each side (Is marijuana a gate-way drug? Is a criminal record too serious a punishment for this activity?) the judge focuses on one issue only. That can be to your disadvantage, of course. If you choose an issue (like revenue) which the judge thinks is less important than the issue chosen on the other side, you may make it easier for the judge to rule against you.

Because the same resolution may admit of a variety of different fundamental questions, the choice of question can determine the outcome of the debate.

Your task as a debater is to make the judges' task easier. For that reason, it is always effective if you can reduce the disagreement between the government and the opposition to essentially one issue. The government case could boil down to whether marijuana should be treated the same as alcohol and tobacco and the opposition case could boil down to whether there are good reasons historically, medically, or otherwise for treating the three substances differently. That kind of analysis makes it easier for the judge to group and consider the different reasons for and against, than if the judge just gets a list on each side.

## 3. Philosophical topics

At Deerfield (and in some university tournaments) we encounter philosophical topics: quite general statements or very open-ended ideas. "Can't buy me love", "Blood is thicker than water", "It is better to die on your feet than live on your knees" are three easy examples.

These all offer the same challenge identified: you need to come to grips with the topic in a way that makes it manageable for the judge and the opposition, and offers the judge a yardstick to determine whether you are right or not. A clear, focused debate is a good debate. The concrete is always better than the vague.

The first step is to identify the idea behind the resolution. There is no one "right" answer to this: what you are identifying is a debateable proposition that is suggested by the wording.

"Can't buy me love" might become a debate about dividing property on divorce. It might become a debate about internet music sharing. It might become a debate about the Liberal sponsorship scandal. It might become a debate about tax cuts for the rich.

But it can't be a debate about whether the platonic ideal of love set out by Greek philosophers transcends commercial value. That is an interesting idea, but your audience does not have the easy familiarity with the different classical works necessary for you to make that argument. And you have 5, 6 or 8 minutes to make your case. Leave that debate for the Ph D student in her thesis.

Even if you feel tempted to give it a try, remember that a good debate requires something substantial for both the government and the opposition to talk about. You have to frame the debate in a way that the opposition can mount a well-argued case in response to your points. Something that leaves them stammering will not produce a good debate. So what you present must be concrete, and there must be good arguments on both sides. If the arguments on the opposition side are not obvious, then you as government team must sketch for them possible arguments.

**You cannot debate a general statement of philosophy in a 10 minute speech.** You must find a way to put the issue into a concrete form. The concrete form you choose must also be easily debateable by the other side, and, whatever angle you choose to debate, remember the yardstick. If you are arguing against dividing property on divorce, give us a measurement for the judge. If you are arguing that the commercialization of the music industry has destroyed the previously high quality exemplified by the music of the 60's, you need to give the judge a means of assessing "the high quality exemplified by the music of the 60's". How does the judge know when the evidence establishes your point?

All three of these issues — yardstick cases, fundamental questions and philosophical topics have this in common: if you can offer the judge a means of evaluating the debate, and frame the debate in a concrete way, you will win. And you can use all three techniques, whether you are government or opposition.

Brian Casey  
May 2004

© Canadian Student Debating Federation.

This article may be freely reproduced provided appropriate acknowledgement is given