

Excerpted from Some Elements Of Debate

Material

You are now beginning to assemble your debate. You must answer two questions:

1. What are you trying to prove?
2. How are you going to prove it?

You should have an answer to the first question as a result of your analysis of the resolution. The second question may require further research.

A. Research

Two different sorts of debate research will from time to time be necessary:

1. Research to discover what arguments support your side of the resolution; and
2. Research to substantiate an argument you have already decided to make.

Topics of a general nature which require only knowledge you already have will not require the first type of research. Every debate in which you make a factual argument will require research of the second sort, although it may involve nothing more than finding a source, quotation or statistic to support an argument you already know to be sound.

When the purpose of your research is to find out about your topic, a wide number of sources may be consulted. Remember that your purpose is limited: you wish to find out generally about the topic, so that you can discuss it intelligently, and you wish to discover what the arguments for and against the resolution are, and what the strengths and weaknesses of each are.

Try to find a short magazine article that discusses the whole subject, or a lengthy newspaper article. Many libraries maintain clipping files which will solve your research problem. Books are normally too long; newspaper articles alone are normally too short. The fastest way to round out your knowledge once you have done some research will frequently be to speak to someone who knows your subject. If the resolution requires you to talk to an "expert", try to find someone who can come to a meeting with your team and speak knowledgeably on the subject. Any more detailed research strategy must depend on the particular topic you are researching.

B. How to make your Arguments

You now know enough about the topic to list all of the arguments for and against and to select your strongest arguments. The effect of the argument you make must be that you will win the debate if your arguments are accepted.

Proof is whatever tends to create belief. An argument is a way of structuring your proof to maximize your ability to create belief. Every argument takes this form:

- I. Statement
- II. Proof
- III. Conclusion.

Take the example earlier given, “That Canada enter a continental energy pact.” The affirmative case is that as an accident of nature, energy resources are unevenly divided between countries - Canada has more oil than it needs while the United States has more hydro-electric power than it needs. It would be a benefit to both countries (or at least Canada) if Canada entered a continental energy pact in which we shared those energy resources that we have an excess of and the U.S. did the same. The first part of the affirmative case might be structured as an argument in the following form:

Statement: “Canada has more petroleum energy than it needs.”

Proof: a. Canada has known reserves of 10.7 trillion barrels of oil.
(Cite source.)

b. Canada will require less than 6 trillion barrels of oil in the next sixty years. (Cite authority.)

c. Because of the development of alternate energy, no significant amount of oil will be needed in fifty years’ time. (Cite authority.)

Conclusion: “Canada has more oil than it needs.”

A similar approach might be used to show a shortage of hydro-electric power and a consequent benefit to Canadians if this resolution were passed.

Nature of Proof

If it is possible, your speech should contain arguments which are supported in different ways - some by the opinions of experts, some by objective facts. Every argument depends on its reasoning for its strength: the opinion or fact must logically lead to the conclusion you ask the audience to draw. It is not true that some arguments depend on reasoning and some on facts - an argument whose reasoning is unsound has no relevant content. (It is correct, however, that an argument will often be made simply by logically assembling the admitted facts. And in this case much of your debate will be spent showing the logical conclusion to be drawn from those assembled facts. We may call this an argument of “pure reasoning”.) An example of an argument that depends on admitted facts might be “Any sharing of energy will either benefit Canada or it will not. If it doesn’t benefit Canada, we should oppose it. If it does benefit Canada, the U.S. will oppose it. So the proposal is either detrimental or not feasible.”

An argument may be factually correct but logically wrong if the conclusion drawn cannot be deduced from the proof offered. (Another logical error occurs when your conclusion, even if true, is not relevant to the debate.) It is impossible to catalogue all the logical errors made in past debates; however, to help you avoid common errors, here are some examples. In each case, the conclusion drawn may be correct - the only objection is that the conclusion does not follow from the proof.

Sources

After you have determined which arguments you will make, you may need to do specific research to support the argument. You will be looking for a fact or opinion that supports an argument you already believe to be true. (You may already have found some while doing your primary research.)

Where you should look will depend on the support your argument requires. I recommend that you turn to *Canadian News Facts* for public affairs topics. *CNF* is an index of Canadian news stories and is therefore a quick way to reach relevant material. Dictionaries of quotations and magazine articles are also useful, depending on the nature of the support your argument requires.

Invention

Invention has an important part to play in a debate - and an imaginative debater who has a creative or

original approach to a resolution will do well. Such a debater is also able to craft examples that precisely illustrate the argument. Inventing facts, however, is always improper and is grounds for disqualification. Some debaters use invention as a substitute for research and that is always wrong.

CSDF Rule 15 states “... all assertions of fact by debaters must be accurate and debaters must be prepared to cite specific authority (publication, page, author, date, etc.) for all such assertions immediately upon being challenged to do so. ... Judges will penalize debaters severely for using inaccurate evidence and, if a judge is certain that a debater has deliberately fabricated or falsified evidence, he or she should report this to the Director as quickly as possible. The penalty for fabrication or falsification of evidence is disqualification from eligibility to win any prize or distinction ...”

If you have not done sufficient research (for whatever reason), you must rely on only generally accepted facts - you cannot invent an authority to support your argument, nor can you invent an apt statistic. This rule is fair: a debater who has done his research normally cannot disprove what you say. As the debate turns partly on the evidence presented, the debate would merely come down to which debater had the greatest powers of imagination, if falsified or fabricated information were permitted.

One exception to this rule is that debaters are allowed reasonable latitude in role-playing. (For example, a Prime Minister may brag about his party’s overwhelming success in “the recent election”.) As well, hypothetical examples are permitted

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