Lincoln Douglas Debate
By James Hoggatt

Lincoln Douglas debate has evolved over the last decade to be less of a simply philosophically minded debate about values into a hybrid that uses philosophical concepts paired with empirical and real world implications. This evolution has changed how many parts of a Lincoln Douglas debate functions and how an effective Lincoln Douglas Debater goes about writing his or her case and how that person debates.

The Case

1. The Pre-Case/Framework/Top of the Case
   a. Definitions:
      i. Choosing Definitions: Effective Definitions depend on the type of resolution that is being debated. The more complex the resolution, the more you should err to a definition coming from an organization that specializes in the field of study the resolution is about, and the less complex the more acceptable it is to use just academic dictionary definitions. If you immediately feel that there is more than one way to define a term in the resolution err to a definition from an organization. EX: the term “Deadly Force” is best defined by a legal group and not a dictionary definition of “Deadly” and “Force”.
      ii. What to Define: Define only terms that are necessary to be defined. Do not define terms simply because they are there. Define the ones that are contentious, can be interpreted different ways, or are at the heart of the resolution.
      iii. Respect a phrase: If a resolution makes use of a phrase as part of the resolution, always define the phrase, never the individual words inside of the phrase. As you know, phrasing changes everything.

   b. Observations:
      i. When to use them: Pre-case observations are primarily used to explain what the Aff/Neg must do in the resolution. Many times the resolution's wording can be difficult and thus some clarification of exactly what the Affirmative or Negative must uphold needs explanation to avoid abuse by the opposing side. Many times we assume the Negative must be the exact opposite of the Affirmative, when in reality the Negative is merely saying the Affirmative position is not valid—the Negative is not required to give an alternative worldview to replace the resolution. In many cases, this is an important distinction to make if the resolution leads heavily one way.
      ii. When to ignore them in round: Listen carefully to the resolution, as some debaters will try to use an observation as a way to abuse the other debater. If you hear an abusive observation, the debater should address the issue in his next speech, however; if you agree with it, do not waste your time.
c. **Value/Criterion**
   
i. **Value:** In the vast majority of rounds, the value plays little role in the total outcome of the debate itself. This is because the vast majority of values are inherently worthwhile concepts that can become endless debate about “which better morality or justice?” This type of debate is not really fulfilling nor is it predictable or skill-based. Instead, the value has become a way to frame the story the case will be telling. It is a kind of advertisement for what is come later in the contentions. The value should generally be something immediately good (Justice, Morality, etc) as well as related directly to the topic.

   ii. **Criterion:** The Criterion is where the majority of the philosophical debate takes place. The question of how to obtain the Values can fundamentally change the way a judge approaches voting for a debtor. A criterion needs to do two major things. 1) It needs to directly link to the value and needs to come with an explanation of how the criterion directly leads to the value of the case. 2) It needs to directly have an impact on the case story that the debater wishes to use. If a student is seeking to have a criterion of “Giving Citizens their Just Deserts” then that concept should permeate throughout the entirety of the case.

2. **Contentions:**
   
a. **What makes a strong contention?**
      
i. **A clear and effective argument:** An effective contention at its core is a solid Claim-Warrant-Impact structure that is relevant and connected to the Criterion and meets the theme of the Value.

   ii. **It is easily explainable in layman’s terms:** Needing to use extremely complex language and verbage makes a contention difficult to defend in fast paced cross-examination periods or in rebuttals. The idea can be complex, but it must be easily explainable in bite-sized responses.

   iii. **The Debater is comfortable with the argument:** A major mistake that is often made is a debater will debate something they do not feel comfortable with, disagree with fundamentally, or feel is weak. Just because one person can argue a point, does not mean that another debater can or should argue the position. We connect to different ideas on different levels and that fundamentally affects things like how believable or how passionate someone can be about a subject.

**The Round**

1. **Cross Examination**
   
a. **What to ask?**
      
i. **Clarification:** If you do not understand something, then ask. Even if you think that you may not understand something, then ask. Clarification questions are
there to make sure that you understand the important parts of your opponent’s case.

ii. **Offensive questions:** These questions are intended to make the opponent’s position and argumentation appear weak. These questions are primarily used to expose weak argumentation and structure in the case. **The most powerful word in cross-examination is WHY?** If you are not satisfied with the answer or if the answer is dodging the question, keep asking why. Many times debaters have not fully thought through their argumentation and your onslaught will force them to slip up. Knowing exactly why the opposing debater is arguing a position is the most powerful knowledge you can gain the round.

iii. **Defensive Questions:** These questions exist to ensure the opposing debater is not able to surprise you with an extremely unorthodox position. The most common defensive questions will be about thematic portions of the case from your value or your criterion. By getting the opponent to agree to some of the more obvious points of your case, you can almost seal up the Value/Criterion debate in cross-examination. The negative has an advantage in this respect, as they can ask questions before their case is revealed.

2. **Rebuttals:**
   
a. **Time Allocation:** In the prep time before your first rebuttal (this means the constructive for the negative) identify the key points in your opponent’s case and the key points in your case in a highlighter or some kind of symbol. Then divide the amount of time in the speech into the number of issues you need to cover. If your 3:00 speech needs to cover 6 issues, then you know you can only spend around :30 seconds on each issue, and you should watch your timer and stick as close to this as possible.

b. **Choosing arguments:** Do not attempt to answer every single point that your opponent makes. Prioritize the points based on their likelihood to win the round, and the damage they have done to your case. Choosing the dangerous arguments out of the plethora of comments and points your opponent has made will put you far ahead strategically.

c. **Voters:** In your final speech, list the arguments you feel you are winning and explain why that should sway your judge to vote for you. These will be the final things that are on the mind of the judge so make the time count. Without voters or “crystallization points” in your final speech you leave the judge guessing which arguments were truly important to you, and you fail to close out the story for the judge.

**Most importantly, remember that an LD Case and round is your chance to tell a moral story.** Never forget the ability to use your contentions and your evidence to form a powerful narrative on whatever your case is valuing. Do not be afraid to get riled up, emotional, passionate, or even sometimes angry—because many of the things we discuss in LD should make you feel all of those things.