The Basics of Debate

I. The Case:

Your case consists of the pre-written arguments you (and your partner, if in a team event) present in the opening speech (or speeches, in team events). Opening speeches are called “constructive” speeches, because they are where each side constructs their core arguments. Subsequent speeches are called “rebuttal” speeches, for obvious reasons.

Preparing a strong case is the most important part of tournament preparation. Contrary to what some believe, it is not the only step. Preparing strong rebuttals and cross-examination strategies is a must. But the case is the foundation, and it needs to be very strong. Here are the basic steps in writing a case:

1. Resolution Analysis:

The resolution is the focal point of debate. It is the goal line you must cross to win. Before you start writing a case, you must be clear on exactly what you are trying to prove or disprove. You need to carefully analyze every word of the resolution for potential advantages and weaknesses on both sides, AFF and NEG.

★TO BE CLEAR, we are debating a specifically worded resolution, not a general topic area. So, for example, knowing lots of information about nuclear proliferation is great, but it is useful only once you are able to link it to an argument for affirming or negating the whole resolution as worded.

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER RESOLUTIONS FOR 2013 ARE:

Lincoln Douglas: In a democracy, voting ought to be compulsory.
Novice LD: Resolved, civil disobedience in a democracy is morally justified.
Public Forum: Resolved, unilateral military force by the United States is justified to prevent nuclear proliferation.

You should start by sitting down with a legal pad, with the resolution written out word-for-word (NEVER paraphrase) at the top, and brainstorm definitions. For example, let’s consider “Resolved, in the United States, plea bargaining undermines the criminal justice system.”

- What are the key terms? Basically ask, what thing is being evaluated? And against what standard? Here “plea bargaining” is being evaluated against a standard of whether it “undermines criminal justice.”

- Any express limitations or qualifiers? Does the resolution specifically limit the scope of debate? In this example, the answer is yes: the resolution limits the scope of debate with the words “in the United States.” This means that arguments about plea bargaining in other countries are not relevant.

1 The side designations in LD (“AFF” and “NEG”) are used interchangeably in this document with the PF side designations (“PRO” and “CON”). Except where noted, anything you see about AFF applies to PRO, anything about NEG applies to CON, and vice versa.
• **Any implied limitations or qualifiers?** Sometimes, limitations may be implied in the phrasing of the resolution. For example, the tense of the words may limit the debate. If the resolution said that plea bargaining "has undermined" criminal justice, a team might justifiably argue that only contentions about the past effects – rather than likely future effects – are relevant.

• **Do the key terms have flexible or vague meanings?** Many debates are won and lost based on arguments about the meaning of words in the resolution. It is easy to see why: the resolution is the goal line. To win, the AFF/PRO team must prove it true. If, for example, an AFF/PRO team can successfully define the key term more narrowly, its burden of proof may be much easier. In other words, it may be able to move the goal line.

Another example, using another resolution: “Resolved: The United States is justified in using private military firms abroad to pursue its military objectives.” The AFF is trying to defend the use of “private military firms.” Most of the objections to the use of military contractors deal with armed mercenary companies, like Blackwater. But if the AFF can define “private military firms” to include, for example, private companies that provide computer support, construction services, and even laundry services to the military, many of those NEG arguments become much weaker.

So it is likely that the AFF will offer one definition of “private military firms,” the NEG will offer another, and the two will debate about which one is preferable. Consequently, *debating about definitions* is an important skill to develop.

• **Writing definitions for your case.** Every case you present will include definitions for key terms. These need to be tailored to the AFF and NEG positions to provide as favorable ground as possible, without being abusive. Abusive definitions are those that leave the other side with no real room to debate. You may use dictionary or other published definitions where appropriate, or you may look to specialized sources, like government regulations that contain definitions, or Black’s Law Dictionary. After you begin drafting your arguments, you may find yourself returning to revise your definitions to better fit the contentions.

2. Observations and Frameworks

In some instances, debaters will find it useful to offer one or two “observations” about the round and how it should be judged. Observations may help clarify the burden of proof, the scope of the debate, peripheral issues that are not in play. They are usually put immediately after definitions in the case.

For example, if the resolution is “Resolved, that the benefits post-9/11 security measures outweigh harms to personal freedoms,” the PRO team might say this:

"Let me first make one observation about the resolution. Because the resolution counterbalances two specific things, this debate is limited to whether benefits from post-9/11 security measures outweigh one specific harm—that is, the harm to personal freedom. Other considerations, like the financial cost of these measures, are excluded for purposes of today's debate."

You should be judicious in how you use observations and frameworks, however, because you are putting a big red flag on an idea, and possibly leaving yourself little room to escape later. Some things need to be said explicitly up front, but other ideas about framework can be woven into your case or even saved for rebuttal. Using the example above, you might decide that there is no need to flag your belief that
cost is irrelevant. Instead, you might just want to let the CON burn its time running cost arguments, if they choose, then come back in rebuttal and argue that cost is not relevant to this resolution.

Lincoln Douglas Note: Values and Criteria:

In Lincoln-Douglas debate, the proposed standards for judging the round are stated explicitly up front, in two steps. This happens in virtually every round and almost always follows the same two-step pattern. First, each debater will identify a value that they contend is the ultimate good we should seek to uphold. For example, an AFF debater may say: “My value for this round is that of justice, which is defined by the Dictionary of Philosophy as giving every person what they are due.” Translated, this means: “The winner of this round should be whichever side better upholds the value of justice, which means giving each person their due.”

Second, each debater will identify a criterion (or a value-criterion), which they contend is the standard (i.e., the measuring stick) the judge should use to determine who best achieves the value.

For an example, let’s return to the sample resolution above: “Resolved, in the United States, plea bargaining undermines the criminal justice system.” The AFF offers the value of justice, and then says, “My criterion for achieving justice is Kant’s Categorical Imperative, which holds that an action is just only if it could be generalized to provide a universal maxim for action in all similar circumstances.”

Let’s translate: “The way you decide who better upholds justice is to look to a theory from a guy named Immanuel Kant called the ‘Categorical Imperative’. The categorical imperative basically says that an action is just if you could make it into a universal rule for action in all similar cases. I’m going to show you that plea bargains don’t meet that standard, so you should affirm the resolution.” In short, the value and criteria are two links in a chain that connects EVIDENCE and WARRANTS (more on those later) to SIGN YOUR BALLOT FOR ME. To illustrate:

Evidence/Warrants → Claims/Arguments → Criterion → Value → BALLOT FOR ME.

One caveat: it is critical to address your opponent’s value and criterion in every round. We have observed, however, that much of the debating about values and criteria is hopelessly vague and thus not useful for the judge. So it will be imperative that you learn how to argue about the standards that govern the round and how to link them, in practical terms to the arguments made in the debate. In other words, do not let your philosophy (or worse, your opponent’s) become detached from practical reality.

3. Contentions

Contentions are the major arguments advanced in your case and take up the bulk of your time in constructive speeches. In LD, main arguments are called “contentions”. In public forum, some teams call them contentions, but some find this too formal or stuffy, and call them “arguments” or simply “points.” The choice is yours; just be sure to remain consistent in whatever you use.

Sub-arguments under contentions are sometimes called subpoints, primarily by LD debaters. They will explicitly state: “Subpoint A: Animals have the same capacity to suffer as humans.” PF debaters tend to simply read their sub-arguments and not flag them with any particular terminology (although they are clearly laid out in the written case).

You should devote a great deal of time to drafting these main arguments, as they are the ground upon which most debates are won and lost. Many new debaters are sloppy in writing contentions, spending lots of time on peripheral points and relatively little on points that will decide the round.
The single most important word to remember in drafting your contentions is **impacts**. Impacts are tangible, real world consequences of voting for or against your side, as opposed to abstract or theoretical ideas. Most judges would prefer not to sit in a classroom for an hour after a round ends pondering abstractions like “Rawlsian Justice,” will thus give their ballot to the debater who gives them simple, concrete reasons why he should win.

Impacts typically look something like this:

- Withdrawing from Afghanistan would cause a return to infant mortality rates that would kill 30,000 children per year.
- Doing away with plea bargaining would result in a five-fold increase in court dockets, keeping innocent people in jail for up to ten years before trial.
- Banning offshore drilling would cost the Gulf South region 100,000 jobs.

Assuming you can carry these arguments to the end, the judge now has something clear and concrete to base her decision on. Rather than think about abstract concepts, she thinks, “Well, the PRO team cited evidence that 30,000 children a year will die if we withdraw U.N. forces and the CON never really refuted that. 30,000 deaths is a really bad thing, so I guess I have to vote for the PRO.”

In LD, many judges will expect strong philosophical justifications to go with your impacts. They may be somewhat more inclined to buy more abstract arguments like “War dehumanizes women.” This does not mean you abandon practical impacts. Most judges want a – at most – a mixture of philosophy and practical application, so in LD, you need to work to provide both, and to link your philosophy to your practical impacts.

### 4. Core Theory

A core theory is not something you actually write into your case. You don’t say aloud in a round, “My core theory today is …. Most debate coaches don’t even teach it. And yet it is arguably the single most important part of your case. So what is it?

Your core theory is your entire in-case argument boiled down to two or three powerful sentences. It should be direct, impactful and straightforward. You should be able to recite it from memory – because even though you’ll never say “My core theory is …,” you will use the ideas in your core theory in every speech you give.

You should devote more time to developing your core theory than to any other part of your case. Give careful thought to what your strongest arguments are, what the likely counterarguments are, and how to preempt them. Here is an example of a core theory for the AFF on the resolution, “Resolved: Justice requires the recognition of animal rights.”

The first principle of justice is that we should not make others worse off for our own benefit. Billions of animals, many of whom have roughly the intelligence of a two year old child, suffer horribly in factory farms and research facilities around the world. While we can’t give them full human rights like voting and owning property, justice and basic morality demand that we not make them worse off than they would be in nature. And that requires recognition of a universal right against cruel treatment.
Again, no one will ask you “What is your core theory?” Learning to develop them is critical, however, as they will give you a lodestar for where your case needs to go in rebuttal, what you need to get in cross examination, how you need to crystalize the round at the end, etc.

5. Evidence

What is evidence? Evidence is any piece of information that makes your position stronger. Regrettably, many debaters, especially Lincoln Douglas debaters, tend to think of evidence in very narrow terms—usually, as block quotes from philosophers, economists, or other academics. The standard debate term for this kind of evidence is “cards”. The term comes from the old practice of copying these quotes onto index cards and carrying them into rounds in a file box.

We still use “carded” evidence today, although we generally store it on laptops or print it in tabbed binders. For better or for worse, some judges still swear by published quotes from academics. But they are only one part of your arsenal of evidence.

Depending on the resolution, you’ll also use things like statistics, news stories, opinion polls, historical parallels, economic data, medical or other scientific data, etc. Ask yourself, if I had to persuade someone to make a real decision with real importance outside a debate round – say, persuading a representative to support legislation – would I rely solely on quotes from academics, or would I want to incorporate a broader array of authorities? I think you know the answer.

How much evidence do I need? You need enough to support the claim. With most judges, you don’t get bonus points for reading quotes, statistics, or any other kind of evidence. Evidence matters only to the extent that it helps fill in the logical chain from your claims to “BALLOT FOR ME.” Now that you mention it, this might be a good time to talk about…

6. The Structure of Logical Arguments

Memorize the following. Tattoo it on the back of your arm if you have to:

Claim $\rightarrow$ Warrant $\rightarrow$ Impact

This is the basic structure of arguments in debate. The particular words used here aren’t magical, but they are the terms used by most debaters and experienced judges, so it pays to understand them.

The claim is the initial assertion of fact or value. By itself, it’s just an assertion without any evidence to back it up. Examples of claims are: “Plea bargaining results in more innocent people being punished,” or “Private military contractors save taxpayers money.” Typically, the labels of your contentions will be claims. For example. “Contention 1: Plea bargains result in more innocent people being punished.”

The warrant is the evidence and/or other logical support for the claim. Why do we say “warrant” as opposed to just “evidence,” “support” or “reason”? It’s a long story. But basically, “warrant” is the big umbrella word that encompasses all types of evidence, analysis, support and other reasons. We actually recommend using common sense terms like these in most rounds, but you need to know that they’re all subspecies of “warrants.”

An example of a warrant for the claim that plea bargaining results in innocent people being punished: “According to a Columbia University study from May 2012, quote, ‘Plea bargaining gives prosecutors powerful leverage to persuade even innocent defendants to accept some prison time, as even a small risk
of a false conviction and years in prison often is considered worse than the certainty of a short jail sentence.”

As discussed above, the impact is where you make it clear what the (claim + warrant) means for the debate. Ideally, it will be clear, like lost lives or economic cost. But in many cases, it will require some explanation. To continue the example, you might argue: “In short, America’s plea bargaining system all but ensures the innocent are punished by letting them take a little jail time to avoid the risk of a lot. Justice demands giving each person what they are due. Consequently, a system that just averages things out and gives everyone a little punishment – regardless of actual guilt or innocence – cannot be just.”

Thus the syllogism would run:

- **CLAIM**: Plea bargains punish the innocent.
  - **WARRANT**: Columbia 2012 evidence shows prosecutors can pressure everyone.
  - **IMPACT**: Plea bargaining can’t be just, as it punishes innocent people rather than giving each person what s/he is due.

There are endless permutations of this basic structure. Some involve complex warrants, multiple warrants, multiple impacts, etc. Some are short, some are long. Some are intuitive; some seem odd at first glance. But regardless, this is the basic structure that virtually all main arguments take.

### II. Rebuttal

We will talk briefly about rebuttals. This is an area in which you absolutely must learn by doing. But there are a few key points to keep in mind as you wade into the waters of rebuttal speeches and debate in general.

1. **Rebuttals are all about preparation.**

   So many debaters believe that all – or at least the vast majority – of their preparation comes from writing the case. They expect to read the case, and then just overwhelm their opponents with the sheer force of their staggering intellect and impromptu speaking skill.

   This is just lazy and dumb. You will be able to anticipate the vast majority of potential arguments your opponents may throw at you. Why would you walk into the round banking on your ability to craft a rebuttal in 15 seconds, when you could have written an iron-clad response in 15 minutes earlier in the week?

   This is why, in drafting briefs on each topic, we create charts with likely arguments and stock rebuttals. You will participate in drafting these rebuttals and you will be responsible for knowing what they are and where to find them quickly in the round. They will not prepare you for everything, but they will make your job much easier on certain arguments, freeing up time to deal with everything else.

2. **You have to master the flow.**

   As you may know, the flow is the specialized outline used by debaters to keep track of all the arguments in play as they progress through the various speeches. It is absolutely imperative that you develop strong
skills for flowing a debate. You cannot win tough rounds without a clear inventory of exactly what your opponent is arguing and what has been said in response.

Flowing is a matter of concentration and discipline. You must learn to tune out all distractions and focus on the words from your opponent. Don’t let a fast delivery get you flustered; if you miss something, you can use cross examination to fill in the gaps. Flowing is something you master only through practice. So in addition to regular practice debates, consider flowing some of the many rounds available on Youtube.

3. **Time management and discipline is key.**

Obviously, time is limited in all debate events. That’s why people tend to talk so fast. Most novice debaters tend to have one bad habit in common – bad time management. They will focus on one or two arguments, letting the others fall by the wayside until only a few precious seconds remain and they have to try to cram in responses but can’t.

Here again, the solution is practice. Think in advance about what has to be covered and how much time you have. For example, if you are the second speaker on a PF team giving the second constructive, you probably have about 4 points on your side and 4 points on their side that merit attention. The speech is 4 minutes long, so at absolute most, that’s 30 seconds per point. You must resist the temptation to spend a full minute on the first point. A few extra seconds, maybe; a minute, no. Say it the best you can and move on.

Together, (1) advance preparation, (2) strong flowing and (3) time management will make you a strong, well organized debater in rebuttal speeches.

**III. General Principles**

Finally, here are some general words of advice from many years of debating. Keep them in mind throughout your preparation. If they seem cryptic now, hopefully time and experience will make their meaning clear to you.

1. **Strong cases win rounds.**

The simplest lesson is the first: You beat opponents by hitting them over the head (metaphorically speaking) with more and bigger impacts than they can respond to. The key word here is “impacts.” As discussed above, impacts are **concrete reasons why your side makes the world a better place**. Your case should be chock full of them.

Why? Because judges want an easy way out. They want to decide the round based on concrete things like deaths, innocent people in jail, and lost jobs. In LD, they probably want some strong, clear philosophy mixed in for good measure. But regardless of the event or the resolution, they want an easy way to weigh the round so they can go back to the judge’s lounge and get some more free food.

About 80-90% of rounds, give or take, will go to the team with stronger impacts (as opposed to, say, the better spoken team). This is why we say that strong cases win rounds.

2. **Strong fundamentals win tournaments.**

Winning a round is about beating one opponent with impacts. Winning a tournament is about beating many opponents in a row. You will not be able to flummox every opponent with your brilliant case, and
some will have cases that will flummox you — if you are unprepared. You will be in close rounds (against strong opponents) that will come down to who makes fewer mistakes under pressure.

This is where debate fundamentals come in. Fundamentals are sound practices that you commit to memory and never stray from. In basketball, for example, they are things like moving your feet on defense and following your shot. In debate, fundamentals are the things discussed in this handout — things like covering the entire flow, managing your time, effectively addressing dropped arguments, and summarizing voting issues effectively. The most important fundamental is excellent preparation before the tournament.

The point is this: when you find yourself doing reasonably well, but unable to get over a threshold — say, making it to break rounds but not advancing — ask yourself what you can do to improve your fundamentals.

3. **Speak from a full head.**

   The more you know, the better. This is true, both of topic-specific knowledge and general knowledge. If you know only what is written in your case, your options for rebutting your opponent’s case are severely limited. The best debaters are people who are interested in politics, economics, social issues, etc., and read about them even when not strictly required for case preparation.

4. **Say it simply and directly.**

   Some debaters hide behind big words and phrases, which they believe makes them sound smarter. Between two bad debaters, the one with bigger words might win. But against better opponents, overly elaborate language just makes you sound pretentious. You don’t have to dumb your arguments down; just say them simply and directly. Judges will reward you if they like you, and most people prefer humble, plain-spoken folks with a sense of humor over teenage know-it-alls.

5. **Get rid of the crutches.**

   Even very strong speakers can get shaken by the pressure of having to cover lots of ground in a short rebuttal. Most revert to using verbal crutches that allow them to spit out ideas quickly. They allow themselves to do this because they believe — incorrectly — that there just isn’t time to phrase the argument well.

   The most common crutch is excessive use of debate jargon. There is a fine line between acceptable use of debate terminology and excessive use. It will vary by judge and by tournament. It will take some time for you to learn how to gauge where the line is. But in general, unless the judge makes it clear he or she is an experienced debater or judge, you should err on the side of using common language over jargon.

   Other crutches include the use of filler terms. Basically, your brain is ready to move to another point, but your mouth isn’t quite there, so you throw in some pointless phrase like, “And so it can be seen that ….,” or just “ummmm …”. It takes work to remove these from your debate vocabulary, but it benefits you in two ways. First, you seem more professional and polished. Second, you use your time more efficiently because you’re not wasting it on pointless verbiage.

6. **No jargon goes unchallenged.**

   As noted above, one of the most common mistakes that all debaters make is to confuse big words with good arguments. Debaters often wield complex ideas in rounds without really understanding what they
mean or how to use them. As former debaters, it is frustrating for us to watch as opponents just let these half-explained ideas slip by without forcing the proponent to explain or defend them.

Put simply: **Never be afraid to ask, “Why does that matter?” or “So what?”** And always make your opponent pay if he does not have a good answer.

For example, say you’re in LD, debating the resolution, “Resolved, that universal access to health care is a moral imperative.” Your opponent argues that the AFF wins because it upholds Rawlsian Justice, which according to some professor, is the best kind of justice. You could just let that go, and watch your opponent come back in rebuttal and say something like “My opponent never disputed that I uphold Rawlsian Justice, which …” blah, blah, blah. Or you could use cross-examination to do something like this (nicely, as always):

Q. “What does Rawlsian Justice require?”
A. “Well, according to Professor Smith…”
Q. “No, I’m not asking for what some professor said. I’m asking you, in your own words, what do we have to do to achieve Rawlsian Justice?”
A. “Well, we have to utilize the notion of the Veil of Ignorance.”
Q. “What is the Veil of Ignorance?”
A. “Well, it means that you have to make all your decisions about social welfare from a position of not knowing your place in society.”
Q. “And why does that support the Affirmative in this debate?”
A. “Well, if you didn’t know your place in society, you would always choose what is best for the least advantaged. So you would provide health care for the least advantaged.”
Q. “So you would redistribute resources until the least advantaged person had the same as the most advantaged person?”
A. “Well, not exactly…”
Q. “What if redistribution caused the whole economy to collapse because people stopped producing goods and services?”
A: “That’s not going to happen.”
Q. “Well, historically, haven’t efforts at equalizing economic outcomes sometimes gone too far and actually caused economies to collapse? Like in Soviet Russia and Cuba and Maoist China?”
A. “Yes, but you wouldn’t go that far.”
Q. “How would you decide where to stop?”
A. “I mean, if it was going to cause society to collapse, you’d stop.”
Q. “So you agree that we put limits on Rawlsian justice based on what’s good for society as a whole, then?”
A. “Sure, I guess.”

You’re now in a great position to win the standards debate because you challenged your opponent’s understanding of jargon—in this case, “Rawlsian Justice.” His argument sounded good on the surface, but when you began probing, you found the weak link—here, that Rawlsian Justice (arguably) requires total redistribution, which can’t possibly be a universal moral mandate.
7. **Make your free throws.**

Sorry about the sports analogies, if you’re not a fan. This one just means: don’t focus so intently on the hard points in a debate that you forget to win the easy points. The most obvious example: the dropped argument. If your case is well-written, your opponent will almost never have time to effectively address all your contentions. Arguments that are not addressed are said to be “dropped,” in debate-speak. You must always take full advantage of the dropped argument. In your final rebuttal, you must be able to (1) identify the argument; (2) explain that your opponent failed to address it; and (3) explain the impact on the round.

Most debaters, if they address drops at all, just stumble through a few sentences like, “Um, my opponent dropped my second contention about the cost of military intervention … so, uh, that argument clearly flows to the affirmative.” I mean, really? “That argument clearly flows to the affirmative”? That’s your pitch to close the deal?

You must do better than that. You should practice a simple verbal template for summarizing dropped (or poorly argued) points. It should sound something like this:

“Now if you look at your outline, you’ll notice my opponent dropped my second contention, which was ______________. And that’s important because in debate, it’s not the judge’s job to answer arguments for the debaters. Also, the rules prevent him from coming back in his final speech and making new arguments I don’t get a chance to answer. So you can treat that argument as conclusively true in this debate. And that gives you a clear cut reason to vote for the Affirmative because __________.”

Getting this right takes discipline and practice. You have to make yourself identify the dropped (or under-argued) points, put them in your rebuttal outline, hit them succinctly, and explain why they help you win the round. But if you do this right, it will win you a close round every other tournament or so.

8. **Starting strong is not enough; you must close the deal.**

Many debaters start strong with well-written cases, but by the end of their final rebuttal, they have let things degenerate into a sputtering mess. They toss out whatever thought is next on their outline without any effort to crystallize the issues for the judge. Don’t let this be you. The last impression is just as important as the first. At the end of a round, the judge has lots of ideas in his or her head, and is looking for a clear, well-articulated reason to give one team the win. You must (1) practice your rebuttals, (2) manage your time, (3) avoid the temptation to try to address every possible point, and above all (4) keep cool.

★**Remember:** anyone can read a good case, but only the best debaters deliver memorable rebuttals.