"MAKING THE CASE"

TIPS FOR AFFIRMATIVE CASE CONSTRUCTION

by
Justin D. Walton

Some Tips for Affirmative Case Construction

The most consequential decision made by a debate team is determining the argumentative substance of the first affirmative case. Forced to preserve its resolutional trajectory, affirmatives are pushed, pulled, bruised, and pounded in a contested defense of their policy recommendation. This antagonistic "tug-of-war" is the essence of oral argumentation; the affirmative will propose—the negative will attack—the affirmative must defend. More times than not, affirmative case defense is adjudicated with standards of precision, clarity, organization, and analytical soundness. With the burden of commencing and concluding the debate, it is eminently important that affirmatives communicate the case's philosophy and theme in a clear and unequivocal manner. Such clarity contributes to the credibility and general persuasiveness of the affirmative's rationale.

Unfortunately, affirmatives often overlook the importance of good case construction in favor of "THE IMPACT CARD" within case. Rather than allowing the case to make a composite argument, affirmatives force specific forms of support to "make the case." Furthermore, due to inexperience and/or lack of detail, affirmatives often design their cases as evidence-driven jigsaw puzzles—jumbled, disorganized sets of cards that "somehow" justify a win. Such techniques are inappropriate and unacceptable for students of communication. As Hensley and Carlin (1999) point out, "Regardless of the type of case used, the key to writing an affirmative case is good organization. Even the best arguments are ineffective if they are presented in a disorganized way" (p. 132). Toward this end, this essay gives debaters five basic tips in designing and organizing the affirmative case.

Suggestion # 1
Understand the Affirmative Case Topic

Affirmatives need a solid grasp of their case. This goes beyond a shallow un-

derstanding of "case evidence," or the "Smith card." Dedicated debaters take the time to research the case topic from top to bottom. I suggest that this research take four directions: (1) background information, (2) up-to-date information (including perspectives outside of the "Smith card"), (3) limitations of the current research, and (4) plausible negative positions on the affirmative case. Debaters should ponder the dimensions of the case in theoretical and practical terms—consideration must be given to how the problem area evolved, actions taken (or not) to deal with the problem, and pragmatic solutions to fixing the problem. Students must be dissuaded of limiting their knowledge to case evidence. The affirmative position is grounded in a contextual field that must be mastered by the advocates. Superficial awareness erodes the educational value of the activity and encourages intellectually shallow refutation.

Suggestion # 2
Figure Out Your Stock Issues

Stock issue analysis provides an effective model for dissecting the measurements of the case area. As debaters read the research, they should tentatively categorize evidence into issues of ill, blame, cost, and probable cures. This method aids debaters by organizing case analysis around a systematic problem-solving procedure; furthermore, this process allows for a comprehensive examination of "what you've got" regarding research burdens. I also recommend that plan-based brainstorming occur in this stage. Debaters should contemplate the innovative and organizational features of the plan's mandates, logistics, efficacy, etc.

The following questions are designed to help novice debaters size up affirmative case evidence:

What is the problem?
How significant is the problem?
What proof do you have?
What is affected by the problem?

What conditions have contributed to the problem?
What obstacles must be overcome to fix the problem?
What might be done to solve the problem?
Can we justify our solution?

Suggestion # 3
Pick an Affirmative Case Format

Like a public speech, the affirmative case must be configured around a sensible and organized format. Patterson and Zarefsky (1983) define format as "the basic structure of the case—the way in which the major arguments will be organized and the order in which they will come" (p. 161). Good argumentation requires good organization; debaters need to be mindful of possible organizational options for case, and the strategic reasoning for each. Traditionally, debate theorists identify four well-known case formats: (a) traditional cases, (b) comparative advantage cases, (c) criteria cases, and (d) alternative justification cases (e.g., Freely, 1990; Patterson & Zarefsky, 1983).

Traditional Cases. Traditional affirmative cases (also termed "need-plan" cases) are structured with a strict stock issue emphasis (i.e., harms, significance, inherency, solvency, and topicality). The affirmative claims that the status quo is inadequate and deficient in some specified way, thus warranting a policy change; in other words, the affirmative outlines a problem, offers a plan to correct the problem, and presents evidence that the plan can alleviate the harm. Hensley and Carlin (1999) write: "The need-plan case requires that a harm be shown which is inherent and significant. The need area must relate to the key terms of the resolution….The plan must solve the need and must be workable and free from serious disadvantages" (p. 117). It is imperative that affirmatives employing this format establish impressive stock issue positions and prepare to discuss plan-specific solvency

details germane to their proposal.

Comparative Advantage Cases. The comparative advantage format retains much of the stock issue-driven arguments in the traditional case structure, but puts emphasis on the advantages of the affirmative policy (Pfau, Thomas, & Ulrich, 1987). After detailing the plan, the affirmative team offers a number of inherent advantages to the policy change; these benefits, it is argued, are comparatively advantageous to other actions. Thus, the affirmative's advantages exceed status quo measures and outweigh any potential disadvantages (Freely, 1990). Debaters interested in stressing the utility of the plan and/or cost-benefit analysis of policy principles are advised to use this case type.

Criteria Cases. A third method of case organization is the criteria (conceptually similar to "goals") case. In this format, the affirmative outlines a number of specific criteria, or goals, that must be met; invariably, the affirmative plan meets these goals and emerges as the best possible alternatives: "The criteria or goals case begins with an explicit statement of the objective to be sought and a defense of its value. It then proceeds to argue why affirming the resolution is the best way to achieve the objective" (Patterson & Zarefsky, 1983). Affirmatives must be able to defend the merit of the identified criteria, as well as the recommended plan option.

Alternative Justification. One of the more unsettled formats, the alternative justification case is a case "that offers multiple justifications for the adoption of the resolution" (Wood & Goodnight, 1995, p. 303). In essence, the affirmative offers several policy actions—any one of which justifies the acceptance of the resolution. Pfau (1979) notes that this format is most often structured around numerous plans with respective advantages. For example, after offering harm and inherency positions, the affirmative may submit a host of plans (e.g., plan-A, plan-B) that independently correct the problem area. Debaters should be aware that this format is theoretically controversial and imposes added argumentative burdens on affirmative refutation.

I do not advocate debaters limiting their options to aforementioned formats—instead, I suggest that debaters take the time to deliberate and discuss the methodological components of their case.

Suggestion # 4
Balance and Outline Your Main Arguments

Lopsided points produce an untidy structure. This past year, I heard an affirmative case that consisted of six main contentions (pre-plan) and one underdeveloped advantage. The case was certainly cluttered, not to mention confusing. To make matters worse, the majority of the evidence was sorely misplaced (i.e., solvency evidence with inherency). In another round, I heard the 1A speaker interchanging impact scenarios and inherency as if the two were equivalent—and trust me, they were not!

Perhaps the best way to avoid "main point chaos" is to outline the case. With this technique, debaters may examine the coordination and subordination of all items and arguments. Obviously, outlining requires that all primary statements have roughly the same amount of support, and that the sub-points descending under those main points get gradually more precise. A second advantage to outlining is that it gives researchers the opportunity to examine the case "at a glance." If something seems displaced or awkward, students can add, subtract, or simply rearrange the evidence.

In their classic textbook, Argumentation and Debate: Techniques of a Free Society, McBurney and Mills (1964) discuss five general principles of outlining procedures:

1. Coordination—all points under a main point should be related. In other words, all sub-points should conceptually contribute to the main idea. Extraneous subpoints violate the homogeneity of the list.

2. Subordination—Simply put, sub-points should operationalize aspects of the main argument. In the following example, sub-point b bears no association to the main point:

   I. Advantages of Debate
   A. Exercises critical thinking skills
   B. Many high schools have debate programs
   C. Improves research skills

3. Discreteness—Each sub-point should be somewhat independent of other sub-points. Writing cases with this in mind serves to the benefit the affirmative in one important way: It can protect them from the "domino effect" of attack. Negatives that nullify one point may not necessarily invalidate other sub-points under the same argument.

4. Sequence—Main points and sub-points should be arranged in a logical sequence. If I were to lecture on World War II, it would seem reasonable to discuss its causes prior to mentioning its effects. McBurney and Mills (1964) write: "Effect should be made to arrange the points in each coordinate list in some kind of significant order or progression. The common sequences are those of time, place, magnitude, or such order as may be dictated by the proof requirements of a thesis" (p. 207).

5. Symbolization—Debaters should clearly label points and sub-points with clear markers. I advocate debaters explicitly saying "Contention 1, sub-point-A, etc." This assists the judge in flowing case arguments and clarifies line-by-line refutation.

The outline ensures that points and sub-points cover appropriate areas, and that major arguments get sufficient support (see Hensley & Carlin, chapter 15).

Suggestion # 5
Tag Lines: Get to the Point

Convoluted tag lines do not communicate the point. Debaters attempting to enhance their credibility with big words, baffling jargon, and run-on sentences undermine their central purpose. Tag lines should clearly state and articulate arguments. Bear in mind: phraseology often trades off with understandability. We cannot ignore the importance of audience adaptation in case writing. Debaters may well understand their case, but that alone does not translate into useful discussion. As students of communication, debaters have a responsibility to convey effective messages to their judges and opponents. Make no mistake, the compositional components of the case ARE important.

Conclusion

Case structure is a meaningful part of effective case communication. Given the broad assortments of organizational patterns from which debaters might choose, it is important that they give the matter of arrangement prudent consideration. A poorly constructed case bruises a team's credibility and may undermine the persuasiveness of the message. Remember, organization contributes to comprehensibility, information-sharing, and accuracy. Get focused, remain methodical, and be clear!

References

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(Justin D. Walton received his B.S. in Speech Communication from Oklahoma State University and his M.A. in Communication from the University of Oklahoma. Currently, he is an Assistant Professor of Communication at Cameron University, Lawton, Oklahoma.)