

CONQUERING A NEW TOPIC

by William H. Bennett

One of the most unusual aspects of high school Lincoln Douglas debate is the large number of topics used every year. The National Forensic League spreads five throughout the year. Some larger tournaments use non-NFL topics. A few states have other topic selection methods.

The diversity of topics is a potential strength of the event. The more topics a debater encounters the greater the amount that can be learned. But for the majority of debaters the result is a modest learning curve because too little time is spent learning about, and developing unique strategies for each new topic.

What is a good debater to do when confronting a new topic? How does a good debater prepare?

Now entertain conjecture of a time
When creeping murmur and the poring dark
Fills the wide vessel of the universe.
From camp to camp, through the foul womb of
night,
The hum of either army stilly sounds,
That the fix'd sentinels almost receive
The secret whispers of each other's watch.
Fire answers fire, and through their paly flames
Each battle sees the other's umber'd face:
Steed threatens steed, in high and boastful
neighs
Piercing the night's dull ear; and from the tents
The armourers, accomplishing the knights,
With busy hammers closing rivets up,
Give dreadful note of preparation.
[Shakespeare, HenryV, IV, Chorus, I]

The Beginning Steps

The first step is to find out what the topic is. If at all possible the topic should be learned well in advance of the first tournament. Good preparation usually requires at least two weeks lead time.

Occasionally the tournament invitation or special mailing will notify each squad. But for most teams it will be the National Forensic League, through an announcement in the *Rostrum*, that announces the topic.

Eager or intelligent competitors do not have to wait for their magazine. The NFL has a special phone number, 920-748-LD4U, available 24 hours a day that announces each new topic as soon as rules allow its release.

The second step is to define every possibly important word of the topic. When in doubt the de-

bater should research definitions on too many words rather than too few. Often a student scholar cannot determine early in her research which words are the most controversial or likeliest to be important. In this situation it is better to find definitions for most topic words.

And at least three types of dictionaries should be consulted: lay, philosophical, and legal. If the topic has a specific field context (e.g. government, politics, economics) a specialty dictionary in that field should also be consulted. The diversity of sources has two purposes: to be sure no obvious meaning or topic intent is overlooked, and to give the debater different options in case construction and response.

Next is the brainstorming session. The debater, his colleagues, coach, friends, parents, and or anyone else who can be cajoled to join participates. Everyone writes down the topic verbatim. One person is appointed recording secretary. Then case ideas are suggested, being **sure** that no suggestion is criticized in any way. The avowed purpose is to generate as many ideas as possible.

When suggestions peter out the group discusses which ideas have merit and which should be stricken. The debater(s) then select their choices but keep the entire list so that opponents possible cases can be considered too. Identifying as many possible cases or issues as possible reduces the chance of being taken by surprise in a tournament debate.

The fourth step is to build a bibliography. This library and computer work will include philosophical sources (book, *Philosophy Index*), historical and contemporary sources (computer data bases, *Social Science Index*, *The New York Times Index*, and others), and debate publications (*The CDE Value Encyclopedia*, *Baylor's Value Handbook*, etc.). Step five, of course, is to pull and copy the best of these materials.

Moving Ahead: Case Building

Looking at the gathered research, and considering the brainstorming list moves the debater

close to the next step: making the first draft of the value and criteria sections of his or her affirmative and negative cases. But the competitor should also consider, before writing, which of the available positions s/he is most familiar with and able to explain well and defend under strong attack. If more than one option remains available the competitor will get a competitive advantage by selecting a value not often used in her region of the nation.

Then should follow a second bibliography and research session. This one should focus on finding pragmatic, historical, and contemporary examples that demonstrate the validity of the criteria and value.

Step eight is to identify the most likely opposition arguments. Four components should go into this set of educated guesses: past history, topic wording, research results, and subscription services. Stronger opponents can anticipate and preempt or develop answering strategies for familiar values and or strategies.

Topic wording usually lends itself to certain common values and or criteria being used. Thought, coach input, and discussion with friends will spot the most obvious options early. Cases should be constructed to take advantage of or preempt the most obvious opposition options.

Research and subscription services can alert you to strong but less obvious case options. Some opponents take their cases verbatim or with only modest modifications from case subscription services. The good competitor will be prepared to defeat these cases.

Step nine is to complete the first draft of cases for both sides. Often this can mean making sure that the affirmative is long enough, and that the negative is not too long. After completing this draft and making modifications to improve the rhetoric and clarity of the case, cross-examination drills should commence.

The cross-examination drills should involve at least three sessions
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sions. We were gratified to see that in every session we have run, between 85 and 90 percent of the participants have made the "correct" decision--they agreed with judges in the actual taped event.

We concluded the session with a handout on suggestions about etiquette and decorum during debate rounds. It's difficult to know how much to leave to good old common sense in this area, but we spelled out a few principles we thought bore reminding: how to introduce oneself and the two debaters; how to keep time, allot prep time, and give useful but unobtrusive time signals; why the judge should not eat or drink during rounds; how to keep the debate moving and minimize distractions; when guests are or are NOT allowed to observe; and how to finish up the round by thanking the participants but NOT giving any oral critique beyond "You both did a fine job." Joe and I at first wondered whether we even needed to broach the etiquette issue, but then we thought back on some horror stories we'd heard over the years: judges loudly opening potato chip wrappers, fraternizing with debaters, making either helpful or (yes, in some cases) sarcastic comments during the rounds, and so on. So we gave our brief spiel on etiquette, emphasizing that the judge is the ADULT in control of the room.

In the two seasons since this training was implemented, complaints about judges, from both coaches and students, have been cut in half. More significantly, the judges' response to the training has been encouraging both on the written evaluation forms they filled out and from their informal comments in the months afterward. Both new and experienced judges have told us that the training was an idea that was long overdue, and that they are better judges because of it.

So the judge training idea seems to have worked for the Montgomery County Debate League. Joe Gannon and I would be glad to pass on the specifics of our plan to any out there who are interested in trying it out.

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sions on each side of the topic. Preferable both coach and experienced squad members should participate, assuming the stance of a very dubious opponent. The more intelligent and dubious the questioner the more useful this test of case ideas, rhetoric, and case structure. After each session the debater should compile a list of notes of case wording and idea improvements that are needed. When the questioning sessions are over the cases should be rewritten.

Next comes the crucial test, the tempering fire of being used in practice rounds. Again the strongest, most experienced and antagonistic opponents should be used. Friends are seldom honest critics. Flowsheets and careful critique notes should be made of every round. At least two rounds on each side should occur.

The Payoff: Final Steps

The most important parts of getting ready to win now occur. The debater takes her or his experience and notes from the cross-examination and practice debates and completely rewrites both cases. This editing adds necessary arguments and subtracts those that did not work. "Did not work" includes arguments that added nothing, or were confusing, or were turned into arguments for the opponent. Almost as important are rhetorical changes, finding better phrases and delivery techniques (usually noted on the side of the transcript).

Step fourteen is to practice on both sides again. This allows the debater to get more familiar with case changes. And it allows even more improvements to be noted and made.

As the first tournament gets close it is time to write short evidenced blocks against strong opposition arguments. You should use two sources to decide what blocks to write. First use the notes developed in step eight when you tried to identify probable opposition arguments. Then use the arguments that gave you the most trouble in practice rounds. For the best opposition values, criteria, and examples you identify write four point blocks. The best blocks will often include one short quote, an example, a reference to a case point that might be considered a preempt, and the one best remaining analytical response or attack.

The last step occurs only after competition actually starts. The smart debater will use the ballots gathered after each tournament. Ballots tell what went wrong (sometimes even in rounds that you won). The best debaters will use them, rather than argue with them, to make minor or large case changes before the next tournament. If, for example, a judge misunderstood an argument you were making then the rhetoric and delivery must be changed.

Underview

Victory usually comes from one of three sources: work, luck, or intelligence. Factors two and three are not controllable. But through the fire and flame of research and practice the Lincoln Douglas debater can arm himself to win.

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