

# TED TURNER DEBATE: ESTABLISHING THEORETICAL GROUNDS

by  
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## Introduction:

New debate events spawn new theoretical arguments. Ted Turner Debate presents the high school debate community with a new event which has a clear purpose "Promoting audience and media centered debate." However, this purpose only provides marginal information about how a debate student would prepare to debate; and, upon what grounds a judge makes a decision about winners and losers. This article provides

## The Role of the Topic:

All debate flows from an adopted resolution. The resolution provides the general field of argument; that is, it frames the territory over which a judge will decide or the parameters of permissible arguments for the advocates of each side

Topics must diagrammatically place in balance an idea which permits evaluation. In the sample topics provided so far the weighing word was should. This word can have policy and/or moral implications; that is, should places a burden upon the debaters to provide sufficient argument, analysis and/or evidence to substantiate a claim to the truth of the resolution.

The word 'should' places any resolution in an indefinite time. This means a debater can argue what is or what should be; and in the case of the negative (con) what should not be, whether it is or is not yet. The topic then establishes the non-immediacy of the topic, removing practical necessity as an evaluative criteria allowing ideology and emotion to also play a

part. That is, 'should' asks for reason and analysis, not action.

Ted Turner Debate topics have an immediacy, and urgency unlike traditional debate topics. While different topics will have more of a policy or more of a values focus, which will show in the tactics of debating, each topic shares the immediacy of today's news. Either form of topic in a Ted Turner Debate round will not likely be adjudicated upon the merits of an implementation of a particular policy or an underlying universal value, but instead will be evaluated within the framework of contemporary media metaphors: "How do I feel about the topic?" "Which debater is more trustworthy?" "Who has the better ethos?"

Finally, the non-expert judge will bring an interpretive criteria of the common understanding of the topic. What this means for the debater is that this common understanding of the issues involved in the topic relate directly to the judge's own life, not to a theoretical interpretation of the topic. This limits the field and range of topicality arguments to a very small number; a mere question during Crossfire should suffice to make the topicality argument. Topicality as an argumentative tactic must yield to topicality as an implied given of the resolution.

**...A new event which has a clear purpose "Promoting audience and media centered debate."**

discussion of some of approaches which might prove useful in grounding preparation and presentation.

The first reaction by many experienced commentators within the debate community to this new debate event was one of horror at an event without apparent tradition. Ted Turner Debate is not grounded in the legal framework of advocacy which guided policy debate for many years, nor within the familiar territory of values and ethics which enlighten procedural rules and argument construction in Lincoln-Douglas debate. Nevertheless, Ted Turner Debate will develop a body of custom and practice out of a spare one page of official rules to help guide efforts to prepare and to execute effective debating skills. Additionally, familiarity with media debates on television and radio provide a body of tactics and presentational styles on controversial issues from noted personalities such as its namesake, Ted Turner. Many observations and suggestions which follow will use the media orientation of this event to ground practice.

No single article can embody all the potential a new event offers: this article lays out some of the implied and stipulated theory for the event and provides practical advice to debaters and coaches.

## Division of Ground:

“Division of ground” is the term used to establish the theoretical responsibilities for each speaker and each team. Some team expectations flow from the topic – the affirmative [pro] defends the topic, the negative [con] refutes the topic. Ted Turner Debate does not reverse this fundamental stance.

Other divisions between speakers have to do with reasonable arguments. Media argumentation places high emphasis upon the ethos of each speaker. Thus, we judge many arguments based upon whether we ‘trust’ the speaker or not. Trust flows from the manner of the debater and the arguments advanced by the debater. Oftentimes, the best arguments are those which directly concern audience members. A debater with genuine caring for the welfare of the audience will have enhanced ethos.

The ‘impression’ the debater makes upon the judge is of more substance in determining a winner than the actual argumentative flow. This emphasis shifts the speaker’s role from that of legal advocate in traditional debate to that of moral or intellectual advocate. Organization takes a different role, too. The debater’s duty is to present in a clear and easily remembered style. This places repetition as a key structural tool for the Ted Turner Debater. Making a few solid points is preferred to making a variety of good, but disconnected, points.

Finally, the media model shifts the role of rebuttal. Advocates should put more emphasis upon the role of decision construction in the mind of the judge than upon a detailed response to an opponent’s specific words; except for the effect of a specific attack upon particular words.

Constructing an argument in the judge’s mind will sound unusual for those not familiar with Vygotsky or constructivist learning. The task is essentially to create a flowsheet in the mind. That means, creating pathways from what the judge already knows to the central argument the debater is making. The use of illustrative stories, examples, and analogies perform this task. A story creates something familiar – the story – upon which the judge can hang (or create a connection to) something less familiar or unfamiliar – the argument.

The form of the argument, whether created in one sub-point or throughout a whole speech, moves from Argument Label or Tag, to illustrative example, to the argument, to explanation of the argument using the illustration, and finally to creating the connection with the topic. This process fully maps the argument in the judge’s mind.

This means that the Speaker 1 position will take the task of presenting the constructive (or new) arguments, creating in the judge’s mind the central argument. Speaker 2 will present the responsive arguments (rejoinder), reaffirming and reconnecting the central argument. The summary speaker will refocus upon central issue rebuilding connections. The Last Shot speaker will provide the one compelling reason for a ballot on the central issue.

## Speaker Duties:

The following speaker duties will provide a clear and effective means to prepare for individual debate rounds. Many alternative strategies are warranted. The following only attempts to make an initial division based upon time and the rotating nature of affirmative (pro) and negative (con).

*Speaker 1* – This speaker position for both sides must be concerned with constructing and presenting a logical argument with evidentiary support. This is the one time in the debate where

specific preparation can be used as a tool of the debate. Due to the uncertainty of whether this will become the first or second speech in the debate, a 4-minute speech for and against the resolution is warranted. Reserving time for response in the Speaker 1 position is not practical.

**I. Introduction to the issue** – An overview of the issue presented in a compelling introductory remark or quotation to alert the judge to the importance of the topic.

**II. Definition of terms** – Whenever a debate focuses upon an issue without support of a clarifying plan or value, the topic must have its own agreed upon parameters. Often this is accomplished with a field definition from an expert; occasionally the topic is self-evident. In the latter case, it may be left to the judge to interpret the topic.

**III. Analysis of the issues** – Traditionally, three issues are considered sufficient to establish a warrant. These issues can be abstract or concrete, or a mix of both. However, to be successful, each should be an independent reason to vote for the topic. Given the nature of the audience, a most logical progression would be:

- a. Personal story or narrative story to provide context for the judge to understand what is at issue.
- b. Example from the news to show timeliness and to support the analysis and to show the debater as knowledgeable about the subject.
- c. General or theoretical issue to establish the argument beyond the particular and to provide grounds for revisiting this speech later in the debate.

**IV. Closing** – Why does this issue matter to us? Answering this question in closing provides reasons for the judge to care; while focusing the entire speech into a short, memorable summary.

*Speaker 2* – This speaker position will have the burden of analyzing the opponents’ position and explaining flaws in the ideas presented by the other team. While this speaker might present prepared arguments from briefs to establish new points, the judge using media analysis is now looking for the fight. Argumentatively, at least, the judge places an expectation that the two sides will clash.

This speech may take the form of a line-by-line refutation of the opponent’s position, but this form is rarely followed in media debate. Instead, the speaker should identify the most attackable issues advanced by the other side. In this manner, the most memorable opposition points are refuted with apt and memorable counterpoints.

Time vested in responding will permit only one or two key responses. A suggested form for this debate would be:

- I. Introduction which links the 2<sup>nd</sup> speech to the 1<sup>st</sup> speech, probably with a story or quotation.
- II. An overview of the issue to be discussed.
  - a. Statement of what opponent said.
  - b. Reasons and/or proof of why opponent is wrong.
  - c. Explanation of what this means for the topic.
- III. (a second issues as in II above)
- IV. Closing which solidifies both of your side’s speeches.

**Summary** – Summary is an odd speech. The purpose is implied in the title. Because the summary speaker will have listened to partner respond in the 2<sup>nd</sup> speech and in the give and take of the Crossfire, the summary should manage all of what the judge has heard to this point. Something like this:

- I. Brief overview of the debate so far.
- II. Focus on the key idea, maybe with a fresh antidotal story or other framing quotation.
- III. What does this all mean? The implications for the judge and the world provide a clear summary focus.

**Last Shot** – The duties of the Last Shot speaker are stipulated in the rules. Last Shot chooses the one issue which matters the most and frames in a final parting shot why this single issue is enough to warrant a ballot for the speaker’s team.

- I. Statement of the issue and its importance.
- II. Explanation of the issue.
- III. Appeal to let this issue override all other concerns.

**Crossfire:** The Crossfire period establishes the uniqueness of Ted Turner Debate. Unlike other forms of questioning, this period has no specific role for the debaters. As such, debaters need to form a clear idea of purpose in order to be effective in this period of the debate. The cross-examination period of policy and value debates was modeled upon the courtroom practice of interviewing a hostile witness. Controversy intends a different model; the network news program of informed, yet mutually competitive voices.

Judges for this event will place great weight upon success during the crossfire. As in media, the crossfire is not used to advance an argument, but rather to explore weaknesses in your opponents’ position and to defend and strengthen your own. Because many debaters will fall into the natural ‘shouting at each other’ posture of some flaring media talking-heads, the debater who has mastered his/her own emotions and keeps a clear, but playful, direction will gain judge appreciation. It is crucial that debaters understand their personal media model – who do you believe when the discussion gets steamy-hot? Occasionally we appreciate the sarcastic hothead; most often we love the cool analyst.

In the two-person crossfire, the debaters’ goal is to advance challenging questions and to provide cogent responses. Simple turn taking - asking and answering - would be a good strategy. However, spontaneous questions and developed responses will mean that turn taking rarely occurs. Instead, conversation will tend to “Yeah, but . . .” With only three minutes, each speaker should focus upon one good extended question, offering the opponent the same opportunity during the first two minutes. Be very careful to have a goal. The last minute is used to quibble the opponent’s statements. Quibbling is not bickering. To quibble is to question with reason a certain number of the small points. To bicker is to question the emotional or personal worth of an opponent’s position. Bickering will make the judge want to change the channel.

In the four-person crossfire a wider range of goals can be adopted. Here are few ideas.

1. One partner can take the role of questioner, while the other mollifies the opposition.
2. A stronger partner can cover for a weaker partner.
3. Partners can mutually intervene to deflect questions from their opponents in order to try to unsettle well-placed attacks.
4. Partners can interrupt each other, not just the opposition, to shift the focus of questions and attacks.

Probably the best debaters will pre-identify mutual strengths and weaknesses. These may be issue based, the ability to question or respond upon demand or exploit the known qualities of the other team. Effective teams will not begin the Grand Crossfire with

out forethought and preparation. It is in this exchange the judge will see the qualities of each debater and each under pressure.

The Grand Crossfire is the moment when the pinnacle of the round is reached in the judge’s mind. This is the final clarification of which team has better reasons and superior ethos. Debaters should not treat this as a time when the judge ‘doesn’t flow,’ but rather as a time when the judge is making a final evaluation of the merits of the issues presented by each side. If the judge is not comfortable with or does not assume the role of moderator, the team who sacrifices a voice in the arena for the cool direction of moderator will earn points in the critique’s mind. This means debaters must be aware of the total impact of each part of the debate round, facilitating dialogue is rewarded.

**Coin toss:** The ‘coin toss’ opens the most challenging theoretical ground in the debate. Unlike every other debate event, the opening team does not have the closing speech. More importantly, the negative (con) may elect to initiate the debate. Both of these innovations throw out traditional ideas of presumption, inherency, burden of proof, and even stock-issues. Further, the negative block in policy and the extensive negative rebuttal in Lincoln-Douglas are not tactical tools for argument placement. That means neither side has what have been traditional theoretically strong positions. Instead, debaters must weigh the intrinsic strength of the resolution against the advantage of speaking first or last. Debaters have but an instant to make an evaluation of the merits of the topic, the natural orientation of the judge, and the advantages of speaking first or last.

“Is the first speech worth giving up the strongest side?” (Copeland 2002). Upon winning the coin toss, whether to have the first or last speech is both tactical and theoretical. Despite Mark Antony’s savage devastation of Brutus in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* arising from Brutus’ error of seeking to speak the truth first, most communication analysis gives additional advantage to the side who can first advocate. Theory suggests that if the judge comes unbiased to issue adjudication, then the side which first presents a cognitively pleasing reason will create in the judge’s mind a map for final decision making. The theory informs the tactical dilemma of first speech or strongest side. Which option correctly captures the nuanced structure of Ted Turner Debate will be argued for the duration of this new event, and for each new topic.

Resolutional analysis takes a different position when advocates do not automatically debate each side of the resolution evenly. By coin toss, a team could defend the resolution during all rounds at a tournament. This event does not call for an even number of pro and con debates. Instead, using the media-centered approach of this event, the debaters need to do pre-round polling of likely judges to determine lay-response to the topic. If presumption enters a Ted Turner Debate round it will come from judges who have no background in adjudicating debate, but who instead yell at television-news commentators in the safety of their own home or from judges who interested in issues and looking for bright high school students to cogently discuss the merits of each side.

A lucky coin toss may capture this volatile presumption. More often, teams will use the results of the coin toss to position their arguments in the round. Losing the coin toss does not mean forfeiting advantage. Once the winner of the toss commits to a side or a speaker position, the loser of the toss can still assert its own choice to advantage. Each choice has consequence. Both teams can profit from choosing wisely.

**No Experienced Debate Judges:** This rule is troubling, both practically and theoretically. There is no argument theory which suggests that ignorance of a field of study renders one better capable of reasoned decision making. While this rule stands as a guideline for NFL tournaments, two major exceptions are made: Judges who only judge Ted Turner Debate or debate coaches who are also classroom teachers may continue to judge Ted Turner Debate throughout the season. Without this stipulation, there would never be an informed body of coaches able to discuss the merits of the event. Even with this stipulation, classroom teachers who have policy teams will still be often consigned as critic to policy rounds, but occasionally they will judge Ted Turner Debates and develop a body of 'rules' and practice. This alleviates the most troubling aspect of 'ignorant judge' as decision maker.

Whether the rule prohibiting experienced debate judges may ultimately 'save' debate or may ultimately 'destroy' debate as an event lies outside the scope of this article. Instead, this article examines the mandate of using only 'lay' judges upon the theory of the event.

Lay judges provide the test of an informed citizen judge. This places the judge in an old role, silent audience. Unlike the judge who noisily prattles to the debaters about this paradigm and that theory, this hate and that love, the lay judge will sit in silence. Personally, I find this refreshing. Debate is not well served by judges who insist upon debaters adapting to their own peccadilloes. Good judges are always tabula rasa. Good judges in any debate event enjoy innovations by debaters; rewarding thinking and diminishing the value of stale, purchased arguments.

While experienced debate judges often find their personal voting criteria the subject of discussion prior to higher level policy rounds, what kind of paradigmatic advice can be provided to debaters about judges who are in their first round of a new event?

Students should rely upon polls of citizens, extrapolating an average judge from regional demographic trends. More practically, the desired stance of the debaters is audience exploration. In this new event the judge will have longer-sustained eye contact with the debaters. Reciprocating debaters will use the information provided non-verbally by the judges to measure argument success adjusting to the clues provided by the judge.

Practice, then, focuses upon reading a judge. Coaching may involve learning the occupation, political affiliation, or civic organization associated with the judge and using this information to prepare debaters during pre-round preparation. Good coaching will also rely upon teaching the proven techniques of adapting to the information provided non-verbally by the critic in this round of debate.

**Prep Time:** Use of preparation time is more tactical than theoretical. How prep time can be used will influence the decisions made as to side and topic. The two minute prep rule has these implications.

The A team must save at least one minute of preparation for the Last Shot. Following the Grand Crossfire, the A team will have no time to build a final single issue argument. All other A speeches do have opposition time for speech preparation.

The B team may wish to use the bulk of its prep time prior to the first Speaker 1 speech. This is the only time in the debate when the opposition derives no benefit from your own prep time. However if all Speaker 1 arguments are pre-written, prep time ought to be saved for the Last Shot. Team B does not need prep time like

team A. This might even be a consideration in choosing to go second in a round. A good Grand Crossfire could squeeze team A by forcing more than one issue to the top, team A is limited to only that issue, team B can easily respond to that one issue by holding all of its prep time for use prior to the final speech in the debate.

Timers should be provided by tournament hosts in order to allow the citizen judges to focus upon issues and not technicalities.

**Research:** The cornerstone of many debate teams is systematic research. This need not change with the advent of Ted Turner Debate. With a one month window for each topic, experienced debaters will find ample time to discover excellent evidence for each topic. Those who have the best evidence will have an edge at winning rounds. Evidence will look more like what Aristotle and Cicero thought of as evidence, than what modern policy debaters see when they hear that word.

Two types of evidence are crucial: stories and statistics. Stories hold universal viability for interest and our current culture is statistically driven. Each of these forms of evidence will have probative utility. Traditional tests of authority will still be used to establish the source's and the debater's credibility.

Only one speech needs extension evidence – Speaker 2. Speaker 2 may well use a small file to hold responses to potentially hostile arguments. For even though the debate focuses upon a broad topic, the Speaker 2 position in this debate requires that speaker to show some depth of understanding and analysis. For many debaters, this is best done with evidence. Counter-examples and counter statistics should be a top priority. Though any debate issue invites some discussion of the warrant, or value, or invites a critique of existing norms, these arguments will have to come out of the generalized pop-culture in order to be accepted within the debate. Academic criticism demands prior knowledge; public critique is an American habit.

Briefs should generally be focused upon a single idea with one example or statistic as the anchor for organization.

**Format:** Some issues of format are ambiguous and need to be addressed by the tournament host (or the NFL or state committee). In lieu of subsequent clarification, the following answers are suggested:

1. Do speakers stand or sit during Crossfire?

During the one-on-one Crossfires, speakers stand next to each other facing the judge. This maximizes the personal nature of the exchange while isolating the two speakers from their partners in order to allow the judge to focus on these two speakers alone.

During the Grand Crossfire, all speakers remain seated facing each other. Questions and responses are presented while seated. This emphasizes the "free for all" nature of the exchange while creating a comfortable and familiar atmosphere.

2. Who initiates the Grand Crossfire?

While the A team is charged with initiating the Crossfire, Speaker A1 should ask a question of Speaker B1. B1 having just presented the last speech contra A1, this would be a natural sequence. A1 is allowed to 'fire back,' while providing a clear initiating sequence. The next questions should flow from the general advice provided as to time and focus.

3. What role does the ballot play?

The NFL sample ballot [*Rostrum* November 2002] provides an issue oriented ballot. It provides the benefit of an issues

oriented ballot with clear categories for evaluation and comparison. A drawback would be that a list of criteria, as given, tends to focus the judge upon only a few criteria and, thus, away from the big issue.

## NFL Ballot

Some hosts will prefer a more open ballot like the NFL policy ballot. The advantage of a more open ballot is that judges can provide a wider range of reasons for decision. A drawback would be less guidance to the judge in decision making.

The following ballot establishes more of a media flavor and may help avoid the danger of lay judges confusing the teams if the Negative (con) team speaks first. The ballot commits the judge to an initial stance via the topic, requires the judge be clear about which team is which, yet provides a open ballot for decision explanation.

**Ted Turner Debate**

Topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Initial response to the topic: On first seeing this topic, I tend to agree/disagree with the topic. (Circle)

Team A: #\_\_\_ Speaker 1 \_\_\_\_\_ Speaker 2 \_\_\_\_\_ Pro/Con

Team B: #\_\_\_ Speaker 1 \_\_\_\_\_ Speaker 2 \_\_\_\_\_ Pro/Con

The team which won this round is A / B representing the Pro / Con. (Circle the winning side)

The winning team's number is: \_\_\_\_\_

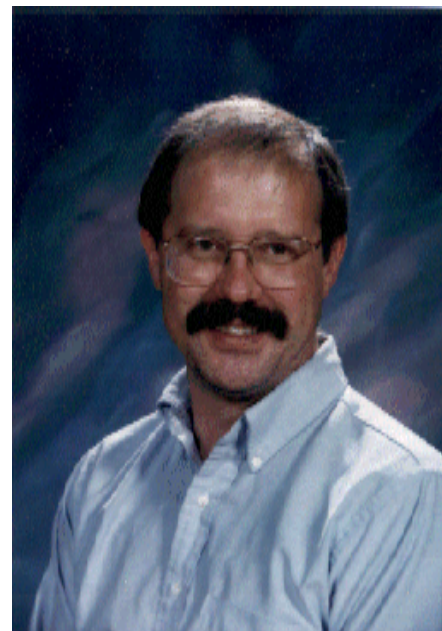
These are the reasons for this decision--

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

**Safeguards:** One large danger from distorting or abusing arguments exists in Ted Turner Debate. Uninformed judges may not be capable of identifying proscribed arguments. That is, a team might “spew or counterplan” or such, but because the judge is unfamiliar with what those terms mean the judge may vote for a team in violation of the parameters of the event. Tournament hosts would be advised to identify a procedure to adjudicate disputes of this nature prior to the beginning of the tournament. Individual, uninformed judges may not have the sophistication to make an independent decision and may need the help of an informed tournament staff. Protests will likely come from angry coaches or debaters, not from judges.

The “all or nothing qualification” at the district tournament presents some difficulties. Unlike any other event, Ted Turner Debaters must rest their qualification upon this event alone. This event is not a safe haven for extempers or an easy qualification for a policy team. Ted Turner Debaters have to want to qualify in this event alone. It cannot be a ‘second’ event. As such, each debater must decide that this event is of personal value. Developing this attitude about this form of debate means not denigrating the event as an alternative, rather the event must stand on its own merits.

Ted Turner Debate presents new challenges and new opportunities. As we in the debate community struggle to understand and master this new event, it is helpful to remind ourselves of the ideals or possibilities which underlie this new event. If Ted Turner Debate grows into a viable debate event it will be because it has developed a tradition of its own. In that spirit, take issue with the ideas and claims advanced through this article. Only by advancing this event in the forum will it find a home of its own by reaching intrinsic qualities that are admirable. If the only theoretical grounds for this event is that it will provide photogenic debaters, the event is as doomed as the one it seeks to replace.



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