

# THE IMPORTANCE OF USING THE CRITERION EFFECTIVELY

by  
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Lincoln-Douglas debate focuses on philosophical dilemmas, either questioning the truth of a single normative statement, or attempting to prioritize two competing values. LD cases center primarily around two key terms: the value premise and the value criterion. Debaters present a value premise to identify the general good questioned in the resolution. The value criterion allows judges and debaters to weigh arguments in relation to the broad notion of good established by the value premise.

Typical criteria do not function as weighing mechanisms; instead they replace the value premise with an equally ambiguous concept. Although the fulfillment of obligations is narrower than morality, it performs poorly as a weighing mechanism to resolve the conflict because most debate topics place two competing obligations in conflict. Effective debate and fair adjudication demand a more focused standard, so more specific standards frequently appear later in the case or, in the worst situation, after the round in the judge's mind. Utilizing a narrow criterion increases the potential for objectivity in judging and allows debaters to achieve greater positional clarity.

## **The Real Importance of the Value**

Lincoln-Douglas requires debaters to demonstrate the validity or falsity of a proposition of value. In most resolutions the wording suggests a value premise. For example, the resolutions "possession of nuclear weapons is immoral" and "human genetic engineering is morally justified" both outline the value dilemmas debaters must resolve. In these topics, linking arguments to morality meets the burden established by the resolution. Taking time to explain a link between the resolution and a different value other than one implicit in the resolution risks confusion, wastes time necessary for more important argumentation, and focuses on less important issues.

Comparative resolutions pose a challenge because the wording seldom directly

contains the value. For example, the topic, "The public's right to know ought to be valued above the right to privacy of candidates for public office," reveals a conflict between two values but does not suggest an overarching value. To determine a value premise that links your arguments to the resolution, debaters must analyze more than the text of the topic to determine a value that underlies both values competing in the resolution. In our example, both sides of the resolution are democratic values, so the debate should be evaluated in terms of who better facilitates a democracy. Picking a value of democracy, for example, would link to the resolution being true or false. Ultimately, a good value clearly relates your case to the truth of the resolution.

A well chosen value should provoke little question over its pertinence. Unless a value is irrelevant to the resolution, or a comparative resolution allows for different resolitional interpretations, values should vary only in wording; there is no point to arguing the primacy of morality over moral justification. The definition of proper values also breeds little reason for disagreement. Morality and justice are both synonymous with "what ought to be." By definition, morality and justice are supreme values. A value for comparative resolutions, although not necessarily morality or justice, should work the same way. Referring to the previous example, one could not disagree with the value of democracy since the conflict of the resolution assumes the framework of a democratic government. This is consistent with the purpose of the value premise: a value premise that links to the truth of the resolution should be inherently supreme. Debate should focus on the criterion.

## **Where the Real Debate Begins**

An ideal criterion outlines the burdens that must be met to prove the resolution true. This provides two important winning components: first, it clearly identifies what debaters need to prove in their case, and second, it provides the judge a defini-

tive standard to weigh issues in the debate.

Clearly identified burdens significantly increase the quality of argumentation. Rather than itemizing claims in a shopping list with no clear direction, debaters know specifically what claims to present, allowing debaters to focus more on making warranted and cogent arguments. Such arguments are analytically stronger and more compelling than a shopping list of unwarranted assertions. Additionally, predetermined burdens ensure ideological consistency within arguments. Since the same standard is ultimately not used to weigh each argument in a case with a broad criterion, inconsistent standards may inadvertently arise.

Providing the judge with a definitive standard significantly influences the outcome of the debate. An overbroad criterion forces the debaters to prioritize competing values as the round progresses, or forces the judge to adopt some standard so s/he can weigh. Weighing mechanisms established during the course of the round are typically unclear, weak, or conflicting weighing standards. Debaters lose control of the direction the round takes as poor standards muddle the round. Allowing the judge to decide how to weigh various impacts eliminates the debater's influence over the outcome of the round. Although it might seem clear that one right is more valuable than other to the debater, a judge may have a completely different point of view. Instead of his or her own point of view, a narrow criterion gives the judge a far more objective and clear standard.

## **Establishing a Definitive Criterion**

Narrowing a resolution into specific principles or burdens is difficult, and it is certainly easier to establish on some resolutions than others. Broad criteria may be appropriate on some topics as well, since arguments are equally broad. Arguments that specifically impact to a government's capacity to protect individual rights in general may very well necessitate a broad crite-

tion such as the protection of individual rights. Arguments that impact to the protection of a specific right require a more specific criterion that provides a mechanism to prioritize different rights claims.

To deconstruct the resolution into definitive standards, debaters should determine what issue is central to the truth of the resolution. However, narrow criteria generally require more resolutive analysis than broad criteria. An example can be taken from, "The public's right to know ought to be valued above the right to privacy of candidate's for public office." Assuming that democracy is the value premise, and given the two issues in conflict, what is necessary for either side to prove the resolution true? One answer is that "it is necessary for the electorate to have all information relevant to making their vote." This standard narrows the debate into the burden of whether it is necessary to reveal information about a candidate's private life to provide voters with relevant information. Winning the issue of relevance is necessary and sufficient for proving the resolution.

### **Enhancing Debate**

A definitive criterion requires less general claims to prove the resolution. Like in the previous example resolution, a debater only needs to empirically prove that affirming provides relevant information not otherwise available to the voters. Narrowing the debate into a few specific claims enhances the quality of debate for four reasons.

First, broad criteria open the debate to numerous different independently weighed claims. Numerous arguments impacted to numerous standards render the round completely unweighable. The strategy of overbroad shopping list cases focuses on extending individual claims dropped by the opponent, which need no warrant to stand in the round, and then attempt to weigh arguments at the end. Such debate is unclear, and seldom works against debaters effectively utilizing narrow criteria. Eliminating the necessity for numerous independent claims through a narrow criterion averts confusion over weighing issues.

Second, narrow positions give debaters more time for warranting arguments. Warranted arguments force opponents to put more thought into developing responses, since one cannot simply point out that a claim is an unwarranted assertion. A narrow position established by a definitive criterion allows debaters the quantitative benefit of a shopping list case through extending numerous warrants; however, a narrow position is more efficient, since multiple warrants that link to the same position are weighed by a specific criterion.

Third, a narrow position is better prepared for overbroad cases with numerous independent claims. Defending a criterion that focuses the debate on one central issue makes all claims that impact to a different standard irrelevant and insignificant. Applying your criterion to an overbroad shopping list case significantly diminishes the number of important claims, by weed-

ing out the irrelevant arguments.

Fourth, the intellectual quality of argumentation increases when time is given to a few well developed claims. Narrowing the realm of the debate leads to a greater need for research and elevated analysis. Emphasizing the quantity of independent claims requires less thought on the actual underlying analysis; focusing on underlying analysis of claims probes deeper and more complex issues. Certainly more impressive than a collection of assertions, detailed analysis underlying the truth of a few specific claims increases the overall educational value of the activity.

### **Conclusion**

Breaking down the topic into one central issue establishes a specific criterion. Utilizing a specific criterion is advantageous in two main areas of debate. First, specificity increases debaters influence over the decision, by increasing overall clarity and providing a more objective weighing mechanism for the round. Second, a definitive criterion promotes four important aspects of strong debate: coherent weighing, better warranting, better coverage of opposing arguments, and more intellectual positions. Ultimately, utilizing the criterion effectively is critical to winning rounds.

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