

TOWARDS A MORE FUNCTIONAL METHODOLOGY FOR TOPIC ANALYSIS: A HYBRID OF DATA AND CONCEPT-DRIVEN MODELS

Editors

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INTRODUCTION

In 1979, the National Forensic League introduced a new values-oriented argumentation event called Lincoln-Douglas debate, also known as L/D debate. The new debate event was meant to be quite distinctive from policy debate, both in theory and practice. Two of the unique characteristics of L/D debate are that the debate topic changes every two months and by an absence of framers' intent. The NFL Lincoln-Douglas wording committee, made up of distinguished forensic educators, works during the NFL National Tournament to develop a list of potential topics for the following calendar year. Unlike the position statements found in the *Forensic Quarterly*, the members of the L/D wording committee remain silent for the duration of the debate season. As a result, L/D debaters engage in fresh topic analyzes every two months.

DEFINITION OF TOPIC ANALYSIS AND STATEMENT OF THESIS

Topic analysis is the process used to determine the validity of affirmative and negative positions as well as the burdens necessary to debate the resolution effectively. The main objective of topic analysis is to limit the debate to fair ground and to make the debate as clear as possible. Unfortunately, many coaches and debaters decide not to analyze the resolution, analyze the resolution at the wrong time, or analyze the resolution incorrectly. In this essay, the authors identify the most common problems associated with this process and offer a hybrid model which will facilitate thorough topic analysis.

Common Problems

One of the most distressing situations for debaters is to face an opponent who misanalyzes the topic. There are several examples of interpretations that misdirect the debate and are often the result of not analyzing a topic or analyzing it incorrectly. There are four specific examples of interpretations that are common flaws of poor topic analysis: balanced negative cases, non-conflict positions, misconstrued contexts and misused definitions.

First common problem: balanced cases

The authors observe that the appli-

cation of balanced negative cases is perhaps the most contentious issue in the evolution of Lincoln Douglas debate for the past few years. Proponents of balanced negatives argue that the negative position is "not the affirmative" as opposed to "the opposite of the affirmative." For instance, the balanced negative position of the 1997 January-February topic, "Resolved: In U.S. policy, the principle of universal human rights ought to take precedence over conflicting national interest," could be interpreted to mean either:

- 1) national interest and human rights are of equal precedence in U.S. policy; or
- 2) national interest ought to take precedence some of the time, instead of the affirmative position that human rights ought to always take precedence.

Polk, English and Walker argue in The Value Debate Handbook the oft-quoted basis for the balanced negative,

"The overriding responsibility of a negative debater is to convince the judge that the resolution should be rejected. In performing that task, the negative speaker assumes the burden of refuting the claims made by the affirmative in its defense of the resolution. There can be no negative independent of the affirmative case."

Polk, et. al. continues,

"The negative has much more freedom of action in choosing arguments than does the affirmative since the affirmative is claiming that the resolution is true; it must meet or 'prove' all of the prima facie burdens. The affirmative must win all of the issues to win the debate. Thus, the negative can choose many strategies from attacking only one element of the affirmative to disputing every element of the affirmative case."

Given that latitude, however, why should the negative be given even any more ground to win the debate? Given the complete lack of responsiveness in the L/D debate community to resolve the current crisis over presumption theory, debaters are left with no prescribed argumentative burdens. Thus the result of accepting balanced negative cases is that the bar is much higher for affirmatives because they have to decisively win the debate while negatives merely have to earn a draw to achieve victory. In addition, given the current 6-3-7-3-4-6-3 format, the affirmative must handle this unequal burden while debating with a significant dropoff in speaking time compared to the negative speaker.

From purely a topic analysis perspec-

tive, balanced negative cases fail to achieve the ultimate goals of debate. First, it fails to establish the negative burden necessary for debate. The mathematical equivalent to a balanced negative is the "equal or more/less than" expression. While that expression certainly has application in the mathematical world, the result is simply a computation result. The purpose of debate is to not only inform, but to persuade and therein lies the shortfall of balanced cases: while factually correct when applied using logical formula (X which is equal to Y cannot be greater than Y), the approach merely supports a fact or truth and fails to directly answer the moral imperative(s) which Lincoln-Douglas debate resolutions raise, which is to make some evaluative judgment of the resolution.

Since we can not adequately deal with the entire concept of balanced cases, please look to additional *Rostrum* sources for information regarding the current debate over balanced cases; the November 1995 issue of the *Rostrum* chronicles the dialogue between Mr. Jason Baldwin and Mr. Mark Webber.

Second common problem: non-conflict cases

The second common problem with topic analysis is the non-conflict case position. As debaters, we often ran into this type of interpretation that posits that the two claims in the resolution do not oppose each other. Therefore, the resolution is flawed and should be negated prima facie. Often, this also results from the natural evolution of debate as it accepts some of the tenets of policy debate such as the critique. While on a superficial level this position may appear to have merit, it fails to meet some of the key requirements of topic analysis. For instance, one objective of topic analysis is to determine whether the resolution is absolutist, comparative, or superlative. If the resolution is comparative, it can often be categorized as an implicit or explicit conflict scenario. Implicit conflict scenarios such as the Jan./ Feb. topic suggest a conflict between the two claims. Explicit conflict scenarios often use the words, "when in conflict," to isolate a specific level of clash between the two claims. For instance, the 1987 NFL Nationals topic, Resolved: When in conflict, the right to a free press is a higher priority than a fair trial, would indicate an explicit conflict scenario. In the realm of topic analysis, the non-conflict interpretation of a resolution fails to

advance sound debate since the round often degenerates into “two ships passing in broad daylight.” The resolution presupposes that a conflict exists between the two claims and a thorough analysis of the resolution can isolate what that conflict entails or where it occurs.

Third common problem: misconstrued topic

The third problem that plagues L/D debaters is an opponent who misconstrues the resolution. The specificity with which the L/D wording committee selects phrases and resolutions in general dictates how the topic should be debated even if framers intent is not published. As a result, the context of the resolution is an important facet of topic analysis. Unfortunately, some debaters misconstrue phrases such as “when in conflict” to direct the debate in an inappropriate direction. During the Nov./Dec. 1996 topic, “Resolved: When in conflict, a business’ responsibility to itself ought to be valued above it’s responsibility to society,” some argued that the definition of “conflict” was “war.” Thus, the resolution would read “When in armed conflict (or in wartime), a business’ responsibility to itself ought to be valued above it’s responsibility to society.” It is clear that this alternative definition radically changes the focus of the debate which renders topic analysis ineffective. The purpose of topic analysis and the definition of terms is to define the words in the resolution to form the framework for a fair debate and not to define a indefensible position. Consequently, any misinterpretation of the words or phrases in a resolution that alters the framework for debate would result in a misdirected debate round.

Fourth common problem: misused definitions

The final problem that results from poor topic analysis is the misuse of definitions. This varies slightly from misconstruing the topic since the definitional variation could also be unintentional. While there are several contemporary examples of resolutions where definitions could be wholly misused, consider the hypothetical resolution, “Resolved: Physical violence is the just response to oppression.” In Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, the fourth sub-definition of the third definition of “just” is “only.” The resolution could now read, “Resolved: Physical violence is the only response to oppression.” Of course,

most would agree that there are a plethora of different responses to oppression of which physical violence is but one possibility. The resolution is probably asking whether physical violence was a right, fair or legitimate response to oppression. Here the debater that defines “just” as “only” has obfuscated the round and limited ground unfairly. The affirmative under this interpretation would simply be false. A negative who defined the affirmative ground in this manner would force the affirmative debater into a laughable position while making the negative of the resolution a truism, by contemporary social standards. Another goal of topic analysis is choosing definitions that are commonly held to be true in that particular context. A society is not typically a family, oppressive is not heavy weights (or calculus homework or parents’ rules) and national interest is definitely not the money the nation earns on money in the treasury.

It is also important to remember to never use a word to define a word. Equality defined as “the quality or state of being equal” does not describe equality effectively. Many of the amorphous concepts inherent to L/D can fall prey to being defined in this manner. And without clarity, the debaters and the judge do not know what each side is supposed to defend. Sometimes it is important to determine whether the word is a noun or a verb, an adjective or an adverb and perhaps whether the verb is reflective. One particularly hazardous topic for L/D debaters was the resolution, “Resolved: Laws which protect citizens from themselves are justified.” The word “themselves” posed a serious problem since it could be concerned with the one citizen and him or herself or one citizen and other citizens.

It is important to look at every aspect of the word and determine how it is used in the sentence.

Conclusion of common problems

Topic analysis is a crucial step in avoiding many of these prevalent pitfalls. Eliminating these problems can assist debaters in advancing the discourse within the round and providing a semblance of fairness and reasonableness to how Lincoln-Douglas topics are debated. The celerity with which we remedy these problems will dictate how the activity as a whole will evolve and grow. However, through careful evaluation of the aspects of the evolu-

tion that takes place we can gain a clearer perception of where the activity is headed and how we might take advantage of the changes occurring around us.

METHODOLOGY

There are two fundamental strategies for topic analysis that are typically used in the L/D community. We will call them the “data-driven model” and the “concept-driven model.” While both have their individual merits and flaws, we believe that a combination of the two strategies would yield the most effective results. But first, it is important to assess these different approaches to topic analysis.

First method: Data-driven model

The data-driven model is perhaps the most controversial in professional fields outside of argumentation and rhetoric. Programs that subscribe to this model will often go immediately to the library after discovering the topic. Debaters pull books and articles off shelves by the dozen and spend hundreds of dollars in copying costs. The basis for this type of topic analysis is that the research will provide the foundation for strong argumentation. This is a legitimate concern and a laudable goal. However, data-driven topic analysis almost always results in what we call “topic myopia.” If research is the basis of the argumentation then originally-developed argumentation may be discouraged or possibly not considered since the arguments and analysis are lifted from the research material.

The advantage of this type of topic analysis is that case writing is significantly easier since the evidence is already tagged and the ‘argument’ is already explained. The debater simply places the evidence in the order he or she wishes and fills in the remaining time with explanations, extensions or impacts. Another advantage to this approach is that the arguments are well supported since printed sources often support their claims with documented proof. During Mr. Koshy’s high school debate career, he employed this type of argumentation on the 1996 September/October topic, Resolved: Individuals with disabilities ought to be afforded the same athletic competition opportunities as abled bodied athletes. The position of the affirmative case rested on “Section 502b of the Americans with Disabilities Act.” As a result of basing all his argumentation on the evidence, the case did not embrace the resolution but rather what the courts would uphold. Mr.

Baldwin made a quite persuasive and applicable claim in his recent *Rostrum* article when he said, “High school debate is not about finding truth, but about learning how to search for it.”

Second method

Concept-driven model

The concept-driven topic analysis is one that is frequently taught at national-caliber debate institutes and by many successful programs. The process begins with idea brainstorming sessions, group discussions, and refinement of ideas which may or may not result in persuasive arguments. As anyone who engages in this type of topic analysis can attest, this is a serious and time consuming process. As the arguments are fleshed out, the cases are written and evidence is found to support the arguments that have been presented. While there are obvious differences in approach, there are also differences in execution. For instance, those that employ concept-driven topic analysis find particular merit in mapping sentences and working out cross examination pathways. Whether this is valuable or not, there is sufficient understanding that there are significant differences between both models.

Third method: Cherian and Minh's 12 steps for topic analysis

In order to best utilize limited time and resources, a combination of the two previous models is necessary. While the structure may be humorous, it serves a particular purpose as it stipulates a sequence for specific tasks. As we discuss each step, we will create the entire process of topic analysis and the justification for the sequence.

Collect definitions: Quite obviously, it is hard to debate that which we do not know. As we completed this article, the current L/D topic: Resolved: The individual ought to value the sanctity of life over the quality of life, requires a firm understanding of what exactly is included in the sanctity of life and what is included in the quality of life. To assist in this process, we have included some excellent sources for definitions as well as some rules.

Dictionaries and Reference

Materials:

Oxford English Dictionary
American Heritage Dictionary
Webster's New International Dictionary

Field or Specialized Dictionaries:

Black's Law Dictionary

The Dictionary of Philosophy
The American Political Dictionary
Corpus Juris Secundum
Ballentine's Law Dictionary
The Encyclopedia of Philosophy
American Jurisprudence
Words and Phrases

Guidelines for definitions:

- Definitions are used to clarify the debate, not define the debate. Most of all, remember to be reasonable; do not define your opponent out of the round. This is not to say that debaters may not use somewhat slanted definitions or definitions that are more favorable to one side or the other but that they should not eliminate their opponent's ground.

- Consider many definitions and find the best ones for application in the round. Do not settle for the first definition you find.

- Choose only definitions that assist and clarify the debate; never use a form of a word to define a word.

- Decide whether or not to define words independently or in phrases. For instance, quality of life may be better defined as a phrase because it's contextual meaning would be lost independently.

- Most people claim that the debater should not define every word in the resolution. While we agree with the intent behind that sentiment, the debater should not ignore words such as 'a' or 'the' when important as those words may give clues to affirmative and negative burdens.

- Always define the word according to its usage. Define nouns, verbs and adjectives properly.

Have debaters determine type: There are essentially three types of resolutions in Lincoln-Douglas debate: absolute, comparative and superlative. Determining the type of resolution will assist the debater in arguing affirmative and negative ground in the debate round.

- Absolute resolutions follow the yes/no format. After reading the resolution, an implied yes or no would be the answer. In terms of values, we see these resolutions as either right or wrong. An example of this type of resolution is “Resolved: Human genetic engineering is morally justified.”

- Comparative resolutions follow the greater than format. When looking at these types of resolutions, a comparison

can be made between the two values by the evaluative term. In the following example, a just social order compares the values of liberty and equality using ought as the evaluative term. “Resolved: A just social order ought to value the principle of liberty over the principle of equality.”

- Superlative resolutions follow the greatest format. Often these resolutions offer a clear hierarchy of values. Since this type of resolution has a high negative bias, it is rarely used but is still an important evaluative type. Very few current examples come to mind for this particular type but there are some examples of this type. “Resolved: National security ought to be the nation's highest priority.”

Examine the action: The resolution often requires that some action must be taken to affirm or negate. This action whether it be valuing above, prioritizing, creating law or obligation not only gives context to the round but also serves as an excellent source for impacts. More often than not, the evaluative term in the resolution has something to do with the action.

Resolve the agent committing the action: After determining what happens when we affirm or negate, it is important to determine who or what commits that action. Often it is the government, society or an individual that would choose the action in the resolution. At the more elite levels of competition, understanding the role of the agent in the resolution can have significant strategic value.

Investigate examples: Often, L/D resolutions have the unique characteristic of being a bit cerebral or too philosophic in nature. In these cases, an effective way to overcome this obstacle is to provide some real world or pragmatic application. Impacts and examples provide that much needed clarity and pragmatic grounding that gives a case depth and universal appeal. An article dealing with pragmatic argumentation in L/D debate, authored by Keryn M. Kwedor and Minh A. Luong, appears elsewhere in this issue of the *Rostrum* so the we will not discuss this issue further.

Arrange a library trip: Here is where the two models intersect and form the “Cherian and Minh model.” While we feel that the data-driven approach has its flaws, there is no substitute for knowledge on the topic. The ability to use and understand terms and concepts within the field of the resolution is not only important for argumentative impact but also being clear in the round. While at the library, it is important

to prioritize tasks and make the most of your limited time at the library or on-line research session.

Note all possible arguments: After having a clear idea of what the current literature says as well as what the agent, the action, and possible examples are, debaters should have excellent ideas for possible arguments. An effective means of accomplishing this would be to list all affirmative arguments and then all negative arguments. After making that list, develop first-line responses to each affirmative and negative argument so that you further develop your list. One frequently neglected area is legal argumentation. Despite the fact that nearly every L/D resolution focuses on social issues, legal-based arguments are either non-existent or are superfluous. An essay on utilizing legal resources and arguments in L/D debate by Elizabeth I. Rogers and Minh A. Luong appear in this issue of the *Rostrum*.

& all effective criteria: Once you have lists of potential affirmative and negative arguments, you can begin to develop and evaluate criteria. Since the literature often provides some unique and interesting criteria that is also topic specific, this is an important time to assess what criteria may be used. This also forces the debater to clearly link the criteria and the arguments. In addition, the criteria will more than likely relate to the topic if it is derived from the arguments. For those who are interested in the value/criterion debate, please refer to Courtney J. Balentine and Minh A. Luong's article on the use of values and criteria in Lincoln-Douglas debate, which appears elsewhere in this issue of the *Rostrum*.

Make a list of values: After creating a list of arguments and the criteria, the next step is the value premise. Instead of getting up on a L/D soapbox about the use of value premises and what value premises are acceptable and not acceptable, we have chosen to simply discuss how to choose a value and why the link to the criteria is important. The most important aspect in choosing a value, especially in comparative resolutions, is to find the value that best adjudicates the competing values in the resolution. So, for instance, when the resolution compares human rights and national interest, a value that can decide between those two claims – in essence, is the most directly related, or intrinsic to the resolution – should be used as the value premise. Typically, the value premise is neutral; that is, either side can achieve it. One sugges-

tion for better value debate is to pick a value and define it specifically to the resolution.

Invest two to three days to develop effective responses: We suggest two to three days because one day should be spent on each side to fully flesh out the development of strong responses. It is often effective to create these responses in a group setting, brainstorming, and listing all responses to the arguments. Remember that cases have not yet been written for very good reasons. Even though the debaters have arguments, criteria and a value premise as well as responses, we do not suggest writing cases until after this stage. The simplest explanation is that the responses can be used to fortify the cases and save them from the easiest responses.

Now, write cases: A treatment on casewriting could justify a dedicated issue of the *Rostrum* -- an entire discussion in itself. Our only note here is that significant time and energy should be undertaken in this process to write, rewrite and rewrite again. Not only will the constant revision undoubtedly improve the cases but will also give debaters the ability to explain concepts and arguments quickly and concisely.

Have practice debates: Debating teammates can give debaters useful insights into whether their arguments make sense and what stands up in a round or what should be scrapped. Sometimes this is not possible before a tournament setting because of either a lack of teammates or a lack of time. If either of these factors are true, debating yourself can also be effective. In any case, the first round a debater has should never be in front of a judge with a ballot.

- Collect definitions
- Have debaters determine type
- Examine the action
- Resolve the agent committing the action
- Investigate examples
- Arrange a library trip
- Note all possible arguments
- & all effective criteria
- Make a list of values
- Invest two to three days for responses
- Now, write cases
- Have practice debates

Conclusion

The evolution of Lincoln-Douglas debate has been a continuous process for nearly 20 years. Each time a debater challenges the norms of what the debate community previously thought was acceptable, another step is taken. Topic analysis gives debaters the tools to stay ahead of the evo-

lutionary trend and take advantage of it. When performed correctly, topic analysis will help debaters understand and research a broader range of issues and decide which are relevant to the discussion. The authors are convinced that several chronic problems which have plagued the Lincoln-Douglas community will be ameliorated by starting with effective topic analysis and argument construction. It is the hope of the authors that through this process, debaters will develop a more universal style that will appeal to wide variety of judges, thereby increasing their rhetorical effectiveness.