



THE D G E

EXTENDING TOPICALITY ARGUMENTS

by
David M. Cheshier

It has become rather difficult to win topicality arguments on the high school national policy circuit, for several reasons. The topic wording committee has tended in recent years to prefer more open-ended terminology, which makes it more difficult to make convincing grammatical claims. And the major terms have not lent themselves to conservative interpretation; this season, for example, it has proved virtually impossible to win arguments that would limit the meaning of terms like “foreign policy.” Even the most precise term on this resolution — “weapons of mass destruction” — has not enabled much successful topicality argumentation.

There is also the fact of accumulated skepticism about the value of topicality debating. Today winning a topicality violation on many circuits requires an all-or-nothing investment of rebuttal time, and some prominent judges regularly broadcast their hostility to T debates.

Still, the perceived tactical benefits of initiating topicality arguments remain. The time tradeoff often favors the negative, since violations can be cut down to fifteen seconds or so while it usually takes longer to convincingly respond. And despite some sporadic efforts to defend “reverse voting issue” claims against underdeveloped violations, the risks remain one way. Only the affirmative can lose the debate on topicality. The result is the odd situation now characteristic of the national circuit: while topicality violations are advanced in as many as 95% of first negative constructives, they remain a part of the second negative rebuttal perhaps only 5% of the time.

In what follows, I offer some tips for arguing topicality, whether you’re trying to win a violation on the negative or simply trying to keep the position

alive in the negative block as a way to pressure the 1AR. Think about these factors:

You can go for other arguments in the 2NR. There are senses in which topicality is an “all or nothing” issue (for example, a plan’s topicality is a bit like being pregnant or infected — either it is or it isn’t). But I disagree with those who believe topicality requires an all or nothing commitment of time, either in the block or the last rebuttal. While obviously some judges feel this way, and for them you should play to the prejudice, most topicality arguments are simply not so complicated as to require a full five-minute explication in the 2NR. I cannot imagine a topicality argument necessitating the total dedication of a constructive speech. Often, over-extension of a violation can actually backfire — either by inducing repetitively excessive explanation, or revealing just how simple (or foolish) the T argument is. Give the violation only the time it requires. If answering the three 1AR arguments only takes two minutes in the 2NR, that’s plenty, and an extra three minutes of oration will not enhance the argumentative power of the violation.

I’ve heard many answers to this point over the years. Some say, “making T the exclusive focus of the 2NR communicates one’s seriousness.” But there are other ways to communicate seriousness, including smart extension, forceful and passionate expression, and sequencing the violation at the top of the rebuttal. Others say, “of course don’t overkill — but it is all or nothing — so take the two minutes you need, and then sit down.” I find that point of view a bit absurd, a concession outright of valuable time that might either be used productively to extend other winning arguments, or divert the 2AR from the T argument you really love.

Be prepared to go for the topicality argument depending on the affirmative answers. An obvious point, I suppose, but I’m surprised at how often I see topicality arguments initiated in the first negative where the team communicates their utter disinterest in going for it. They’ll cheerfully admit to the 2AC as she preps that they haven’t flowed their own violation. Or, and this is worse, while the 1NR fights his way through the violation, the affirmative will see with their own four eyes that the 2NC isn’t flowing her colleague on the argument. Such behaviors needlessly give away the game, and they deny you the possibility of actually going for the violation if the 1AR screws it up. Even if you imagine the T position as a time-waster, pure and simple, preserve your options.

Flow especially carefully. Avoid grouping when you respond. Topicality arguments run but not extended are ubiquitous, and even judges friendly to T often give the benefit of the doubt to affirmatives under heavy 2AC time pressure. They’ll permit creative 1AR reinterpretation of obviously irrelevant 2AC answers. To avoid this problem, make absolutely sure 2AC arguments are well understood. Take a careful flow. Use cross-examination time to review the answers to insure the judge’s flow entirely agrees

with yours. And debate carefully. Topicality is one argument requiring line by line refutation (the only exception is the situation where none of a group of responses is relevant to the violation, and you’re grouping simply to point this fact out).

Make the original violation as complicated as necessary, and your extensions as simple as possible. The common judging predisposition to give affirmatives latitude on topicality is enhanced when the original violation is under-developed. It closes potential 2AR escape routes to put a little extra effort into the original structure — preempt where you can — so that when the time comes, you’re able to point out that they have “missed this from the very beginning.” On the other hand, do not make your extension of the position needlessly complicated. Avoid absurdly intricate overviews (they only provide 1ARs with a hook on which to hang their new arguments), and don’t add new explanations essentially making the violation new or different. Start with a detailed position, and then simply reiterate it later in the round.

Carefully explain the violation in an overview if necessary. Some violations are basic and well understood by all, and they do not require overview explanation in the block. This advice to overview pertains to the more intricate positions, where the plan may appear to meet the violation but fails because of a technicality buried in the 1NR definition. If this is so, a quick overview explanation of exactly how the plan falls short is a good idea.

Stay focused on the specifics of the plan. Another basic point, but one often forgotten: it is the plan we are testing for topicality purposes, not the rhetoric of the case or the 2AC. At every point, keep your eyes (and debating) centered on what the plan says. Feel free to quote its mandates, and explain how they fall short of meeting your definition (or, for that matter, their own).

Rely on “topicality tests.” When a judge decides topicality at round’s end, she or he will often lay your definition down side-by-side with the text of the plan. The judge faces the simple task of determining if this plan meets this definition. Your debating must provide the judge with a test (or tests) for making such a determination. In the law these are often called “bright line tests,” since ideally they produce clear-cut determinations. In topicality debates, such tests can be simple. “Does the plan’s plain language reduce weapons of mass destruction by 50% or not? — If not they are not a significant limit.” Or “look at the plan language — do they use the State Department as the implementing agency? — If not they are not a foreign policy.” Or they can be a little harder to communicate clearly, like the so-called “vacuum test” I proposed many years ago. Either way, debate focused on such “tests” give a judge a clear roadmap for decision, and can help the negative clearly explain both the specificity of their violation and the reasonability of its application to the affirmative plan.

Avoid yes/no debating. Deploy “trump-

ing” arguments. Debate “as if.” Topicality debating centers on questions of semantic interpretation or grammatical construction. Often the decisive arguments do not reference specific pieces of evidence. Given this, topicality debate often reduces to “yes” versus “no” claims — “they over-limit,” “breadth is better than depth,” and so on — which are not decisively resolvable for either side. Even talented debaters can fall prey to this problem by failing to argue as if their opponent will win any of her claims. That is, even passionately and carefully argued violations end up a mess for the judge when both sides fail to integrate any fall back positions into their extensions. Here more than on any other issue it is important to build in such fallback arguments — “even if they win that ‘limits’ is the most important standard, they lose because...” Where possible, provide the judge with clear paths out of the thicket of assertion and counter-assertion.

Avoid repetition. Topicality debates are often tedious because the same point is so frequently repeated. As you prep you may find that you’re often writing down the same explanation or argument. When you do, move the point into the issue overview — say it once, and then refer to your introductory analysis later on as necessary.

In the block, extend the violation in the 2NC if possible. Or, the 2NR should at least flow the partner’s 1NR on topicality. This advice may seem a bit counter-intuitive, since mismatched teams (where the 2NC is more experienced than the 1NC) often use the strategy of having the 1NR extend T. The logic is that the 1NR will do no real damage — if they don’t cover everything the round will not be lost (since topicality isn’t normally a position the affirmative can turn), and the 1NR can orate for as little or much time as they want to use. But this strategy is often a giveaway that the 2NR will not extend the violation, and many 2NCs compound the problem by not flowing their partners on T. As a result of this conventional wisdom, you can sometimes get mileage simply by extending topicality in the 2NC. It doesn’t have to take very long, and should not divert from the major position(s) extended in the 2NC (critical argument, counterplan, etc.). And since the 2NC is a constructive speech, there won’t be any risk the arguments run there will be “new.” Leave topicality for the constructive’s end — if everything isn’t covered, the 1NR can take care of the rest.

Be strategic in allocating time to the violation. If you intend the violation as a time-waster for the affirmative, only give it the minimal time necessary to accomplish the purpose. If you want to win the debate on it, spend a little more time on it to cover your bases.

Close the door on the “it only means we’re extra-topical” trap. Affirmatives will often try to convert your topicality argument into an extra-topicality claim. They’ll point out that the violation only pertains to a part of the plan (which would leave the other topical provisions

as reasons to vote affirmative), since they know most judges are less offended by extra-topicality problems than by violations that strike at the heart of the plan's mandates. Preempt this possible affirmative response. Either explain why extra-topicality is also a voting issue, or explain that the remaining part of the plan wouldn't be topical of its own accord. Or you might explain how, even if it is, what's left wouldn't secure any advantage worth voting for.

Practice extending topicality without taking preparation time. I recommend this as an at-home practice strategy for both negative speakers. Specifically, you should practice giving "stand-up" extension speeches of the violation. You'll be surprised, I think, by how quickly you'll learn to extend topicality off the top of your head, and convincingly so. Partly this is true because, as I mentioned earlier, most topicality positions are just not very complicated. Topicality does not usually require evidenced extension, so there is no need to use prep time to pull cards or briefs. If you become adept at no-prep extension of topicality, you'll be able to extend the violation in the 2NC without taking prep, and also strengthen your 2NR skills at topicality explanation. Unlike other substantive positions, you'll discover that many affirmative topicality answers can be convincingly answered with a single response.

Debate topicality by example. Topicality debates are usually diverted to the extent they focus on standards or impact arguments. In addition to remaining focused at all times on the plan's mandates, smart topicality debaters also rise above assertion and counter-assertion by giving as many examples as possible to illustrate their points. Instead of asserting their definition permits abusive affirmatives, list six or seven of the most ridiculous cases enabled by their interpretation. Instead of simply arguing "they over-limit," list four or five popularly accepted heart-of-the-topic cases that would be disallowed by their interpretation.

Only offer and extend relevant standards. Most topicality violations end up coming down to the issue of whether the affirmative plan meets a reasonably limited definition of the key term. Given this, it's usually a diversion to offer and defend multiple alternative topicality standards, like grammar (which is almost never actually at issue) or "legal definitions best" (again, usually not relevant). Defend only those standards necessary to make effective your particular violation.

Keep the number of violations you offer to a minimum. It is a waste of time to offer marginally relevant violations, and doing so only reinforces the prejudice of some judges against bad topicality debate. There is also the problem

of cross-application: running multiple violations only compounds the risk of affirmative answers which can be made relevant to the serious violation you intend to extend.

The decision to run a topicality argument reflects one of two judgments: either you think the violation is a genuine winner, or you're running it because "it can't hurt" to add a no-lose argument to the negative mix. The trick, of course, is to convince your opponent of your serious intention to go for topicality, while simultaneously minimizing your investment of time in it, thereby enabling you to extend other positions you also care about. But keep this in mind: walking this fine line and creating the credible impression you want the judge to vote on topicality is only partly a function of the time you invest in the violation. Seriousness can be conveyed in many other ways that will not rob you of speech time more urgently needed to keep other arguments alive.

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(David M. Cheshier is Assistant Professor of Communications and Director of Debate at Georgia State University. His column appears monthly in the Rostrum.)