

# PERFORMANCE DEBATES: HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

by  
Jenny Heidt

Imagine the following 1AC: the affirmative team stands up and reads a series of poems written by someone claiming to be mentally ill, they play a song that refers to mental illness and, for a grand finale; they refuse to speak to show solidarity with the oppressed. There is no plan and the closest they come to being topical is to claim that they are “germane” to the resolution. Besides, topicality is outweighed by the value of their discourse. Sound bizarre? Most debate coaches would think so

about a very specialized and alien sounding slice of academic literature. All debate has value but the obvious practicality of being an informed citizen who can evaluate public policy makes more sense to me as a high school teacher.

My hope is that the community will react to these “performances” with intelligent counter-arguments. We had to go through a long phase of reactionary “go to LD” type arguments against critiques that won very few debates. Refreshingly, I have been hearing more and more affirmative responses to critiques that are well-developed. It took many squads a long time before they gave in and started cutting cards to stock critique claims. Now that they have, the playing field seems to have leveled out somewhat.

**...“the community norm that topicality is a voting issue has kept the range of possible affirmatives to a manageable number.”**

The way most of these debates happen in the college community, the affirmative essentially waits to react to the 1NC before engaging in discussions about how the debate should

but some of the very best college teams in the country win on plan-free “performance” 1ACs weekend after weekend. As with critiques and a host of other arguments, these “performances” will surely leak down to the high school community. Even now, high school teams are beginning to preface their 1ACs with “narratives” or add “frameworks” on to their plan that claim that they do not believe in fiat and debate should be viewed as an opportunity for personal advocacy. Camps are also beginning to explore these arguments and my guess is that they will only become more popular.

operate. The 1AC is interesting but does not lay out any standards. The 2AC has an extensive series of blocks on why topicality or disadvantages or other traditional arguments are bad. Given that the affirmative makes these arguments every round and they do not have to keep up with updating a policy affirmative, they become quite sophisticated on these arguments. A negative team who has not invested in thoroughly thinking through justifications for traditional policy debate will be lost.

Although critical arguments seem here to stay in debate, there at least has been an expectation that the affirmative needs to present a topical plan of action. The shift away from presenting plans in the college community bodes ill for the future of high school debate. My concern primarily lies with serious fairness issues that I will explore in this article. However, I am also not sure that we need to move any farther from debating about public policy. I enjoyed reading about critical theory in graduate school and believe people when they claim that this literature has opened up new ways of looking at the world. At the same time, I cannot imagine telling a classroom full of new ninth grade debaters that instead of debating public policy that they need to learn

In this article, I hope to introduce some possible arguments defenses of traditional policy debate that can be used to challenge the procedural fairness of performance debates. For this article, “performance” will mean an affirmative that does not have a plan and claims that the value of their speech act comes before traditional policy making concerns.

First, the negative can argue that the performing team has a substantial and unfair advantage before the round. Given that they only claim to be “germane” to the resolution, the negative team cannot adequately prepare. We all know that topicality does not restrict teams from running affirmatives on the very edges of the topic. Yet, the community norm that topicality is a voting issue has kept the range of possible affirmatives to a manageable

number. Negative teams can at least have generic disadvantage links and counterplans in case they are taken surprise by a new but topical affirmative. Performance debates have no such limit. The possible affirmative claims in a world where they only need to be “germane” are endless. They might make any variety of claims in the 1AC from telling stories that illustrate a harms area to critiquing the resolution to asking the judge to join a movement.

When faced with these challenges to the fairness of the performance, the affirmative is likely to make a few arguments. First, they may suggest a number of marvelous positions that the negative could have run. These suggestions obviously ignore the necessity of pre-round preparation which rests on having a predictable limit on cases (such as having to be topical). Second, they may claim that you are silencing their voices and therefore should lose for committing discursive violence. They will claim that we are a community of academics in a unique position to speak our minds and read evidence that local action spurs larger political movements. This glorious description of the power of a debate round ignores that competitive fairness is a necessary precondition for the community to exist. Students are and coaches are motivated by fair competition. We all need to feel that hard preparation work will pay off or we will stop coming to tournaments. Stumbling across a bit of “truth” because of a debate argument is exciting but fair competition is the engine that keeps us going. Also, if their issue of the day is really that critical to discuss, they ought to introduce it in a noncompetitive situation where the other participants in the discussion are prepared! Highlighting the suffering caused by homophobia or racism is obviously valuable but that does not mean that a team should win a competitive debate round. To be successful on these arguments, the negative needs to effectively separate the value of the affirmative harm claim from procedural issues of fairness.

Second the negative can argue that the performance team has a substantial advantage in the round. This in-round advantage primarily stems from the lack of a clear methodology by which the judge is supposed to decide the round. In a world where there are no clear standards of how to judge the debate, the team running the performance gets to make up the rules as they go along! Self-serving standards for which performance is “better” evolve throughout the debate, leaving the negative bewildered.

As Ross Smith of Wake Forest University has argued, the judge has to vote affirmative or negative at the end of the round and there needs to be a predictable standard by which they reach these conclusions. In a traditional debate, the judge starts by asking whether or not the plan is topical. If so, they move on to a second question about whether or not the plan is desirable. Desirability can be calculated in terms of net benefits. If the affirmative advantages minus the disadvantages are greater than zero, the judge votes affirmative. If the reverse conditions are true, the judge votes negative. Counterplan and permutation net benefits can easily be added into this equation. These calculations are never perfectly scientific but teams can cut evidence and make strategic decisions during the debate with those calculations in mind. They know that they need to find a combination of arguments that will allow them outweigh the affirmative. During the block, they can kick out of positions that are not helping them to maximize net benefits for their side. Some of the very best training in critical

thinking comes from these strategic considerations. These weighing exercises are impossible in a world where the debaters do not know what basis the judge will use for their decision. How can the negative possibly prepare for invisible standards inside the mind of the judge? How can they kick out of positions that are not working if the judge has to craft standards during the debate? How can they know what will appeal to the emotions of the judge? Without answers to these questions, strategy gets replaced by fumbling through speeches.

In response, the affirmative will argue that judging is always value laden and, therefore, unpredictable. We all know that judging can vary quite a bit from debate to debate. However, that is not a reason to throw out all judging standards! If there is a sliding scale between the perfect judge who comprehends and weighs all arguments with zero bias on one end and, say, someone who is asleep and therefore totally random on the other end, I would certainly rather strive for the first model. The fact that the same teams clear from tournament to tournament and that we all have judges that we would prefer in the back of the room proves that judging is predictable enough to allow us to function. My students certainly feel better when they lose and take more pride in winning rounds when the judging was coherent and predictable. Much like in a topicality debate, even if the traditional policy model of decision making has some flaws, it is still the only predictable interpretation available and must be accepted. Performance affirmatives may also claim that critical arguments make judging unpredictable already. This argument ignores that the plan is still the central focus of the debate. The affirmative can prepare for likely links, and the negative, by claiming to turn solvency or highlighting an external impact, usually fits within traditional decision making calculations.

The dynamic nature of the debate community keeps it interesting. Advanced college debaters and coaches who have tread the ground of traditional policy debate for several years are understandably invigorated by new literature and creative arguments. Most high school judges have also seen enough agent counterplan and politics debates to last a lifetime. However, this new model of debate raises serious fairness questions. Over time, fairer standards may evolve to judge performances but, in the mean time, debaters must prepare or perish. Debaters who are trained to defend the logic behind traditional policy making will have a much better chance than a team who is only ready to sputter “but topicality HAS to be a voting issue.” Be ready to talk about the logic of policy making in a sophisticated way and these new debates will not be as daunting.

*(Jenny Heidt is Director of Forensics at The Westminster Schools in Atlanta, Georgia. Previously, Jenny was the Assistant Director at Pace Academy where her team won the Tournament of Champions. Jenny also helped to coach an NDT champion at Emory University before starting her high school coaching career.)*

