

TURNER DEBATE: WRITING YOUR CASES

by
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In *History of Civilization in England*, Henry Buckle wrote that "Every new truth which has ever been propounded has for a time caused mischief; it has produced discomfort, and often unhappiness..." Turner Debate is a new truth for all our speech programs. The reasons for its creation are good and sound. But like all new truths it can produce discomfort as we all struggle to decide how to approach it, and that begins with the question of how to research and write cases.

What types of ideas should a debater look for? What arguments are most likely to win a lay judge's ballot? Four categories are most likely to be successful: *real world, philosophical, historic, and economic.*

Real world arguments argue the way things are. They say that we may or may not like our world but if we are to succeed in it we have to accept what is before we can make it better. We might get angry, for example, at the fact that women often get paid less than men for the same work but anger solves nothing. Only by looking for the reasons for this bigotry can we take the first step towards solving it. Or we might pontificate against pollution. But unless we identify and learn about the economic realities that create pollution can we change those realities.

Philosophical case arguments identify the moral or ethical beliefs we hold most dear and use them to construct case issues. If you believe the audience will hold liberty as more important than justice or religion than liberty might form the center of a key case argument. If you were debating for a topic on increasing income taxes

you might have a contention about the social contract or utilitarianism to give the judge the philosophical underpinnings to vote for your position.

Historical arguments are pragmatic. They are a special class of examples, which argue that since the past proves a certain approach to be good or bad the judge should use that information to view the topic (which should be clearly analogous) as good or bad. The position reflects Santayana's axiomatic observation that "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it". If the topic, for example, argued that the United States abandon deploying the anti-missile defense system the negative could talk about how weak British and French defenses encouraged Hitler's European invasions and attacks in 1938 and 1939. The affirmative could counter with the example that Iraqi development of new weapons systems, especially weapons of mass destruction, almost initiated a preemptive Persian Gulf War and invasion by the United States in 2002.

Economic arguments give the debater a facet, a mental approach, too often missing in many debate cases. With an economic approach the case, or one part of it, argues that costs should drive the judge's decision. If the topic calls for admitting a new member to NAFTA the affirmative could argue that more exports creates more

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Turner Debate cases should start with an acceptance of the time limits for each first speech, four minutes. This is a small amount of time and inherently limits how much can be contained in the affirmative and negative cases. The limited time should also be used to guide and focus research on each new topic. The debater's research must serve not just to identify the likely issues, but also to identify the two to four best arguments on each side.

Before researching each new topic the debater should list the key words in the topic and their most common synonyms. This list should be used for internet web search entries. As research produces results you should modify your key word list, usually by expanding it, to incorporate new ideas you had not thought of but the articles you find suggest.

After culling twenty to thirty good articles on the topic the debater will read, highlight and or mark quotes, examples, and good ideas in each article. These important bits of evidence and information, utilized in conjunction with the key word list, should suggest the best affirmative and negative arguments. To be doubly sure a meeting with the debate coach should compare ideas and cultivate an educational sharing that improves the final selection of central case ideas.

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jobs. The negative could counter with a study showing that the United States would actually lose some jobs, especially low-skilled jobs that the working poor are most in need of. If the topic was on the prison system the costs of crime verses crime control could be debated.

After the debater selects two to four central ideas s/he must next outline a case for each side, affirmative and negative. In structuring case ideas, whether they are called contentions or issues or observations or truths, the writer should use enthymatic constructions. An enthymeme is a logical argument where one or more of the premises is assumed or unstated. Since the speaker has only four minutes to make his or her case such arguments save time. A good enthymeme uses the beliefs of the judge to begin the argument. Francis Bacon explained it well in 1620: "For what a man had rather were true he more readily believes." If you can tap into what the judge wants to believe your job is easier.

Thus if you wanted to argue for a free press you might just say that press restrictions are unconstitutional, but not state why the constitution is good and deserves our support because almost all lay judges will grant that the United States' constitution should be supported. Or if you were negative on a topic calling for increased federal government funding of mass transit one contention might argue that more and larger federal programs are inherently bureaucratic and inefficient. Such an argument takes advantage of the beliefs of many Americans and thus reduces the evidence and time burden placed on the negative speaker. In the mass transit example most negative speakers would not feel obligated to cite studies which show that increased size means increased bureaucracy, nor would the speaker usually be criticized for omitting evidence that the federal government is especially prone to bureaucratic expansion with its resultant inertia. (In point of fact both these suppositions are debatable, but lay judge beliefs sometimes make it not worth the time to challenge the enthymeme or the implied assertion.)

When the outlines are done both partners should agree on their approaches. Then the coach should be consulted for her or his input. Only then should a verbatim transcript be typed.

The full case should be written to consciously include *power* words and *action* phrases. These rhetorical tools make the judge more likely top vote for the speaker's side in the debate. Power words are usually adjectives. They convey importance and or a need to act; they are words which command attention. It is good to argue that "rights should grow", it is more effective to argue "vital human rights must be aggressively increased". If something is *vital* we must have it, and a *human* right is more important than a right. An "aggressive increase" commands more attention than growth. Words have power, the Turner debater must learn to harness and use that power to win a lay judge to his side.

But there is a second *power* tool the debater should consider. The American culture shows a healthy respect for science, mathematics, and empirical research. Both affirmative and negative cases should use this audience predisposition to win judges to their side. How? By using numbers, statistics, statistical claims, and scientific related phrasing so that their case sounds empirically grounded. If the topic argues that airline pilots should be armed in the cockpit the affirmative could say, "terrorists will be deterred by a pilot with a gun". Or the affirmative could say, "*empirical data* gathered by El Al Airlines *statistically proves* that terrorists are deterred by armed pilots".

After the first drafts of the affirmative and negative cases are

done they should be timed and practiced. Is the speech too long? Too short? Boring? Insufficiently evidenced? Lacking in persuasive examples? Is the wording powerful and persuasive without sacrificing thoughtful content? Winners will use these questions to critique their work and then rewrite or edit both cases.

Then the really good debater will write a second version that is half the length of the first version. Why? Because half the time your team will not be giving the first speech, you will lose the flip and go second (or win it and choose to go second). That means you will have already heard the other team's case and want to attack it. But if your case fills your full four minutes you cannot start your attack in your first speech. And you should start your attacks as early as possible; the longer a position or claim goes undenied the less likely the judge will reject it. The stronger or more important an opposition argument the more important that it be attacked early and often. So your first speech, if it is not the first speech in the debate, should leave ample time for attack and refutation.

When both versions are done the team's first speaker should practice an *assertive delivery*. Judges are influenced by how you say it every bit as much as by what you say. An assertive delivery has strong volume, frequent direct eye contact, and a gesture plus facial expression package that clearly emphasize important points. Your ethos (credibility as a speaker) is also improved by good grammar and appropriate advanced vocabulary.

At the end of case researching and writing your cases should be checked to be sure they reflect the following elements:

- ___ They comfortably fit the 4-minute time limit
- ___ They are both well researched
- ___ They include at least 3 out of 4 argument categories: real world, philosophy, historical, and economic analysis
- ___ You have used enthymemes
- ___ Your rhetoric uses power words, active words
- ___ Numbers and science are incorporated
- ___ You have 2 affirmative and 2 negative case versions to use when your side goes first, and when it speaks second
- ___ Your grammar and vocabulary add to your team ethos

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