

# Advancing in Debate: Skills & Concepts

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# Preface

Academic debate requires multiple levels of skills and understandings. This is what makes participation in the activity so fascinating and challenging. As a beginning debater, you may have found yourself feeling overwhelmed by all that you needed to learn. With effort and direction, however, your confidence in dealing with such basic concepts as stock issues, evidence taking, and “flowsheeting” increased. As you advance to more experienced levels of competition, these fundamentals will continue to be important, but the mastery of other techniques and concepts is also necessary. The purpose of this text is to help you better understand these advanced processes.

Some of the ideas discussed in this book will not be totally new. They will, however, be presented in greater depth than you may have previously experienced. The effective use of concepts such as topicality, counterplans, and disadvantages requires a considerable degree of sophistication. The theory behind these concepts is complex, with many aspects not universally agreed upon. The best debaters must be able not only to defend their substantive arguments but also to justify the theoretical foundations of their analysis. Are topical counterplans legitimate? Why are broad interpretations of topics good? When may counterplans be permuted? These are important theoretical questions which you must be prepared to argue.

In addition to understanding the theoretical constructs of academic debate, you also need to increase your mastery of a variety of key skills. By relying on intuition and innate skills, inexperienced debaters are able to engage in refutation, cross-examination, and communication. But just as sandlot baseball players discover that innate skills alone are not sufficient for major league competition, experienced debaters eventually learn that their debating techniques

need refinement and conscious control. There are a number of ways to test the soundness of evidence and arguments. Debaters who do not have a deep understanding of these standards are severely handicapped. The reason why so much cross-examination is a waste of time is because many debaters lack real knowledge of how to use it effectively. And just because debaters can talk does not mean that they know how to communicate relationships or to focus critical ideas in ways that judges can comprehend.

The use of debate briefs has become such a common practice in academic debate that even most novice debaters have some experience with briefing. Unfortunately, instruction in brief-making is often unsystematic and not fully explained. A better understanding of how to construct good briefs results in much-improved debating. Another key to successful debating is judge adaptation. Debaters who understand the different perspectives that judges bring to their task are better able to present arguments in ways acceptable to a variety of different judges. Debating is a complex and dynamic activity. One of the newer ideas to emerge in academic debate is that of the critique strategy. As you progress into the most advanced levels of the activity, you may wish to try this approach. Whether you like the concept of the critique or not, be prepared to respond to it. To do this, you need to understand what types of critique strategies exist and the arguments for and against their use.

The skills and concepts discussed in this text are not necessarily easily learned or quickly mastered, but they will make your debating experience more challenging and interesting. To help you apply these concepts, we have suggested learning exercises at the end of each chapter. We urge you to utilize these exercises as a means of increasing your understanding. Some ideas have special utility for you at different times. We have, therefore, tried to organize the materials for easy reference. In addition to a comprehensive index at the end of the book, we have provided detailed outlines at the beginning of each chapter and summaries at the end of the chapters.

Good luck and have fun!

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**OVERVIEW**

- I. A rule-based approach to debate theory is incomplete.
- II. Deductive models provide a source of debate theory.
  - A. A legal model of debate.
    - (1) Affects the roles of the participants.
    - (2) Suggests a significant role for presumption.
    - (3) Points to key issues around which the debate revolves.
  - B. A legal model directs advocates to recurrent stock issues.
    - (1) Significant harm.
    - (2) Inherency.
    - (3) Solvency.
    - (4) Costs.
    - (5) Jurisdiction/topicality.
  - C. A policy model of debate.
    - (1) Focuses debate on the affirmative plan.
    - (2) Suggests an interactive view of the stock issues.
    - (3) Focuses debate on a comparison of competing policies.
    - (4) Emphasizes consistency in arguments.
  - D. A social science model of debate.
    - (1) Focuses on the resolution.
    - (2) Counterplans and inherency arguments are hypothetical tests of the truth of the resolution.
    - (3) All arguments are conditional.
- III. Inductive models provide a source of debate theory.
  - A. A gaming model of debate.
    - (1) Emphasizes the competitive nature of the activity.
    - (2) Allows the debaters to create the rules.
    - (3) Requires the judge to be tabula rasa.
  - B. An educational model of debate.
    - (1) Emphasizes the educational nature of the activity.
    - (2) Emphasizes the role of the judge as an educator.

# Debate Paradigms

- IV. A pluralistic model provides a way to incorporate elements of alternative models.
- A. A pluralistic model depends on identifying core values of the activity.
  - B. A pluralistic model relies on participants appealing to the set of core values.

## **KEY TERMS**

paradigm:	A general model or world view which serves to guide practice in debate.
stasis:	A critical issue which tends to recur from debate to debate.
hypothesis testing:	A paradigm which views the resolution as a truth claim to be tested through debate.
tenet:	A principle, belief or doctrine generally held to be true.
dialectic:	A system of reasoning or argument which juxtaposes opposing or contradictory ideas and seeks to resolve their conflict.
tabula rasa:	A perspective which views the judge as a blank slate with no preconceived opinions.
eclectic:	Composed of elements drawn from various sources.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Debate theory is often an issue which frightens beginning debaters and coaches. Part of the difficulty with understanding debate theory is the fact that the nature of theory is constantly evolving. This isn't a reason to be frightened. Debate theory is driven by logic and common sense. It is accessible to any who are willing to commit themselves to carefully thinking about the nature of the activity. One of the most exciting aspects of academic debate is that the participants—both debaters and judges—can play an active role in defining the nature of the activity.

## **A RULE-BASED APPROACH**

Debate is unique among competitive activities in that the rules governing its practice are not clearly defined and are in a constant state of flux. Learning how to debate and learning how to judge debates would be far simpler if there were a codified set of rules for the participants to follow. In fact, this book may have been selected in the hopes of finding a codified set of rules and answers to questions concerning debate theory. The nature of the activity, however, encourages debaters and judges themselves to participate in the development of theory and practice.

While a variety of rules may be imposed by the director of a tournament or by an individual judge, traditionally the only rules which universally bind the participants are the time limits and the order of speeches. Once a debate begins, the meaning and nature of arguments presented are largely determined by the debaters and the judge(s). This doesn't mean that the participants have no guidance in determining what to do in a debate. The source of this guidance is not a set of rules but a combination of theory, tradition, and experience. The answers to why various practices are acceptable or unacceptable for particular forms of debate are grounded in reasons articulated by the debaters themselves. Consequently, it's imperative that the debaters understand the language and assumptions underlying various theoretical perspectives.

## **DEDUCTIVE MODELS OF DEBATE**

In the absence of a set of rules to dictate the answers to complex theoretical questions, debate theorists have turned to external sources for guidance. They have attempted to develop models of debate by drawing analogies with other activities which seem similar in some way to debate. Observing how arguments are conducted in other fields has led to various recommendations on how debate ought to function. These externally derived models are generally described as debate “paradigms.” A *paradigm* is a general model or world view which serves to guide practice. The model provides a deductive framework for resolving questions of debate theory. While each of the deductive models has been widely criticized, it is important to review them, because they provide the basis for much debate theory.

### *A Legal Model of Debate*

The first deductive model is derived from an analogy to the court system. There are some obvious ways in which the debate process is analogous to the legal system. A debate involves advocates making competing claims which are adjudicated by a third party. The process is loosely analogous to a trial. Consequently, the legal system served as the earliest model for describing debate. From this external model, a number of corollaries were derived.

- (1) **The analogy influences the way the two sides in the debate are viewed.** The affirmative is viewed as the prosecution or plaintiff seeking to convict the present system. The negative is viewed as the defense attorney arguing on behalf of the present system as a defendant.
- (2) **The model suggests a significant role for the concept of presumption.** The presumption of innocence is one of the core values of the legal system. It is generally thought to be better to let many guilty individuals go free than to wrongly convict one innocent person. The substantial weight given to presumption magnifies the burden of proof on the prosecution. As the prosecutor in

a debate round, the affirmative faces a similar burden of proof to overcome the presumption of innocence for the present system. The negative, or defense, must only create a reasonable doubt in the judge's mind to avoid a conviction.

- (3) **The legal paradigm points to certain key issues around which the debate revolves.** In the court room, depending on the nature of the crime, there are certain key issues which the prosecution must win in order to prove its case. For example, in a first-degree murder trial the prosecution must prove means, motive, opportunity, and intent in order to get a conviction. If the defense wins any of these issues, they may succeed in creating reasonable doubt.

*Stock Issues* In debate, several issues are identified as the key points of *stasis* in seeking to convict present policy. These key elements are known as the stock issues. The stock issues are recurrent questions vital to the affirmative cause. In the legal paradigm, the failure of the affirmative to win any of the stock issues results in a failure to prove its case beyond a reasonable doubt. The negative need only win a single issue to win the debate. Five stock issues are typically identified.

- (1) **The need to demonstrate the presence of a significant harm.** Harm and significance are sometimes described as separate stock issues, but they are closely tied. In order to prove that a change in policy should occur, the affirmative must demonstrate that a significant problem exists. This is analogous to the prosecution's burden in a criminal trial to prove that a crime was committed or the plaintiff's burden in a civil trial to prove that significant damages occurred. It is unclear exactly how much harm must be demonstrated to overcome the affirmative burden to establish significance. One possible standard is that the requisite significance should vary with the quantity of change in policy advocated. Small changes can be

justified with small significance. Large changes require demonstration of a larger problem.

- (2) **The affirmative burden to establish inherency.** This is analogous to the prosecution's burden to prove that the defendant is responsible for the crime or damages with which he or she is charged. The basic concept is that the present system must be found responsible for the existence of the significant harm. There is no single definition of what inherency means as it relates to academic debate. Some have defined it as establishing that the problem is "built in" to the present system. What it means to be "built in" is unclear. Some have defined inherency as a burden to prove why the harm exists or why the affirmative proposal hasn't been adopted. This essentially asks the affirmative to supply a motive for the crime. This translation requires the affirmative to functionally provide links to disadvantages for the negative. At its simplest level, inherency is defined as the affirmative burden to prove that the plan hasn't already been adopted or that the problem hasn't already been solved. The assumption is that it's irrational to advocate policy changes which are already enacted or to try to solve problems which are or will be solved without changing policy.
- (3) **The question of solvency.** It is the affirmative burden to prove that the proposed change in policy solves or reduces the significant harm. This is analogous to the legal burden to prove that the punishment or remedy is appropriate. The assumption is that it's irrational to change policy without some assurance that the change will be effective.
- (4) **The affirmative must demonstrate that the costs to the policy change don't outweigh the benefits.** This stock issue is different in that it isn't a burden which the affirmative must overcome in order to demonstrate a prima



facia case. It is the negative burden to demonstrate that the plan has adverse consequences. It is sometimes included as a stock issue because it's a critical point of stasis which tends to recur from debate to debate.

- (5) **Topicality is the affirmative burden to demonstrate that proposed change fits within the resolution.** In the legal paradigm, this is analogous to the burden of the prosecution or plaintiff to demonstrate that the trial belongs in the jurisdiction of the court hearing the case. Like the cost/benefit stock issue, however, it's generally thought to be the negative burden to prove the plan non-topical. The plan is generally assumed to be in the appropriate jurisdiction until the negative claims otherwise.

The legal paradigm tends to discourage but not exclude counterplans as a viable negative strategy. In this model, counterplans are viewed as analogous to a plea of insanity and hence a strategy of desperation. Counterplans are thought to be an admission of guilt and an abandonment of presumption.

While the legal metaphor provides a useful model for examining arguments, there are a number of ways in which a debate is radically different from a trial. The most obvious difference is the nature of the subject matter commonly treated in debate. Debate rounds don't generally attempt to determine the guilt or innocence of an individual. Debate instead focuses on issues of policy or general societal value judgment. While the legal model is widely criticized for its failure to accurately describe the debate process, its contributions have tended to transcend the paradigm. The stock issues tend to be the central issues around which debates revolve in nearly every paradigm, although they may be conceived of in less absolute terms.

### *A Policy Model of Debate*

A second deductive model of debate is derived from an analogy to the policy making process typified by congressional decision making. The subject matter of policy debate is typically concerned with the

development of public policy. Consequently, theorists have suggested modeling the argument practices found in congressional debates. The policy making model has several implications for theoretical issues in debate.

- (1) **For policy makers, the focus of the debate is on the affirmative policy proposal.** Just as congressional debates tend to focus on the merits of a particular bill, the central issue in an academic policy debate is whether or not the affirmative plan is a good idea.
- (2) **The policy making paradigm suggests an interactive view of the stock issues.** The key points of stasis in policy making are similar to the legal stock issues. An advocate of a policy change must demonstrate the presence of significant harm, inherency, solvency, the absence of major disadvantages, and topicality. The principal difference is that the stock issues are not viewed as independent points of conflict, but as part of an interactive process. The affirmative must demonstrate that the proposed change is on balance better than the present system or a proposed alternative. To satisfy this burden, the affirmative need not necessarily win each stock issue absolutely. The affirmative must demonstrate some level of comparative advantage at the end of the debate.
- (3) **The policy maker analogy suggests that a debate revolves around a comparison of competing policies.** The affirmative defends its plan as one policy while the negative defends either the present system or a counterplan. To maintain competitive equity, some policy makers believe that each team should be permitted to defend only one policy in a debate. Counterplans are thought to be normal practice in the policy making paradigm. In Congress, it is common for policy makers

to propose substitute motions as a strategy for opposing a particular bill.

- (4) **Debaters operating in the policy making model are expected to maintain consistency as they defend their positions.** Policy makers often have to face consequences if they articulate inconsistent positions. Contradiction tends to make all of a policy maker’s arguments suspect.

As with the legal metaphor, the policy making analogy is imperfect and breaks down on a number of levels. Most obviously, the format of academic debate is radically different from policy making procedures. Congress operates through parliamentary rules which have little relevance to academic debate. Debate participants are also not subject to pressure from constituencies or lobbyists.

*A Social  
Science Model  
of Debate*

A third deductive model guiding debate theory is derived from an analogy to social scientific research. This model is commonly referred to as “*hypothesis testing*.” The central *tenet* of this paradigm is that debate is a *dialectic* process of searching for truth. Debate resolutions are viewed as claims about social truths which are tested through the debate process. The participants function as social scientists testing the validity of the claim embodied in the resolution. This analogy has several implications for debate practice.

- (1) **Since the debate is about the truth value of the resolution, the focus of the debate is on the resolution itself.** Specific plans are largely irrelevant. The affirmative must prove the resolution is probably true, not that a specific example of the resolution is a good idea.
- (2) **Counterplans and inherency arguments function as hypothetical tests of the necessity of the resolution.** If the negative can demonstrate that other solutions to the problem exist, then the resolution may not be inherently true. Any negative counterplans in the hypothesis testing

paradigm must be non-topical, since the negative is attempting to negate the resolution.

The burdens of the advocates are altered in hypothesis testing. The nature of the stock issues is determined by the wording of the resolution. The affirmative's burden is to defend the resolution's core. The nature of significance and harm is dependent on the wording of the resolution. In order to prove the resolution true, the negative often has to prove the existence of significant problems. Inherency for the hypothesis tester is grounded in the resolution. The affirmative must prove the problems inherent in the resolution. Inherency requires the affirmative to prove the resolution necessary as compared to any possible alternatives. Solvency and disadvantages must be intrinsic to the resolution and not linked to a specific policy proposal. Topicality is not a test of a plan but of the general arguments claimed as support for the resolution statement.

- (3) **The social science analogy doesn't place any prohibition on conditional argumentation.** All arguments in this paradigm serve as philosophical tests of truth. Neither the affirmative or negative need advocate any examples or counter-examples but may offer them as hypothetical tests of validity. A debater may advance multiple tests of truth within a given debate.

As with the other deductive models, the analogy between debate and the social sciences is strained. Debate deals with different types of claims than social scientific research, cannot employ the same types of quantitative and intellectual rigor, and is performed by advocates with an interest in the outcome of the process rather than objective researchers. Many critics have argued that the hypothesis testing paradigm distorts the competitive balance of debate by freeing the negative from many burdens of advocacy.

## INDUCTIVE MODELS OF DEBATE

The three deductive models of debate dominated academic debate until the early 1980s. Judges often presented themselves as adherents to a particular paradigm and debaters would adapt their arguments to that paradigm. In other debates the debaters devoted extensive time to arguing which paradigm was more appropriate for debate. These debates took place at both a theoretical level and a substantive level. The evaluation of the substantive issues often turned on which team won the paradigm debate. By the early 1980s, however, the entire notion of external models as the source of debate theory began to be discredited. This rejection of the deductive models stemmed partly from a recognition of the limitation of each of the analogies and partly from the fact that arguments over paradigms tended to produce unsatisfying debates which often detracted debaters from the substantive issues of a topic.

In place of the deductive models, several debate theorists proposed inductive models of debate which are derived from the essential nature of the activity itself. The two most common examples of this turn to internal models are the gaming model and the educational model.

### *Gaming Model of Debate*

The first inductive model emphasizes the competitive nature of the activity. Debate is depicted as a competitive intellectual game played between participants seeking to win the game. The nature of the game of debate is derived from an internal examination of how the game is played. While many games begin with a prescribed set of rules, the gaming paradigm of debate begins with the core assumption that the debaters should participate in the development of the rules of the game. The only externally imposed restrictions on the game are those impacting on other game players competing in other rooms. Consequently, the scheduled time for when the debate should begin and end is important. Other rules for the game are to be developed by the participants themselves. The judge in the gaming model functions as a *tabula rasa* or blank slate referee who doesn't impose restrictions on the players. Claims advanced by the debaters playing the game are assumed to be true unless challenged by the opposing

team. Judges should impose no external standards of validity on truth claims unless they are presented by the debaters themselves.

The gaming model is appealing to some debaters because it creates a perception of judge objectivity and maximizes student control of the process. As a paradigm, however, it offers little guidance for resolving questions of debate theory. It also devalues the role of the judge as an educator in ways which make some judges uncomfortable. In addition, the gaming paradigm often rewards undeveloped arguments which become voting issues because one team claims them as such. In the gaming model theory, arguments often become voting issues themselves rather than creating a framework for viewing the substantive issues in the debate.

### *Educational Model of Debate*

A second inductive model of debate focuses on the educational aspects of the activity. This model emphasizes the value of debate as a method of teaching reasoning, analysis, and argumentation skills to the participants. This model of debate creates a much different role for the judge than the gaming paradigm. In the educational paradigm the judge functions as an argument critic willing to intervene to criticize the argumentation practices of the participants. Arguments which don't satisfy minimum standards imposed by the judge aren't accepted as legitimate arguments. In the gaming paradigm, a judge usually votes for a dropped argument claimed as a voting issue even if the argument wasn't understood. In the educator model, the judge might refuse to vote on an argument which wasn't explained even if it were dropped by the other team. The educational model emphasizes the role of the judge as a participant in the debate process. This does not generally mean that the judge seeks to intervene into debates. The paradigm holds that while intervention should be minimized it is inevitable that some level of intervention will occur. In the role of educator the judge uses the least intervention necessary to make certain that debaters conform to a minimal standard of argument.

Like the gaming model, the educational paradigm doesn't offer a clear guide for resolving theoretical issues. Unless the judge informs the debaters in advance what standards of argument are going to be

used, it may be difficult for debaters to anticipate how arguments will be resolved. While the educational model may provide a more intellectually satisfying role for judges who wish to view themselves as educators, it reduces the role of competition in the educational process. Critics argue that it is the task of the debaters to point out when arguments are inadequate or invalid. If a judge rejects an argument on grounds not introduced in the debate the judge is arguably rewarding the team which failed to point out what was wrong with the argument. The gaming and education paradigms represent different approaches to teaching and rewarding argument skills.

## **A PLURALISTIC MODEL OF DEBATE**

It is clear that no single debate paradigm is entirely satisfying. Each adds to our understanding of the activity but falls short of providing an all encompassing guide for debate. Roger Solt has described the development of debate paradigms as blind men trying to describe an elephant—the one who felt its trunk described a hose; the one who felt its tail described a rope; and the one who felt its side described a wall. Each description is accurate as far as it goes but provides only a limited description. The various external and internal models of debate emphasize parts of the activity but fail to provide a complete picture. Rather than imposing a single model of debate as controlling, it is possible to develop an *eclectic* model which incorporates elements from each of the paradigms.

The key to a pluralistic model of debate is the identification of core values which the activity seeks to pursue. From these values are derived arguments in support of particular solutions to theory problems. The model doesn't seek to impose answers to questions but to describe a process through which arguments are resolved. Participants can generate a significant list of values promoted by the activity. Among the core values of the activity are education, competition, policy analysis, truth seeking, and responsible advocacy. Debaters argue about the relative importance of the various values underlying the activity. Thus, to answer a theory question, arguments need to be grounded in appeals to these core values. So, for example,

it can be argued that a particular practice is best because it promotes fair competition, improves education, promotes responsible advocacy, or improves policy analysis. External analogies might be used as justifications for a particular theory. The answer to what is appropriate, however, isn't determined by practice in an analogous field, but is based on what best promotes a value important to the debate activity. This pluralistic process doesn't constitute a radical transformation of debate practice. The process of grounding arguments in appeals to transcendent values is something debaters also do in resolving substantive claims. In weighing impacts of various arguments debaters make claims of the relative importance of arguments employing a variety of valuative dimensions. Theoretical arguments are resolved through a similar process of appeal to various values. The relative importance of the values promoted by the activity are determined by the debater's arguments.

A pluralistic model doesn't supply definitive answers to questions of debate theory. There are no singular answers to most theory questions. It is impossible to build a paradigm which resolves every theory dispute. Debate is continuously evolving in ways which change accepted answers to theory questions. A pluralistic model reserves a central role for debaters and judges to continue to participate in the evolution of theory.

## **SUMMARY**

Debaters and judges often desire a list of rules to guide the activity. This search for a set of rules is inconsistent with the analytic, educational nature of debate. At the same time, the competitive nature of the activity demands some degree of uniformity of process in order to fairly evaluate arguments. The evolution of debate theory has been the result of a pursuit of balancing the demands of education and competition.

Three deductive models provide insight into the nature of debate. A legal model directs debaters to concepts such as presumption, burden of proof, and the stock issues of harm, inherency, solvency, cost, and topicality. A policy model directs debaters to the comparison



of competing policies. A social science model directs debaters to evaluate the resolution as a statement whose validity should be tested. Each of these models add to a debater's knowledge of debate but provide incomplete guides to the practice of debate.

Two inductive models also provide insight into the nature of debate. A gaming model depicts debate as a game and emphasizes the role of the debater in determining the nature of the activity. An educational model depicts debate as an educational instrument and emphasizes the role of the judge in determining the nature of the activity. While each of these models promote both competition and education, their points of emphasis create an imbalance in the roles of participants.

A pluralistic model represent an effort to balance the competitive and educational aspects of the activity. It relies on participants grounding answers to theory questions in appeals to transcendent values promoted by the activity. A pluralistic model may be more of a description of present debate practice than a paradigm guiding that practice. Whatever perspective is used, debate theory and practice will continue to evolve as the participants seek to refine their activity.

## **EXERCISES**

- (1) Create a list of values promoted by debate as an activity. Be as complete as possible.
- (2) Take your list of values and try to rank them in order of importance. Make arguments as to why one is more important than another. This exercise can be done through group discussion.
- (3) By appealing to the list of values you have created, answer each of the following questions:
  - (a) If one team debates in a language which the other team does not understand but the judge understands the

language should the judge evaluate arguments presented in the foreign language?

- (b) If one team speaks at a rate of speed which the other team cannot understand but the judge comprehends the words, should the judge evaluate the arguments presented at the high rate of speed?
  - (c) If one team presents an argument which the judge cannot understand but claims it is a voting issue and the other team does not respond to it, should the judge vote on the argument?
- (4) Make a list of arguments as to why each of the deductive models discussed in the chapter is a better analogy for debate than the others.
  - (5) Construct your own deductive model. For example, in what ways is debate similar or different from a civil trial or from an arbitration hearing? What implications might these analogies have for different questions of debate theory?
  - (6) Watch a debate and try to judge it without intervening your own opinions into the debate. Is it possible to judge without intervening? Under what circumstances is intervention acceptable?