



Lincoln-Douglas Debate: An Introduction to Argumentation

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Abstract: At the heart of this activity lies argumentation. To be an effective, successful Lincoln-Douglas debater, you need to master the art of argumentation. What is argumentation? How do you construct an argument? This article will give you the basics of argumentation and build a foundation so that you may delve into more advanced forms of argumentation.

What is an Argument?

At its most basic level, an argument occurs when there is a disagreement over two opposing views (i.e., the affirmative and negative). For an argument to occur, there must be clash. If you and your opponent agree on everything, then the necessary conditions for an argument do not exist because there is nothing to disagree on or contest.

The Components of an Argument

The first component of an argument is the claim. This is the “tag line” of your argument that introduces the full argument that you will justify and defend. For example, if you have a study that says that McDonald’s hamburgers contain 25% more meat than Burger King’s, your claim, or tag line, for this argument would simply be, “McDonald’s is better than Burger King because their burgers contain more meat.” The claim does not warrant, or justify, the argument, but it lets everyone know the thesis, essentially, of the argument you are going to make.

The second component of an argument, which comes after the claim, is the warrant. The warrant is merely the reason why your argument is true. This may come in many forms (studies, eyewitnesses writing about a certain phenomenon, predictions based on historical events, etc.), but in the end it should always offer a principled reason why your argument is true.

There are two general categories of warrants: analytical and empirical. Analytical warrants use logic, common sense, or common knowledge to justify certain arguments. For example, “*Socrates is a man; all men are mortal; therefore, Socrates is mortal*” is an example of an analytical argument. It appeals to logic to justify its veracity.

The other category of warrants, empirical, typically relies on evidence produced from researching a credible source to back up the argument that it is making. Using the McDonald’s example, the study that the negative read saying that McDonald’s burgers contain more meat is based on an empirical study that stated McDonald’s hamburgers have more meat than Burger King’s. This is not the kind of argument that we could make without using this empirical warrant because none of us really know whether or not that claim is true without some form of empirical confirmation.

The third component of an argument is the impact. The impact establishes the importance, significance, or weight of your argument; it is the “So What.” Why is your argument important? Even if you are correct, why should we care? It’s your job to explain to the judge what the impact of your argument is.

Each of these components is necessary. If you have a well-warranted argument, but there is no impact, then there is no reason why we should care about your arguments, or vote for you.

How to Make an Argument in A Debate Round: Line-by-Line Refutation

In a debate round, as we have discussed, you will present a case either for the affirmative or the negative and your opponent will present his/her case on the opposite side. When writing a case, you should use the structure of argumentation just discussed to help put together arguments that you will use within your case as part of your contention.

Line-by-line argumentation is when you start at the top of either the affirmative or negative flow and proceed to go down the flow and answer arguments. When making arguments against your opponents’ case, you should first state what their claim was, and then what your argument is against that. When you’re answering arguments your opponent made against your case, reference your original argument, and then answer theirs.

What is My Burden of Proof?

Debaters have the responsibility (burden) of proving why the judge should support their position. The affirmative has the burden to convince the judge that the resolution is true, and that s/he should affirm or support the resolution. Conversely, the negative’s responsibility is to convince the judge that the resolution is false. Without burdens of proof, there are no grounds to debate on in the first place since there is no clash.

Conclusion

This is a very basic overview pertaining to what an argument should contain, but the most important thing to remember, and something you will use in every round, is that an argument **MUST** contain a claim, warrant, and an impact. If your opponent tries to make an argument that does not at least contain a warrant and an impact, you should be able to identify this and point out to the judge that it is not a complete argument, and thus cannot be considered, unless it has those key components.