

Issue Selection: How to Pick a Winner

Abstract: One of the most important aspects of debate is being able to formulate winning strategies. Despite this, affirmatives are still unable to effectively counter balance the time tradeoff that they have, and negatives are unable to capitalize on the huge time advantage. The purpose of this article is to teach debaters how they can give a 1AR and 2AR that will allow them to make up for the disadvantage they have time wise. It will also teach you the skills to exploit the negative time advantage so that, if implemented correctly, you never lose another negative round.

Issue Selection is a Lost Art

Although it is one of the most important things debaters need to understand, issue selection has become a lost art in rounds today. Affirmatives lose to negatives that make tons of arguments, many of which are not necessary at all, because they try and answer everything and negatives try and go for every argument in their rebuttal that they made in their first speech. This makes it incredibly difficult for judges who get lost in the minutia of the flow and are simply unable to keep up with every argument.

Debaters have begun to confuse issue selection with argument selection, and this confusion has diluted their ability to effectively select issues. The question of issue selection is not, “Which argument should I extend?” but instead “Which strategy should I take?”

Issue selection is absolutely critical in debate. You are given a limited amount of time in your speeches, which necessitates that you make strategic choices. You have to make sure that your strategy doesn't spread yourself too thin, but that you give yourself a sufficient number of arguments that you can develop as voting issues. Issue selection is also important when it comes to crystallization because when you are writing the ballot for the judge that becomes incredibly hard if you're trying to win thirty different arguments.

Classifying Arguments: Which Issues Do I Have to Deal With?

In a debate, you are inevitably going to have to make some decisions about which arguments you have to answer, and which arguments you are going to extend. Part of this decision-making process requires realizing which arguments are important, and prioritizing them. A pretty accurate way of classifying the importance of arguments is as follows:

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First comes theory or topicality. These issues are usually considered gateway issues and take precedence over substance because they discuss the rules for debate or what substance is relevant.

Second comes a prioris. By nature of their function, these arguments are defended as coming before the rest of the substance in the debate. The justification for that being true is going to depend on the content of the a priori, but when deciding which issues you are going to go for, you want to make sure you take these into account.

After dealing with arguments that come before the substance of the case, you have to decide how the framework debate is to be resolved. Frameworks determine which contention level arguments are going to be relevant at the end of the round, so this should be the next layer of the debate that you focus on.

Finally comes the substance. If there are big impacts in the debate, for example, you have to decide how you plan to weigh against that.

The Link Story

When you are answering your opponents' links, you need to decide whether you are answering the link or the internal link. If you are going to make a link turn, you then want to make sure that you do not also make a link turn on the same argument because then you would be double turning yourself.

The Impact Story

When your opponent is claiming big impacts, you want to pressure their scenario. Question whether or not the huge nuclear war they talk about is actually something that would result from the small link that they have to their impact. If you can understand the intricacies of their impact story, you will be able to either discredit their impact, or use it in your favor if you link turn their argument.

Unimportant Issues

Not every argument is a great argument. Some of the arguments that you usually will not need to answer are:

First, definitions. Unless you're going to make topicality an issue in the debate, most of these definitions will be irrelevant and should not be something that you waste your time on. There are obviously exceptions to this, so you need to pay attention in rounds, but for the most part definitions will be a part of the debate that you can skip.

The second issue that is relatively unimportant is low impact offense. If your opponents' terminal impact is that 20,000 people are going to get colds from an airborne virus that they could fix, this probably isn't going to be as important as the thousands of people that would die if their affirmative were true. This is something that you should point out when weighing, but also an issue that you don't need to spend a vast majority of your time on.

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Finally, one of the last issues that you don't need to spend a lot of time answering is any argument that deals with presumption. These arguments will say something along the lines of, "If there is no offense at the end of the debate, presume affirmative..." In response, you can quickly say, "Even if my opponent is right about presumption, their scenario would never occur because there is always a risk that one advocacy is better than the other. Thus, there is no tie because of that risk."

Affirmative Issue Selection: Fixing the Time Tradeoff

When your affirmative, you need three strategic routes to victory built into your case so that depending on what your opponent does, you can choose which strategy you want to take. On top of these embedded strategies, you **MUST** be turning the negative case. This is a necessity, not a luxury. If you do not put pressure on the negative by turning their case, you've given them a much easier time in their rebuttal because they get to pick and choose whatever arguments they want to go for. Carded turns in the 1AR are huge because they are almost always extremely well developed, which looks great against a short negative case that is probably underdeveloped.

You Should be Writing the Ballot

If the negative under covers your turn on their case, extend it. All arguments hold equal weight. When extending the turn, explain that it outweighs in terms of the terminal impact that it links to, or that it has the strongest link to that impact. This is one of the most strategic ways to weigh your argument because if you can win that you have the strongest link into an impact, then even if your opponent also has a link to that impact, you still win.

You should also be winning the standard. If you can win that your standard comes before the negatives, that means that your offense is going to come before offense on the negative case assuming that it doesn't also link to your standard.

A 2AR Tip

Imagine a scenario where you have made an argument against the negative case that has two warrants leading to the same impact. If the negative drops both of them, you should only be extending one of those arguments. For the 2AR, the basic lesson is that you should only go for one warrant on any argument. People make this mistake all the time when they're winning the standards debate. There is no added value in extending a second warrant for your argument because if the judge is going to vote on the dropped argument, they're going to vote on it regardless of whether you extend one warrant or give. In these cases you simply have to tell the judge what you're doing, what the function of your argument was, and then let them know what you're going to do next.

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Negative Issue Selection: Exploiting the Awesome Time Tradeoff

When you're negative you want to make the affirmative look like they were extremely underdeveloped and that they failed to cover a lot of what they needed to answer. The formula for the 2NR is that you should spend 150% of the time that the affirmative spent on any given issue. If they spend a minute on something, you should spend a minute and a half.

When you are negative and the affirmative turns your case, you should bury their turns. If they make one turn, you should have 4-6 answers to it. Why? You can deter the affirmative from going for that argument in the 2AR because of all the work it would require for them to win it. Essentially, then, you've wasted their time because they had to invest time on an offense argument that you buried, and the time tradeoff is still in your favor. Affirmatives simply can't spend that much time on arguments, and they have half as much time in their 2AR as you do in your 2NR, so there is really no chance that they'll be able to answer all of those arguments and have efficient issue selection.

When there are a bunch of arguments that prove the same thing, you should be grouping these arguments. If you can effectively group affirmative arguments in your 2NR, then you have just increased your advantage exponentially by making the time tradeoff even worse for your opponent.

In your first speech, you should be preempting the 1AR's ability to group your arguments. If you have four cards to read on their case, don't just read straight through them. You should be adding analytics in between every card so that it is applied specifically in each debate.

One of the most effective things you can do as the negative is combine overviews with effective line-by-line debate. There is this perception that overviews and the line-by-line are separate parts of the debate. When making defensive arguments, make them in overviews. When answering arguments on the line-by-line, this is when you should be making your turns. Combining overviews with line-by-line arguments has a multiplication effect because in order for your opponent to extend any argument they have to answer a general overview, and the line-by-line, but your overview applies to all of their arguments, not just one.

The 2NR is the Most Poorly Executed Speech in Debate

Even though it's more common to see bad 1AR, it is understandable because the 1AR is the hardest speech in debate. However, many debaters are still giving very poor 2NRs. There is no excuse for a bad negative rebuttal. At that point in the debate you have a 6-minute to 3-minute advantage. The biggest mistake that negatives make is that they treat this as a luxury. Negatives think that they can just extend every argument that they made in the first speech and be fine.

You should treat your 2NR as the time when you do damage control. It is a curse because it mixes refutation, extension, and crystallization, and debaters simply aren't efficient. The key to overcoming this curse is to maximize efficiency. Assuming that the affirmative and negative make equally strong arguments, negatives should never lose.

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Think of your voting issues as a long-term relationship. If you're only calling your significant other 10 minutes a day every other day, then you're probably going to get dumped. Analogously, if you do not give your voting issues the time that they need, you're probably going to lose. Every argument you make is an investment. You put time into it, and as a result, you want to maximize your dividends.

Conclusion

Issue selection is like chess. You have to make the right move, and when you do, you always have a strategy in mind. Going for every argument in the debate is never the right strategy because that kills your efficiency. In debate, time is money. Every second you use, if it's not a second invested in an argument that will bring you positive returns, then it's a net loss for you. You want to win as many time tradeoffs as possible.

You can't win without offense. You need to select issues that maximize your efficiency while providing you with offense that you can use to win the debate. Issue selection is about strategic vision. In order to be great, you must have that vision.

