

Topicality: A Negative's Best Friend

Created by Josh Roberts

Abstract: One of the most undermined, poorly implemented weapons that the negative has in his/her arsenal is topicality. A well-developed topicality shell, combined with research and a solid technical understanding of topicality is enough to win you a significant amount of negative rounds. This article will help you understand what it takes to win any negative round on topicality.

What is Topicality?

Topicality is about the affirmative's advocacy. The purpose of it is to set the ground for what affirmative arguments fall within the topic. Being topical is a burden that the affirmative has, not a burden of the negative, thus only negatives have the right to run it.

Interpretation

The interpretation in topicality is always a definition. Unlike theory, the interpretation does not set the best rule for debate, but rather argues for what the best definition of a certain term in the topic is. It must be positively worded. What this means is that your interpretation must proscribe something; it shouldn't be phrased as a prohibition.

Violation

The violation in topicality is similar to a violation in theory. Your violation should explain what the affirmative does that is inconsistent with your interpretation.

Standards

Your standards in topicality are the reasons why your interpretation of the topic is preferable. Most standards in topicality debates are in some way related to predictability and ground. If you're using textuality as a standard, then you should reconsider this since it just begs the question of topicality in the first place.

A lot of evidence justifying standards in topicality comes from literature on how to interpret the Constitution. You may find that people read evidence justifying originalism or textualism. Originalism type arguments would argue in favor or against trying to understand how the framers, or people who wrote the topic, intended for the topic to be understood. Textualism, on the other hand, means that debaters would interpret the meaning of the resolution by reading its text really closely.

The Two Types of Topicality

There are two kinds of topicality that you may deploy in any given debate: effects-topicality and extra-topicality.

Effects-Topicality

Effects-topicality means that the affirmative is topical because the effects of what the affirmative does falls within the topic. For example, if the topic has something to do with whether or not the government should give more money to the poor and the affirmative argues that we should increase taxes on the rich and that money will go to the poor, that's effects-topicality.

Effects-topicality is bad because it significantly increases the amount of ground that the affirmative now has to make arguments, and most of that ground is entirely unpredictable. Some standards that you could use against this kind of case will be discussed below.

Extra-Topicality

Extra-topicality means that the affirmative does what the resolution asks of it, and then more. For example, if the resolution says that the affirmative has to defend that the United States should join the International Criminal Court, and the affirmative argues that the U.S. should join all international criminal courts, including something like the International Court of Justice, then that would be extra-topical.

Extra-topicality is bad because it allows the affirmative to garner advantages from things entirely unrelated to the topic, which is also extremely unpredictable because as the negative you'd have no way of knowing what parts they may add to their advocacy.

What Are Some Specific Topicality Standards?

One standard you will see quite often in topicality debates is limits. This can mean one of two things. Either, the affirmative is over-limiting the debate, in which case his/her interpretation makes the topic too narrow and there is not enough ground to make arguments. Or, the affirmative is under-limiting the topic, which means that his/her interpretation makes the topic so broad that it destroys any possibility of arguments clashing.

The second standard you might see is field context. Since most topics have such a broad array of topic literature, often definitions taken from the context in which the topic places us are better suited for that topic. For example, if the resolution is a legal resolution, you could argue that your definition from a law journal should be preferred over a definition from a dictionary because it's taken from the field in which the resolution is contextualized.

A third standard is grammar. When people use the term textuality, what they're actually referring to is grammar. Grammar just means that your definition makes more grammatical sense when used in the resolution.

Another standard that is used is political relevance. Some definitions, more than others, get to the heart of what is politically relevant in the topic. Political relevance argues we should choose a definition that allows for more politically relevant debates because that's good for education. For example, on the economic sanctions topic in 2010, many people would define sanctions as "smart" sanctions, which were more targeted than the broad-sweeping sanctions used in the 90's because that definition was more politically relevant since the U.S. only uses "smart sanctions" now.

It's important to note that many of the standards that you see used in theory shells can also be used in topicality debates, but these are the main standards you will see that apply exclusively to topicality.

Why Is Being Non-Topical Bad?

A necessary step in winning topicality is being able to explain why it's bad if the affirmative isn't topical—which, surprisingly, is seemingly difficult for many debaters to do. You should be able to explain very definitively why, if the affirmative is not defending a topical advocacy, then they deserve to lose.

One of the ways that you can do this is by appealing to predictability and fairness. The resolution is the main source of predictability; it's the only thing we have before the tournament, and it's what we prepare for. If the affirmative doesn't have to be topical, then they could pick anything that they wanted and defend that. There is no way that you could predict, or should be reasonably expected to predict, what the affirmative would pick to defend outside of the topic; thus it's unfair for the affirmative to not be topical. Then you can just explain why fairness is important, and you've justified a reason in defense of the importance of topicality.

Another way to justify the importance of being topical is by appealing to research burdens. If the affirmative gets to pick whatever advocacy they want to defend and it doesn't have to be related to the topic then it would be impossible for you to ever research enough to be prepared to debate. This is also unfair because the affirmative knows exactly what his/her advocacy would be going into the round, and you would have no way of knowing. Whereas, if your opponent's advocacy fell within the realms of the topic, you would have some way of knowing what s/he might defend based on the topic literature you've read.

Finally, you can argue that the topic you've been given to debate is a good, educational topic and it would benefit debaters if you actually discussed it. Topicality ensures that the education the topic has to offer is the center of focus, and doesn't allow the affirmative to skirt his/her duty to discuss it.

These are just a few of the ways that you could go about justifying why affirmatives ought to lose if they do not defend an advocacy that is topical.

Reasonability Revised: Why Being Reasonable Might Be the Best for Topicality

In theory, many debaters will argue that theory should be about determining the best practice for debate, so we should use competing interpretations to evaluate who has the best rule. That might not, however, be the appropriate way to approach topicality. Searching for the best definition is very likely a fruitless practice, so instead, you can argue that we should just accept that the definition you have offered is reasonably good.

You can argue that finding the best definition is different from finding the best practice for a few reasons. First, definitions don't have the shelf life that practices do. A priori, for example, will exist on every topic, but the word that the topicality debate is over is more than likely not going to be used in the next topic. Therefore, whether or not you find the best definition out there is essentially a waste of time since the topic will be over soon.

Moreover, practices are binary in a way that definitions are not. Necessary but insufficient burdens, for example, are either good or bad, but definitions can have more of a middle ground that allows for compromise. Thus, it's not worth finding the "best" definition because there are so many different definitions that, in a world of variability, not choosing the best definition does not require you to then choose the worst one.

Conclusion

If you can add topicality to your arsenal as a negative, you become that much more of a threat to affirmatives. You should not be letting affirmatives get away with cases that are just barely related to the topic simply because you're not sure of how to show that they're doing something unfair. What you'll find the longer you debate is that a surprisingly large number of affirmatives aren't actually topical and you should be able to exploit this.

