

## Crystallization and the Final Focus

Every round of debate can be broadly divided into three phases: the constructive phase, the rebuttal phase, and the crystallization phase. Earlier chapters have dealt with the constructive and rebuttal phases; this chapter will address crystallization, or the process of clarifying, summarizing, and prioritizing the most important arguments in the round. This process is an integral part of both Congressional Debate and Public Forum Debate.

### **Crystallization**

Crystallization is a vital skill for any debater because a debate round can be extraordinarily complex. Judges may be asked to consider as many as 20 or 30 distinct arguments, each with several responses or challenges attached, and all in some form of conflict with one another. Without a serious effort by debaters at the end of the round to clarify these issues, a judge will be left to sort through the round on his own. This can often lead to him making a decision based on his own thoughts or feelings rather

than on the arguments presented. Crystallization is also important because it enables debaters to showcase a distinct set of skills. While constructives demonstrate the ability to research and rebuttals to process and challenge information, crystallization displays the ability to compare, contrast, and prioritize information and argumentation. Constructives and even rebuttals can be planned before the round begins: arguments may be pre-written by debaters or their coaches. Crystallization, however, must be specific to the round: debaters must think for themselves and craft unique arguments based on how the round has played out.

## **Goals of Crystallization**

All crystallization speeches have three goals: select and highlight the most important issues in the round, close the debate on those issues, and then prioritize or weigh the arguments selected.

### **SELECTING THE ISSUES**

Debaters must identify the most important arguments in the round. They can use three possible standards:

1. **Quantity of debate.** The arguments that have produced the most clash and the most numerous responses are typically considered the most important in the round. This is not always the case, however, as a lengthy discussion of an issue may actually resolve it or render it irrelevant. Additionally, debaters may be distracted by an argument and spend more time on it than is merited. Nevertheless, if an argument produces multiple

responses from both sides, it is probably worth mentioning during crystallization.

2. **How connected the argument is to the other issues of the round.** Some issues exist independently of others, while some issues are central to the rest of the debate. Crystallization time is generally better spent on issues that will have a broad impact on the round—those that are connected to and interact with many other issues. By selecting these, debaters ensure that they are addressing the bulk of the round.
3. **Strategy.** Debaters can choose those arguments that they are most clearly winning or that give them the best chance to win. Even in Congressional Debate, where the outcome of the actual debate is irrelevant to the outcome of the competition, selecting strategically important issues makes debaters seem attuned to the debate and invested in its outcome, both of which carry great persuasive weight.

#### **CLOSING DEBATE ON IMPORTANT ISSUES**

Closing debate means answering any lingering objections to arguments or perhaps extending an argument one final time. The goal is to avoid leaving unanswered questions for the judge; at the conclusion of a crystallization speech, the judge should not need to do any additional thinking about an argument's or idea's impact in the round. Because of the burden of rejoinder, this process is very different in Public Forum than in Congressional Debate.

### **PRIORITIZING AND WEIGHING THE ARGUMENTS CHOSEN FOR DISCUSSION**

Prioritizing and weighing are the most difficult tasks of a crystallization speech. Debaters must not simply make additional responses nor should they repeat the answers that have already been given. Instead, debaters must provide analysis that enables the judge to distinguish between important and trivial arguments.

At the end of a round, both sides of a debate will likely have made many valid arguments; some of these may have been answered, others will have been extended. Debaters must find a way to evaluate these arguments and give the judge or audience a way to decide between them.

Consider a debate about withdrawing American troops from Afghanistan. The affirmative side of the debate may rightly claim that withdrawing troops would save the U.S. government billions of dollars; meanwhile, the negative side may claim that withdrawing troops would endanger Afghan civilians. If both of these arguments have been adequately supported and defended, how should the judge decide between them? Which is more important? Which argument should be considered first? These are difficult questions, but they are the questions that crystallization attempts to answer. Making matters more complicated are the numerous answers and challenges made during a debate; neither of these initial claims is likely to survive the debate unscathed. Now a judge must not only weigh between claims, but also evaluate how the various responses to those claims affect the end-round decision. A crystallizing debater must take all this into account and provide a coherent rationale for endorsing her position over that of her opponents. She must compare the strength of the warrants and the magnitude of the impacts on each

side of the debate in order to support a particular position on the resolution. This skill, called “weighing,” is vital to all forms of debate.

## **Weighing**

Arguments can be weighed in a number of different ways, using a number of different standards. Some of the most common are by:

- **Magnitude, or the size or severity of the argument’s impact.** If affirming a resolution results in the death of a thousand and negating the resolution results in the death of two thousand, then magnitude tells the judge that she should affirm. This is the simplest conceivable weighing mechanism, merely requiring the debater to summarize the impacts of each side, then present those impacts side-by-side for the judge to evaluate. Decisions are rarely this simple, though. For one, arguments may result in different sorts of harms, such as loss of life, financial losses, or environmental disruptions. To provide clarity, debaters may choose to translate the various harms into a common “currency.” Essentially, a debater may translate costs in one arena to costs in another arena to give the judge a clear means of evaluating impacts. For example, a debater may relate financial losses or environmental decay to the loss of human life, thus making a comparison of magnitude more appropriate and easier for the judge.
- **Competing frameworks, or analysis of value in the debate round.** At various points in the round, debaters may make “framework” arguments, contentions

that aim to convince the judge that some arguments are more important than others. By ordering impacts in this way, the debaters have a clear mechanism for weighing arguments. If they have demonstrated that human life should be considered before financial loss or gain, then the judge can easily weigh between the two; alternatively, if a debater proves that environmental decay is more harmful than any immediate loss of human life, then this also provides a clear weighing mechanism.

- **Probability, or how likely the argument's impact is to occur.** Probability may simply refer to the likelihood of an event occurring in the real world; for example, meteorologists can calculate the probability of rain on a given day with some degree of precision if certain conditions are known. Debaters can perform similar probability analyses by citing experts who predict the likelihood of a particular outcome if certain conditions are met. Alternatively, the probability of an argument may depend on the strength of the link the debaters provide; if an action only marginally contributes to a problem, this decreases the argumentative probability of the impact occurring. For example, if a particular resolution would increase the national debt by \$1,000, the strength of the link to impacts derived from increased debt would be extremely small; if the resolution increased the debt by \$1,000,000,000, the strength of the link would be much greater.
- **Examining how aggressively or successfully an argument has been answered.** As covered earlier, an argument that has gone unrefuted becomes true at the end of a round; if a debater has cleanly and clearly

extended such argument, then it may have more weight at the end of the round than arguments that have been answered or mitigated. This weighing standard is not as preferable as the others because it ignores the internal logic and real-world applicability of arguments in favor of a strategic evaluation of the round. Nevertheless, debaters may successfully argue that a judge should evaluate unanswered arguments before contested ones as a way to make a simple and clear decision.

### **The Final Focus in Public Forum Debate**

The final speech in a Public Forum round is aptly called the “final focus”; this is the speech wherein debaters will crystallize the round for the judge. The various processes that lay the foundation for crystallization will naturally have begun earlier in the round: debaters select which issues to spend time on in the rebuttal, summary, and crossfire; debaters attempt to close debate on issues throughout the round; and successful debaters will be weighing arguments throughout the round. All of these efforts come to fruition in the final focus, though, when the second speaker on each team has two minutes to make her final plea for the ballot. This section will address the appropriate content and structure of this speech.

The last speech must never introduce new arguments. A final focus may respond to new arguments made in the summary speeches, or, if the debater is speaking second, to new arguments made in the opponents’ final focus. Beyond those immediate responses, though, the final focus should consist entirely of weighing and extending arguments already made in the round.

The final focus speaker should always advance a clear set of offensive reasons to vote for his team. These are called “voting issues.” They serve as bullet points for the judge to write an easy ballot. Although it may be necessary to make defensive arguments during the final focus, the emphasis should always be on offense. At the end of the round, the judge needs to have something to vote for, not merely vote against. Crystallization in Public Forum Debate should always be centered around the offense-defense split and should always favor offense.

A speaker can structure a final focus speech in many ways. She may begin with defensive arguments, laying to rest any lingering offense or objections her opponent has raised, and then move on to the offensive reasons the judge should prefer her team. Alternatively, she may follow the flow of the round, dealing with both offensive and defensive arguments in the order they were raised. Both approaches are acceptable as long as the debater is sure to end strongly (generally by offering a 10–15 second summary of her position and enumerating the reasons to vote for it) and is sure to advance enough offense to win the ballot.

The final focus speaker should also endeavor to have the last word on the subject. If speaking first, he should try to predict and preempt his opponent’s arguments; if speaking second, he should take his opponents’ final focus into account when crafting his speech and do his best to dismiss the arguments raised. Language in the final focus should be clear and definitive, leaving no room for doubt or equivocation.

The most effective final focus should work in concert with the summary speech to highlight the arguments that a team thinks are most likely to win them the ballot. These

arguments should include significant offense and, ideally, should have already been settled or resolved in earlier speeches. The final focus should, in effect, write the ballot for the judge.

### **Crystallization in Congressional Debate**

Crystallization in Congressional Debate is significantly different from crystallization in other debate events. Because Congressional Debate has no burden of rejoinder, and because the outcome of the debate has no bearing on the success of a debater, crystallization in Congressional Debate serves a very different purpose. It demonstrates to the judge that the debater is engaged in the debate and can think critically about the arguments presented.

Because so many speeches can have been made on one bill or resolution, participants in Congressional Debate often run into the problem of repeating old arguments. After 10, 16, or even 20 speeches, it is extremely unlikely that any arguments have been unexplored. Nevertheless, debaters often find themselves in a position where they must speak late in the cycle of debate; this is where crystallization becomes important. Much like the final focus in Public Forum Debate, crystallization in Congressional Debate necessitates specific content that fits within one of the recommended structures listed below.

In a crystallization speech, speakers must first make their purpose clear to the judge. Judge fatigue is a common problem in Congressional Debate; judges who have listened to 20 speeches on a topic are primed to write off additional speeches as unnecessary rehash. For a late-cycle debater to stand out, he must use explicit language to

differentiate his crystallization speech from those of others. At the conclusion of his introduction, he should say something like “It is vital that we weigh the arguments made thus far in the debate” or “Rather than repeat old arguments, we must determine which arguments have held up under scrutiny.” Statements such as these make clear to the judge that this speech will accomplish something unique.

Next, speakers must add to the debate by introducing clear weighing mechanisms. In Congressional Debate, speakers will generally both make constructive arguments and refute the arguments made by others; rarely do speakers focus on weighing between arguments because there is no ballot to be won through weighing. This is where a crystallization speech can contribute to the debate. Rather than offer new material for consideration, the crystallizing debater will offer new perspective on old material.

One helpful metaphor for this process is a sports broadcast. The actual game being played may be thought of as the constructive and rebuttal portions of the debate; decisions are made, strategies are formed and responded to, and one side generally wins in the end. As the game (debate) approaches its conclusion, the announcers (crystallizing debaters) offer their analysis: what strategies were employed, why they were employed, and whether or not they were successful. This analysis does not change the result of the game, but it does make it clear and understandable to the audience. This analysis is what crystallization adds.

### **CRYSTALLIZATION STRUCTURES IN CONGRESSIONAL DEBATE**

Like in the Public Forum final focus, crystallization in Congressional Debate has multiple possible structures:

- **Identify the two or three most important issues in the round.** One common approach is to simply identify the two or three most important issues in the round and discuss the debate that has occurred on those issues. This approach is easy for debaters to grasp but often lacks sophistication; it does not structurally add any evaluation to the arguments, but merely presents them in an arbitrary order.
- **Pave the Road.** A more sophisticated approach is sometimes called “paving the road.” In this approach, debaters take important arguments that support their side of the debate and address the objections to those arguments. A debater may rebut the refutations made by his opponents; he may answer questions raised by the debate; he may provide alternative analysis that overcomes argumentative obstacles. The result is the same: the argument in favor of his position is now established as a truth in the round. Having dealt with objections, the crystallizing debater can focus on the offensive reason to prefer his position. In a crystallization speech, a debater may pave the road for two or three arguments, using the same approach for each.
- **Blend small-picture refutation with big-picture summary.** Using this approach, a speaker will begin by addressing a small or under-discussed issue in the round, possibly offering some additional insight or refutation. Then the debater will move on to the big-picture debate, addressing the large issues in a more general way. This approach shows the judge that the speaker is capable of both types of debate and, perhaps counterintuitively, helps to focus the audience’s attention on the big-picture discussion. Like paving the road,

this approach conveys a sense of settling old business (the refutation) before moving on to new business (the crystallization).

A speaker in Congressional Debate does not have to focus on offense or provide voting issues. Because the speaker's focus is not solely on winning the debate for the affirmative or negative but, rather, impressing the judge, she may choose to structure her speech in whatever way makes the most sense to her. If providing three defensive answers to her opponent's central argument would make clear why a speaker has chosen her position, then she should proceed with that speech. If she strays too far from the central issues of the debate, however, she risks being perceived by the judge as out-of-touch with the round.

At the end of the day (and the round), a speaker must make strong choices about what to cover in his speech. He must make these choices clear to the judge using explicit language, and he must tailor these choices to the debate as it has occurred. He should add to the debate by providing analysis of the arguments presented, weighing between them, and structuring them in a way that communicates his overall position clearly. A good crystallization speech has the highest degree of difficulty of any speech in Congressional Debate, but also the highest reward; debaters should invest much of their time learning this higher-order skill to be successful in their event.

## KEY CONCEPTS

- Crystallization is the process by which debaters frame, prioritize, and conclude their thoughts on the major issues of the debate.
- Debaters should weigh arguments against one another at the end of the round.
- Debaters should always strive to make the judge's decision as easy as possible; in essence, they should "write the ballot" for the judge.
- In the final focus, a debater should concentrate on clarity and simplicity while advancing offensive reasons to vote for her position.
- Crystallization speeches in Congressional Debate should demonstrate that the debater is engaged in the debate and can think critically about the arguments presented.

