

Defining Motions & Constructing Cases: Guidelines for Competitors and Adjudicators

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For a debate to proceed, both teams need a clear understanding of what the motion means. This requires the motion to be 'defined' so that everyone (audience and adjudicators included) knows what is being debated. Problems arise if the two teams present different understandings of the meaning of the motion. This can result in a 'definition debate', where the focus of the debate becomes the meaning of the words in the motion, rather than the motion itself. Interaction and clash between the two teams concentrates on whose definition is correct, rather than the issues raised by the motion. Definition debates should be avoided wherever possible. They make a mockery of what debating seeks to achieve.

1. REASONABLE DEFINITIONS

The Proposition must present a reasonable definition of the motion. This means:

(a) On receiving a motion, both teams should ask: 'What is the issue that the two teams are expected to debate? What would an ordinary intelligent person reading the motion think that it is about?'

(b) If the motion poses a clear issue for debate (i.e. it has an obvious meaning), the Proposition must define the motion accordingly. When the motion has an obvious meaning (one which the ordinary intelligent person would realise), any other definition would not be reasonable.

(c) If there is no obvious meaning to the motion, the range of possible meanings is limited to those that allow for a reasonable debate. Choosing a meaning that does not allow the Opposition room for debate would not be a reasonable definition. Truisms and tautologies leave the Opposition no room for debate and are clearly illegitimate. Defining absolute words literally may prevent a reasonable debate, and they can therefore be read down.

(d) When defining the words in the motion so as (i) to allow the obvious meaning to be debated or (ii) (when there is no obvious meaning) to give effect to a possible meaning which would allow for a reasonable debate, the Proposition must ensure that the definition is one the ordinary intelligent person would accept.

These requirements are summarised in clauses 6.2 and 6.3 of the Judging Schedule of the Rules of the World Schools Debating Championships. They are further elaborated upon below.

(a) Is there a clear issue to be debated?

Teams at the World Schools Championships are expected to debate the topic set ('the motion'). The Proposition team advances arguments supporting the motion and the Opposition team opposes it. Team members may not necessarily agree with the side of the motion they are arguing, but their task is to try to persuade the audience that their side of the motion is to be preferred.

It may seem obvious, but in order to prove their side of the motion, *teams must debate the motion*— not a subset or some bizarre or unusual variant of it.

'Squirreling' is banned at the World Schools Championships. The Judging Schedule to the Rules notes that 'squirreling is the distortion of the definition to enable a team to argue a pre-prepared argument that it wishes to debate regardless of the motion actually set'. Squirreling does not attempt to find a reasonable definition of the motion as a whole; it just asserts some sort of 'link' between the words of the motion and the case the Proposition wishes to run.

An example of squirreling is defining ‘This House would legalise performance-enhancing drugs in sport’ to mean that marijuana should be legalised (asserting a link by saying sport is fun; life is fun; and soft drugs enhance people’s ability to have fun in the sport of life). This sort of debating quickly becomes artificial and pedantic.

Debates work best when everyone understands what is going to be debated. Both teams can go away and prepare their cases, knowing they will be talking about the same subject. The audience and adjudicators can predict the broad subject matter that will be debated.

The sorts of motions set at the World Schools Championships lend themselves to this occurring. Typical motions might include ‘This House believes that we should break unjust laws in democracies’ and ‘This House believes that the media serves us well.’ Both motions raise specific issues. One involves the merits of civil disobedience (one side will talk about the dangers of majority oppression; the other about ways of seeking to change the law without needing to break it); the second requires analysis of the positive and negative attributes of the media today.

The organisers of World Schools Championships avoid setting vague or metaphorical motions such as ‘This House believes there is light at the end of the tunnel’ or ‘This House believes life is a bowl of cherries’. Such motions lack a clear or obvious issue. They give the Proposition enormous scope to say ‘this is what the topic is about’, without the Opposition or audience having been able to predict this. They place a heavy burden on the Opposition, which is forced to prepare any number of cases on the off chance that one of them may prove relevant and can end up having to face the Proposition effectively unprepared. Such motions invite the Proposition to try to catch the Opposition out by putting the most unexpected spin possible on the motion.

The people who set motions for World Schools Championships have an obligation to ensure that each poses a clear issue to be debated. This being so, the teams have an obligation to take the obvious meaning of the motion and to debate the issue posed. A Proposition that avoids doing so deserves criticism. Refusing to engage with the plain meaning of a motion deprives the Opposition of its preparation time and results in debates on unduly narrow or bizarre subjects, or disputes over the definition. Audiences, who anticipated a certain subject being debated, see something substantially more limited or unexpected, and come to regard debating as overly technical and confusing.

On receiving a motion, both teams must ask: ‘What is the issue that the two teams are expected to debate? What would an ordinary intelligent person reading the motion think that it is about?’ This should give a good idea as to what the audience, adjudicators and people setting the motion expect to see debated.

(b) Taking the obvious meaning

If the motion poses a clear issue for debate (i.e. it has an obvious meaning), the Proposition must define the motion accordingly. When the motion has an obvious meaning (one which the ordinary intelligent person would realise), any other definition would not be reasonable.

The motion ‘This House believes that governments should subsidise the arts’ can be used by way of illustration. The motion poses the issue of whether government money should be spent on cultural activities such as art exhibitions, music and drama performances, and building and operating museums. Not much more needs to be said by way of definition. None of the words in the motion cause any real problems; ‘subsidise’ simply means ‘pay some of the costs of’.

Finding the correct level of abstraction

Debating the obvious meaning of a motion means that if the motion poses a very specific issue, the debate will itself be specific and must focus on the narrow, particular question posed. If, on the other hand, the motion expresses a very general principle, the debate will be much broader in scope and will include a correspondingly greater range of material. *The definition must match the level of abstraction (or specificity) of the motion, so that the debate is as specific or general as the motion itself.*

'This House would maintain United States military bases in Asia' was debated as one of the prepared rounds at the 2002 World Schools Championships in Singapore. The motion posed a clear issue and required to be defined accordingly. The Proposition would be defining the motion too generally if it ignored the words 'United States' and 'in Asia' and took the debate to mean that countries should have off shore military bases (and spent much of its time on examples from the Roman and British empires and their alleged benefits). The motion is more specific than this and requires the teams to focus on American bases in Asia today. The Proposition could validly use the more general principle in support of its specific argument (saying that American bases should remain in Asia because there are benefits to countries having off shore military bases, and the sorts of benefits derived during the time of the Roman and British empires show, by analogy, the sorts of benefits gained from having American bases in Asia today). However, the focus must remain on American bases in Asia, meaning that material directly related to this will be much more relevant. The Opposition would be at liberty to argue that the Roman and British empire examples are not that analogous and fail to assist the Proposition case.

The Proposition would be equally at fault if it defined the motion too specifically. The motion is framed in terms of maintaining 'United States military bases in Asia' and a proposition that said it would only talk about American bases in Japan (while ignoring those in Korea) would be giving a definition more specific than the motion itself. Arguing that the existence of bases in Japan is more controversial is unlikely to justify limiting the words of the motion. The organisers have set the debate on 'United States military bases in Asia' not on 'United States military bases in Japan', and the issues that apply to bases in Japan also arise, even if less acutely, with respect to bases in Korea and other parts of Asia. The Proposition might be entitled to use Japan as the major example supporting its case, but cannot claim it is the only one able to be raised in the debate.

As at other World Schools Championships, the motions at the 2002 contest in Singapore ranged from the very specific ('This House supports missile defence', 'This House supports the international trading of pollution permits') to the more general ('This House believes that low taxes are preferable to extensive government services', 'This House would compromise civil liberties in the interest of security'). The organisers sought to test the debaters' ability to argue both specific cases and general principles.

A Proposition team in the semi-finals defined the last-mentioned motion ('This House would compromise civil liberties in the interest of security') to mean that all countries should adopt a system of national identification cards (this compromise of civil liberties being warranted by the security benefits that would result). The problem with this definition is that it took a motion expressed as a general principle and tried to confine it to a single example. The organisers had not set the motion 'This House supports national identification cards' and the Proposition team, by defining the motion to mean this, was turning a topic of general application into something extremely specific. The plain meaning of the motion was whether, as a general principle, civil liberties should be reduced when this would benefit security, and national identification cards comprised but a single example which might or might not be contested in the course of this debate. By trying to make national identification cards the entire debate, the Proposition pitched the motion at a much more specific level than had been set and, as such, failed to provide the reasonable definition required.

Proving motions expressed as general principles

The Notes for Adjudicators at the World Schools Championships stress that when teams debate general issues, the emphasis 'is upon the principle, not the specifics'. The Proposition has the onus of proving the motion is *generally* true. In other words, it must prove the motion correct as a *general proposition*. This means showing it is true more often than not— that it is true in *the majority of cases*.

There will always be examples for and against any motion expressed as a general principle. This places a premium upon logical argument. As mentioned in the Notes for Adjudicators, the Proposition 'has to present a generalised case and prove it logically, rather than relying on large numbers of examples in the hope that these will do the job instead.' Just as a single example will not prove a generalised motion, nor will a welter of examples. What becomes important is not the number of examples, but the analysis of them, finding how they are linked, and the reasons and arguments they point to and that prove the team's case.

The construction of team cases is discussed below. The point to note here is that motions expressed as general principles must be proven true as general principles. A single example will neither prove nor disprove a general principle. Finding arguments that explain the majority of examples will be more important.

(c) Allowing for a reasonable debate

Because the definition must be reasonable, if there is no obvious meaning to the motion, the range of possible meanings is limited to those that allow for a reasonable debate. In other words, if the person setting the motion has failed to frame a clear issue for debate, the Proposition must define the motion in such a way as to provide an issue for debate.

As mentioned, the organisers of World Schools Championships endeavour to set motions which pose clear issues for debate. Proposition teams that fail to take the obvious meanings of such motions often do so with a view to reducing the Opposition's room for debate.

The dangers were illustrated in a national final on the motion 'This House believes that we need a world government'. The wording appeared specific enough, as did the issue involved. The United Nations is not a world government. Did the state of the world today require a governing body with a lot more power and could this be made to work? What would the dangers be and could these be surmounted? The Proposition team chose to take an unexpected definition of the motion and ended up arguing that there should be a new body that was similar to but more effective than the International Criminal Court then being established, and that it should have the ability to deal with the most terrible crimes against humanity, such as genocide. Such a body could hardly be what was meant by the concept of a 'world government', yet the Proposition proceeded to run its debate on this basis. Presumably the intent was to make the Opposition's preparation redundant and, by changing the issue to be debated, to frame the debate in such a way that this significantly increased the burden on the Opposition (witnessed by members of the Proposition issuing challenges such as 'do you want people to be able to commit genocide without being punished?' throughout the debate). The Proposition's definition can be condemned as (i) having ignored the obvious meaning of the motion (which provided a clear issue for debate) and (ii) having set up an alternative meaning of the motion designed to be one-sided.

The Rules of the World Schools Championships outlaw definitions that are truistic or tautological. Such definitions do not leave the Opposition *any* room for debate.

Truisms

A truism is something that is obviously true.

It would be a truism to define the motion 'This House believes that the sun is rising in the East' literally. The Opposition would have nothing to say to three speeches that discussed the manner in which the earth revolved around the sun. In terms of the questions posed above, the Opposition should be asking whether there is a clear issue to be debated. There is no issue as to whether the sun actually rises in the East.

On the other hand, what might the ordinary intelligent person believe the motion means? Taking it as a metaphor for Asia ('the East') becoming much more important in the world ('the sun is rising') seems eminently sensible: this poses a very real issue for both sides to debate. (China's/ Asia's importance in the world militarily/ economically/ politically.) While the motion is not so specific that the issue is immediately apparent, other possible meanings (e.g. that Eastern Europe is prospering) seem much more strained and artificial– and correspondingly less reasonable.

Tautologies

A tautology is something that is true by definition.

The motion for the semi-finals of the 1995 World Schools Debating Championships in Cardiff was 'This House believes that extremism is the catalyst for progress'. One of the proposition teams was concerned that it might have to defend 'bad extremists' (e.g. the IRA), so tried to limit the debate to 'good extremists' (e.g. the South African anti-apartheid movement) by defining 'extremism' in terms of positive change. The Proposition defined 'extremism' as radical groups that contribute to the advancement of society, so ended up arguing that radical groups that contribute to the advancement of society help cause the advancement of society (progress). A tautology becomes a circular argument and leaves the Opposition nothing to debate. In this case, the Opposition first speaker pointed out that the definition was tautological, and her team won the debate unanimously.

Another example of a tautology would be defining the word 'best' in the motion 'This House believes that government is best when it governs least' to mean 'least intrusive into the lives of ordinary people'.

Truistic and tautological definitions are clearly unreasonable. They leave the Opposition no room for debate.

Absolute Words

Motions with absolute words such as 'all', 'everyone', 'always' and 'never' need to be approached with caution because, while their plain meaning might suggest taking such words literally, doing so might prevent a reasonable debate. People setting motions generally avoid using absolute words unless there is good reason to the contrary.

A motion such as 'This House believes that all politicians are incompetent' seems on its face much more difficult to prove than 'This House believes that politicians are incompetent'. If a single competent politician can be found, this seems to have disproved that 'all politicians are incompetent', whereas 'This House believes that politicians are incompetent' only requires this to be shown in the majority of cases.

The Judging Schedule to the Rules of the World Schools Debating Championships provides that when a topic is expressed as an absolute, the Proposition 'must prove the topic true in the significant majority of cases, but not in every conceivable instance'. 'All' can therefore be defined as 'in the significant majority of cases'.

As with the prohibition on truisms and tautologies, the reading down of absolute words is designed to ensure there is a reasonable debate. This after all is why six debaters show up. To debate. Not for one side to use the words in the motion to claim victory from the outset.

(d) Would the ordinary intelligent person accept the definition?

Once the Proposition has decided upon a definition following the above guidelines, it should check this is a reasonable definition by asking whether it is one the ordinary intelligent person would accept.

The phrase 'ordinary intelligent person' has no particular magic. It is just a means of trying to express the idea that motions and the words in motions should be defined in accordance with what the average member of the audience would expect ('ordinary intelligent person' being used instead of 'average member of the audience' to cover the fact that an adequate level of education and general knowledge must be assumed).

The reason for this last provision is to reinforce the point that a reasonable definition involves doing what is expected; it is not about trying to win by playing tricks with words. It is not reasonable to take the obvious meaning of the motion and set up a debate which addresses the anticipated issue, but at the same time to define one word in the motion in quite an unexpected way, so as to give the Proposition a much easier burden of proof than the Opposition when debating this issue.

In one debate on the motion 'This House would break unjust laws in democracies', the Proposition team correctly discerned the issue for debate, whether civil disobedience was justified when living in a democracy. The Proposition quite rightly made much of the fact that majorities might oppress minorities and that, even although the United States was a democracy in the 1950s, black Americans faced immense difficulty enforcing civil rights

through legal means. Nevertheless, the Proposition in this debate made a critical mistake when it defined the word 'democracies'. The Proposition wanted to talk about South Africa and to say that people like Nelson Mandela were quite justified in breaking the laws of the apartheid regime there. Quite clearly those laws were 'unjust', but was apartheid South Africa a 'democracy'? The Proposition argued yes, by saying there was a democracy if there were elections, no matter if some people were ineligible to vote in them.

The Proposition's desire to use a strong example which the Opposition would have difficulty answering led it into the trap of distorting the definition to do so. As the Opposition correctly pointed out, no reasonable person would have considered apartheid South Africa a democracy when ninety percent of its populace was not allowed to vote in free elections. The Proposition had got the right issue in one sense (civil disobedience) but had missed it in another (the exact issue was civil disobedience *in democracies*). Its unreasonable definition of one word meant it was not in fact debating the motion set.

Dictionaries and Common Usage

The Proposition's task is to define the motion, not every word in it. Individual words need not be defined if their meaning is obvious. But when words do need to be defined (such as 'democracies' in the above example), the question is what would the ordinary intelligent person expect those words to mean. Dictionary definitions may assist in finding a commonly accepted meaning and can provide speakers with quick, concise explanations. But a dictionary has no particular authority; it is nothing more than an aid to determining the commonly accepted meaning of a word.

Taking an obscure dictionary definition and claiming that this is what the motion must mean is clearly illegitimate. Some time ago, a Proposition team defined 'rape' in the motion 'This House believes that rape is a problem for us all' to mean the oil-producing seed called rape. While this is one of the dictionary definitions of that word, it ignores the clear issue (is the crime of rape a problem men should be addressing as well as women?) and is not what the ordinary intelligent person would expect 'rape' to mean in this sentence.

A dictionary often lists a number of meanings for each word; some of these may be specialised, archaic or obscure meanings. Words must always be defined in context, and debaters should look to work out the meaning of the motion first. If any particular word is difficult to understand or is especially important for the debate, a dictionary might be consulted for a quick, concise explanation of its meaning, provided the dictionary definition chosen is one the ordinary intelligent person would accept in the context of the motion as a whole. When a dictionary is used, it makes no difference what dictionary it is; what matters is if it helps explain the proper use of the word in question.

The motion 'This House supports missile defence' was debated as one of the prepared rounds at the 2002 World Schools Debating Championships in Singapore. At that time, the phrase 'missile defence' was commonly used to refer to United States President George W. Bush's controversial proposal to develop a missile system that could intercept and destroy incoming ballistic missiles. It would have been inappropriate to resort to dictionary definitions of 'missile' and 'defence' to support any other more general definition. In the context of the times, there was an obvious meaning to the motion and a clear issue that was already being debated internationally.

There can sometimes be genuine ambiguity. The word 'Asia' in the motion 'This House would maintain United States military bases in Asia' might be interpreted as including the Middle East (dictionaries define the continent of Asia as doing so) or as excluding this region (common usage of 'Asia' and 'Asian' often fails to include the Middle East). It is unclear whether the framers of the motion intended American military bases in the Middle East to be included in the debate. In view of the genuine ambiguity of the word 'Asia' in this context, the Proposition might reasonably define the motion to include or not include bases in the Middle East and the Opposition would have to be prepared for either eventuality. This example can, however, be distinguished from the one mentioned earlier, namely a proposition excluding discussion of bases in Korea, which would clearly be illegitimate, given that any reasonable definition of 'Asia' must encompass Korea.

2. PARAMETERS, MODELS AND CRITERIA

In some national debating competitions the Proposition has a much greater right of definition than at the World Schools Championships. There are American university tournaments where the teams only have 15 minutes preparation time and it is accepted that the Proposition can define the motion as it wishes, so long as there some sort of a 'link' between the motion and the Proposition's case. Motions often end up being 'squirreled' so that proposing teams can argue pre-prepared cases. There are other competitions where it is usual for the Proposition to present a detailed 'policy' or 'model' for achieving the broad object of the motion, and debates focus on the merits of different models proposed. The World Schools Debating Championships are quite different from these sorts of competitions in that the Proposition has neither an absolute right of definition nor the ability to transform a broad philosophical motion into a detailed policy debate.

Because of longer preparation times, the belief that both teams have the right to employ that time gainfully, and an emphasis upon debating to an audience, the World Schools Championships are suffused by the principle of reasonableness. The Proposition must provide a reasonable definition. It must be one that the ordinary intelligent person would accept. When suggesting parameters to the debate, or proposing particular models or criteria to judge it by, the Proposition must ensure such parameters, models or criteria are themselves reasonable. They must be ones that the ordinary intelligent person would accept as applicable to the debate.

(a) Parameters for Debate

On occasion there may be an implicit context to a debate, which gives the Proposition reasonable grounds to set parameters or boundaries to what is included.

The motion 'This House believes that gay couples should be allowed to adopt children' was debated as one of the prepared rounds at the 2001 World Schools Championships in Johannesburg. While normally general motions at a world competition must be taken as applicable to the whole world, doing so in this instance would have allowed the Opposition to argue that gay adoption should not proceed because there were many countries that outlawed homosexuality and persecuted gay men and women. The implicit context of the motion did not include situations where gay couples were not allowed to exist. The issue to be debated was the merits of gay couples adopting children, and this was an issue that could only arise in societies where gay relationships were not illegal. Proposition teams were thus entitled to confine the debate to such societies. Such parameters were reasonable in view of the implicit context of the motion.

The Proposition's ability to set reasonable parameters to a debate does not provide a licence to restrict the motion arbitrarily.

'This House believes that private schools should be subsidised by the state' could not be defined as relating only to private schools in the United States. This would be altering the motion to read 'This House believes that private schools in the United States should be subsidised by the state', which is not what has been set. No matter that the Proposition knows a lot about American private schools or believes state subsidies to be particularly controversial there as a result of 'school voucher' proposals. While the motion may implicitly be limited to areas of the world where there are private schools, there is nothing to limit it to the United States given there are well-known examples of private schools in Britain, Australia and many other countries which could be used.

Motions that state general principles can normally be debated as such. 'This House believes that low taxes are preferable to extensive government services', debated at the 2002 World Schools Championships in Singapore, poses the issue of the extent to which society or the consumer should pay for services such as health care, education and public transport. The motion can be debated with reference to examples from all these areas and from a variety of different countries. Restricting the debate to just one country or to just health care would amount to rewriting the motion without cause. The Proposition would be attempting through its definition (rather than its debating) to gain an advantage over the Opposition, by making many of its examples redundant.

While the Proposition may on some occasions be required to set parameters to a debate, this will normally have been done by the person setting the motion. When there is a genuine ambiguity that needs to be resolved or an

implicit context that needs to be stated for the debate to proceed, the Proposition must remember its overarching responsibility to debate the issue posed: what the ordinary intelligent person would expect, not a subset thereof.

(b) Models

The word ‘model’ needs to be used with care at the World Schools Championships.

As mentioned, there are some competitions where teams are expected to propose specific plans or models. In American ‘policy debating’, the Proposition will often outline a specific plan for achieving the goal of the motion, and the Opposition will defend the status quo (present situation), attack the Proposition’s plan, and/ or present an allegedly better plan. At the World Schools Championships, teams are expected to take the motion as it stands. If it proposes a specific policy, to argue for or against this. If it puts forward a more general principle, to debate whether or not it is valid.

The closest the World Schools Championships come to ‘policy debating’ is when the motion involves a ‘change debate’. This requires the Proposition to propose a change in the status quo (present situation) and will often have the word ‘should’ in the motion. In order to propose a change, the Proposition will need to suggest there is a major problem and that the change will alleviate it.

The motion ‘This House believes that smoking should be banned’ is an example of a change debate. The Proposition must first identify the problem that exists (e.g. the health effects of smoking and the costs these impose on society). The Proposition must then propose banning as the solution to this problem and argue that this will be effective (i.e. the solution will in fact solve the problem).

In a change debate, the Opposition may argue one or all of the following:

- (a) the problem is not as bad as the Proposition suggests (costs are borne by individuals who know the risks, and are similar to other legal activities, such as drinking alcohol or driving cars);
- (b) the Proposition’s solution will not solve the problem (prohibition only leads to a black market, which causes more problems);
- (c) there are better solutions for the problem (raising taxes, education programmes).

Sometimes it is necessary for the Proposition to set out its proposed solution in a fair amount of detail in order to prove it will be effective. When this occurs, the proposed solution is called a ‘model’ or ‘plan’. As with the definition and any parameters, the Proposition must ensure that its model is a reasonable one if it is to serve as a basis for the debate.

The motion ‘This House believes that voluntary euthanasia should be legalised’ may require the Proposition to spell out what exactly it means by ‘voluntary euthanasia’, given that there have been different proposals before different legislatures around the world. So long as the Proposition’s model is a reasonable one (looking to common features of these proposals, such as the person being terminally ill and suffering from severe and untreatable pain, the person making the decision by free choice, certified by at least two medical experts), this will be the model to be debated. If the Proposition left out an important part of any scheme for voluntary euthanasia, it would be open for the Opposition to argue that this must also be included.

Debaters at the World Schools Championships can ‘use a model’ in the sense they are entitled to set out the details of a proposed solution required by the motion, provided that they do so reasonably (detailing what is meant by ‘voluntary euthanasia’ in the example given above; explaining what is accepted as ‘international trading of pollution permits’ in a debate proposing such a scheme). What debaters cannot do is use the word ‘model’ as some sort of link between the motion and what is in fact a different or much more limited case. A team proposing ‘This House believes that low taxes are preferable to extensive government services’ cannot say ‘our model

involves only providing free healthcare upon means-testing' any more than it could say it was only going to debate the motion with respect to means-tested healthcare. This would be arbitrarily restricting the motion and little different to 'squirreling' or 'policy debating'. The same would be true of a team that said 'our model is the United States presidential election in 2000' when proposing "this House would break unjust laws in democracies' or that said 'our model is setting up a worldwide system of national identification cards' when proposing 'This House would compromise civil liberties in the interest of security'. Models cannot justify failing to debate the issue posed; they are best used to flesh out a proposed solution in a 'change debate' and, even then, must be reasonable if they are to form a basis for the debate.

(c) Criteria

The standard of reasonableness is no less important when the Proposition puts forward criteria for assessing the truth of a motion. This often occurs in 'judgement debates', when the Proposition's task is to judge a particular subject favourably or unfavourably, and the Opposition has to challenge that judgement.

A judgement debate often has the word 'is' in the motion. For example, 'This House believes that there is too much money in sport' is a judgement debate. One of the first tasks of the Proposition is to set up criteria (some form of 'measuring stick') by which the subject can be judged. In this debate it will not be enough to show that there is a lot of money in sport; the Proposition must show there is 'too much money'. How can we judge when money in sport has become 'too much money'? The Proposition could suggest criteria such as when the traditional values of sport become corrupted (fair play ideals; playing being more important than winning). The Proposition would then argue these criteria have been satisfied (the media and sponsors support winners; athletes resort to drug-taking and playing when injured; even at amateur level, the behaviour of side-line supporters shows the corruption of fair play ideals).

In a judgement debate, the Opposition may argue one or all of the following:

- (a) the Proposition's criteria are not appropriate (sport has always been competitive and the Proposition is mythologising the idea of playing being more important than winning);
- (b) the Opposition has better (i.e. alternative) or additional criteria for judging the issue, and these criteria have not been satisfied (There is too much money in sport if it negatively affects sport's popularity and enjoyment derived from it. Money in fact allows for better sporting events seen by more people; it helps standards in sports improve);
- (c) even taking the Proposition's criteria, their arguments are incorrect (media and sponsors demand fair play; sports are taking action to deal with the few who engage in drug-taking and similar practices; people play sports at the amateur level for enjoyment of the game).

The Grand Final motion at the 1995 World Schools Debating Championships in Cardiff, 'This House believes that the United Nations has failed', similarly called for a judgement debate. The Opposition expected the criteria for whether the United Nations had 'failed' would be whether it had lived up to its objectives (promoting peace, economic prosperity, human rights) and had prepared examples of UN peace-keeping operations, economic and social development programmes, human rights committees and the like. The Proposition said that failure, in terms of an institution, was whether it was doing as well as it should be, and the UN was performing more poorly than it should after fifty years of existence due to its failure to adapt or evolve to meet changing circumstances during that time (thus a Security Council that did not reflect the modern world; executive officers not appointed on merit; bloated bureaucracies impeding effective delivery of programmes; inadequate and politicised processes).

The Opposition expected the Proposition team would be arguing the UN was not meeting its objectives, whereas the Proposition in fact argued the UN was not meeting its objectives *as well as it should* (demonstrating institutionally poorer performance than would have been the case had it changed its structures and processes over the last fifty years). The Proposition also took on the examples raised by the Opposition, arguing that they only further demonstrated the problems of the UN (peace-keeping operations had been blighted by

politicised processes and unwieldy bureaucracies; the UN had in fact been irrelevant in terms of the major steps taken to promote peace in the world, human rights declarations were not enforced, and so on). The Proposition won the debate by having set up criteria for judging 'failure' more carefully (and such criteria being reasonable in terms of the motion).

3. THE OPPOSITION'S OPTIONS

Presuming the Proposition's definition is satisfactory, the First Speaker of the Opposition will not argue the definition, but will proceed immediately to dealing with the Proposition's arguments. There is no need to say that the Opposition accepts the definition; this is presumed unless the First Speaker of the Opposition challenges it.

If the Opposition is unhappy with the Proposition's definition, it has several options:

(a) Accept and Debate

The first option is to accept it anyway. If the Proposition's definition leads in to the expected issue and allows the Opposition to put forward the arguments and examples it was intending, there is no point to arguing over the precise words the Proposition has used. Some inexperienced debaters do exactly this. The words used by the Proposition differ from those they have written down, so they 'clear up' the definition by using different words with much the same meaning or that still result in essentially the same debate. The Opposition gains no marks talking about the definition unless it has to. Trifling objections are counter-productive. The best advice is to move into the debate and take on the Proposition's arguments.

Much more serious is an unreasonable definition by the Proposition that, if accepted, will result in a different debate to the one the Opposition expected. One option is for the Opposition, despite quite understandable annoyance, to accept the definition anyway. The rationale for doing this is to avoid a 'definition debate', where the focus of the debate becomes the meaning of the words in the motion. In such debates, interaction and clash between the two teams concentrates on whose definition is correct. The two teams' arguments and examples may end up having little to do with each other, and there might as well be two parallel debates. For both teams and audience, the result is tedious. A lot will hinge on the adjudicators' opinion as to whether the definition was unreasonable or not. If the Opposition believes the matter is dicey, and the adjudicators might side with the Proposition, it may make more sense to accept the definition, borderline as it is.

Often when Proposition teams prepare surprise definitions, they put more effort into twisting the definition than to preparing solid cases. If the Opposition feels that what the First Speaker of the Proposition actually said (definition aside) is eminently rebuttable, it may wish to abandon its prepared case (or adapt what it can from this) and take the Proposition on its own ground. The Opposition may mention in passing the unexpected nature of the Proposition's definition which, presuming the audience agrees, may win it some sympathy. The adjudicators will also give credit to an Opposition that takes an unexpected definition in its stride.

The national final on the motion 'This House believes that we need a world government' has already been mentioned. The Proposition team gave an unexpected definition, arguing that there should be a new body that was similar to but more effective than the International Criminal Court then being established, and that it should have the ability to deal with the most terrible crimes against humanity, such as genocide. The Opposition team, while well aware that this sort of body did not begin to encompass what was meant by a 'world government' (although effectively punishing people who committed crimes against humanity might constitute a small sub-set of a world government's role), decided to accept the definition and avoid a definition debate in front of several hundred guests. The Opposition went on to argue there was no 'need' for the sort of body proposed by the Proposition, as the specifics of what they were suggesting ('the model' they were proposing) was little different from the International Criminal Court and would have the same degree of effectiveness. Since the Proposition was not proposing to transform the world order, there was likely to be little change.

(b) Challenge

The second option for the Opposition is to challenge the Proposition's definition, arguing it is unreasonable. The Opposition will have to explain exactly why it is unreasonable, then put up an alternative (and reasonable) definition, before proceeding to advance arguments and examples based on its own definition. It will meanwhile ignore the arguments and examples the Proposition has put forward (based, as they are, on an unreasonable definition).

The problems of a definition debate are canvassed above, but the Opposition may feel the Proposition's definition to be so grossly unreasonable, it has no choice but to challenge it. If the Proposition is arguing a truism or tautology, the Opposition must challenge the definition, or it would otherwise be shouldering an impossible burden. (Neither of the other options mentioned below is available for a truism or tautology.)

As mentioned above, unless the First Speaker of the Opposition challenges the definition, it is deemed to be accepted. The Judging Schedule to the Rules of the World Schools Debating Championships provide that the Opposition 'may not challenge the definition in any other speech unless the [Proposition...] significantly alters the definition in their subsequent speeches.'

The 'content' of definition debates hinges on which team presented the better arguments about the definition and which team then put forward the better case based on its own version of the definition. The definition having become the most important issue in the debate, it is marked accordingly. It is therefore vital that each team sticks to its definition. Even if the Proposition's definition was unsound, the second and third speakers will have to defend it and argue for it being reasonable, or they risk having their first speaker's speech become irrelevant.

As with any other argument put forward in a debate, the adjudicators must decide a definitional challenge, not on the basis of the adjudicators' own opinion (if the adjudicators believe the definition was reasonable or not), but in terms of the strength of the arguments offered. Even if the adjudicators feel the definition was a tautology, the Opposition will need to explain why this is so. If the adjudicators feel the Proposition argued better in its defence than the Opposition did in challenging it, the Proposition will 'win the definition'. But that said, the more unexpected, bizarre or unusual the definition would appear to the ordinary intelligent person, the less argument will be needed to point this out.

A team may still win despite a bad definition. Its marks for style and strategy may be considerably better. It may have much stronger arguments and examples, despite a poorer definition. But while winning remains possible, it has handicapped itself significantly by allowing the other team the opportunity to attack the premise of its case.

(c) Broaden

The third option for the Opposition is neither outright acceptance nor outright rejection, but instead to supplement the definition. The Proposition's definition may be incomplete. It may have omitted to define a word in the motion that the Opposition considers pivotal. In this case, the Opposition can offer a definition of this word, so long as it meets the standards of reasonableness outlined above (or it may in turn be challenged by the Proposition). The best response by the Proposition would be to ignore the Opposition supplementing the definition if this leaves unaltered the basic issue in dispute, and the nature of the arguments and examples being contended. If the word was in fact important, the Proposition might claim its definition was implicit in the case and arguments it put forward.

'Broadening the debate' is a form of supplementing the definition, and is one of the best tactics available to the Opposition. In many cases when there is an unexpected definition, the Proposition will be seeking to debate a narrower version of the motion. What is being put forward is not alien to the motion, it is just a small subset of what it should encompass.

A number of examples have been given above: 'This House believes that we need a world government' meaning that there should be a new body similar to but more effective than the International Criminal Court; 'This House

would compromise civil liberties in the interest of security' being restricted to the merits of national identification cards.

In each of these cases it is possible to say, yes, we will take on the example you have given, and show why you are wrong, but this is only one aspect of what the motion encompasses and we will present examples showing that in other aspects it is also wrong, thereby demonstrating that as a general proposition it is wrong. The Opposition is not rejecting the definition and the arguments that flow from it; the Opposition is instead saying they are incomplete, and is supplementing them.

Broadening the debate (back to what was originally expected) avoids the pitfalls of a definition debate, while allowing the Opposition to present its case and arguments, as prepared. If the motion 'This House believes that low taxes are preferable to extensive government services' was restricted to health care (on the basis this was particularly controversial at present), the Opposition could spend a fair amount of time dealing with health care arguments (which it should have anticipated, given these are a major area in which consumer choice policies have been implemented or discussed), but could broaden the debate by noting that such policies have also been applied in education and public transport and failings in these areas further prove why it is wrong to suggest the consumer rather than the state should pay for such commodities.

The Opposition's decision to broaden the debate rather than just accept the Proposition's restriction will depend on how much it can say about the Proposition's chosen subset (if it knows a lot and believes the Proposition's case is weak, it may be better to concentrate on demolishing the Proposition rather than having to set up and defend other examples). It will also want to consider the effects of broadening the debate on the Proposition (while the Opposition has to cover more ground, so too does the Proposition, which may be rattled by the bypassing of its definition and may not know a lot about the other areas raised by the Opposition).

(d) 'Even If'

The fourth option for the Opposition is to both reject and accept the definition. This is called an 'even if' case and involves:

- (a) rejecting the Proposition definition as unreasonable and explaining why;
- (b) putting up an alternative (and reasonable) definition, then proceeding to advance arguments and examples based on this;
- (c) rather than ignoring the Proposition's arguments and examples on the basis they derive from an unreasonable definition, arguing that 'even if' the Proposition's definition was reasonable, its arguments and examples do not prove what is alleged.

This is sometimes known as the 'you're wrong, and even if you're right, you're wrong' case. Historically, 'even if' debates were more likely to arise in Australian competitions, where the Opposition had an equal right of definition.

While this option avoids the danger of rejecting the Proposition's definition, only to have the adjudicator uphold it, the 'even if' case requires the Opposition to cover a lot of ground. There are three separate issues to be argued: the definitional debate, the Opposition's case and the Proposition's case (rejecting the definition involves the first two; broadening the debate blends the last two). The adjudicators will have to judge both teams over each of the areas they tackle (the Proposition might decide to rely on winning the definition, or could reply with 'even if the Opposition's definition is correct' counter-arguments of its own).

In addition to the quantity of argument involved, an 'even if' case has the further disadvantage that it makes the Opposition's definitional challenge appear less pressing. If the Opposition can argue on the Proposition's terms, and indeed wants to hedge its bets on the Proposition's definition being found unreasonable, how vital was it to

clog up the debate with an inevitably tedious and protracted definitional tussle? An 'even if' debate is almost always less advantageous than one of the three options set out above.

4. CONSTRUCTING CASES

The definition settled, each team has to present a case, arguments and examples. Each team presents a single case. The team's case is supported by several arguments. Each argument is backed up by one or more examples.

(a) Case

The team's case is sometimes called the team line or team theme. This is the essence of what the team is arguing. Every individual argument made must help prove the case, which in turn must prove the team's side of the motion.

During preparation, the team should always try to work out the key point it wants to make. Does this prove its side of the motion? Does each individual argument derive from this?

Often the team case can be written out as a 'because statement'. For example, 'affluent nations *should* accept more refugees' *because* there is dire human need, they can easily afford to help alleviate it, and they themselves benefit from doing so; 'we should *not* cancel third world debt' *because* the real problem is not the debt but the governments of these countries. (These are two sample cases argued at the 2001 World Schools Debating Championships in South Africa.)

All three team members should write down the team case once it has been agreed. By referring each of their arguments back to the team case and repeating it at different junctures, the team's three speeches are given a unity and consistency.

'Remember there are people in need; we've got the means to help them; and we ourselves benefit from more diverse communities' is the sort of ending to a speech that sounds good and, more importantly, reiterates and reinforces the team case in the 'affluent nations should accept more refugees' debate.

The Opposition team case against cancelling third world debt is less wordy. Team cases can always be simplified and given more punch. The Proposition team case in the refugees debate could be refined to read 'affluent nations *should* accept more refugees' *because* this benefits both the refugees and the affluent nations.

(b) Arguments

The team will need to ensure that it provides arguments in support of its case and that these arguments are divided among the three speakers, the most important arguments being made first.

An argument is a reason or rationale why the team's case is right. Inexperienced debaters sometimes state the team case, but then descend into a series of examples, without trying to show how they are linked or the underlying reasons why they prove the team's point.

A Proposition team speaker claiming affluent nations themselves benefit from accepting more refugees might say that this occurred when European countries took in some of the Kosovo Albanian refugees who were fleeing into Macedonia in 2000. But this would be to go from case to example, without the intervening stage of argument. What is needed is an explanation as to *why* this example shows affluent nations benefit from taking more refugees. What was the benefit they gained?

The Proposition speaker should have said: Affluent nations themselves benefit from taking more refugees [part of the case]. Refugees often flood into neighbouring countries that face many of the same problems; this destabilises these countries, causing regional instability that often affects the affluent countries' political and economic interests [argument]. For example, the Kosovo Albanians fleeing into Macedonia in 2000 threatened

to overwhelm that country and spark a civil war which could have involved Greece and directly affected NATO interests, meaning Europe helped its own regional stability by taking some of those refugees [example linked to argument].

The Proposition speaker could then provide another example making the same point, then move to a second argument supporting this part of the case (regional stability is not the only self-interest affluent nations have in taking more refugees; doing so adds to those nations' diversity and multiculturalism, which is an element in their success) followed by an example in turn.

Debates without arguments become a hotchpotch of examples. What is important is not the number of examples, but the analysis of them.

In a debate on the motion 'This House would keep out of other people's wars', the Proposition team said that peacekeeping missions had exacerbated problems in Rwanda and Kosovo. The Opposition replied that peacekeeping ventures had assisted the situations in East Timor and Eritrea. Both teams resorted to citing examples without attaching them to arguments. What they needed to do was to provide reasons why intervening (here, by way of peacekeeping) in other people's wars was detrimental or advantageous (multinational peacekeeping forces suffered from cumbersome command structures which prevented their being effective when threatened; once enough nations committed to a multinational force it could deter local and neighbouring military threats due to its firepower and international standing). The examples that supported such arguments would then follow.

Examples alone can never win a debate. There will always be examples for and against the motion. The strength of the arguments that seek to explain the examples will therefore be more important.

(c) Examples

Arguments require logic and reason, and need to be supported by examples. The problem of the speaker who lists a series of examples without providing any argument is matched by that of the speaker who offers a variety of arguments, but with no supporting evidence. Without proof, arguments are reduced to assertions and generalisations.

The best examples are those that the ordinary intelligent person (hopefully most audience members!) will have heard of. These are facts, events and occurrences that have been widely reported in the media. A common usage example will have much more immediate credibility than an obscure statistic from an unknown author.

This is not to suggest that general knowledge is the only source of good evidence. Research will produce useful facts, figures and examples that can be introduced into a debate. But such specific material works best when it complements or provides detail for something that is commonly known or understood. Personal anecdotes (stories involving the speaker) are to be avoided; impartiality and credibility are dubious when arguing for a particular side of the motion.

When presenting an example, it is important that it be fully explained. It is better to mention a few examples well, linking them carefully to arguments just made, and explaining why they are relevant and significant to the debate, than merely to list a series of examples without proper clarification.

(d) Restrictive Cases

A lot has been said about the definition and about constructing cases. The aim is to make definitional issues less prominent, not more; for teams to debate the motion set, not the motion one team prefers.

The dangers of unexpected definitions and restrictive cases were illustrated in the final stages of the 2002 World Schools Debating Championships in Singapore. The semi-finals motion has already been mentioned. One of the proposition teams defined 'This House would compromise civil liberties in the interest of security' to mean that

all countries should adopt a system of national identification cards (this compromise of civil liberties being warranted by the security benefits that would result). The Proposition in the Grand Final debate affirmed 'This House believes that the media has become too powerful' by claiming the media had become overly intrusive into the private lives of citizens.

Both cases were restrictive. The Proposition in the semi-final mentioned sought to restrict a general debate to a single *example*. The Proposition in the Grand Final was restricting its case to a single *argument*. The former approach was open to challenge; the latter was not.

The semi-final Proposition was effectively suggesting that if it proved a system of national identification cards to be beneficial, it would have proved that civil liberties should be compromised in the interest of security. The logic was faulty. At most, the Proposition would have proved the general principle true with respect to a single example. The Proposition having no grounds for narrowing a debate of general application to a single, specific example, the Opposition team was entitled not only to question the validity of the Proposition's example, but also to suggest that other examples proved the converse. The fact that the Proposition was restricting the motion to a much more specific level of abstraction than had been set is demonstrated by trying to write the team's case as a 'because statement'. 'Civil liberties should be compromised in the interest of security *because* a system of national identification cards is beneficial' becomes nonsensical. The Proposition First Speaker spent most of his first speech talking about the mechanics of a national identification card (how it would be issued, updated, and replacement procedures in the event it was lost), itself an indicator of how peripheral his speech had become to the actual motion. Setting out a detailed model as *tohow* a national identification card system might work was no substitute for providing reasons as to *why* civil liberties should be compromised in the interest of security.

The Proposition's case in the Grand Final makes sense when expressed as a 'because statement'. 'The media has become too powerful *because* it is now overly intrusive into the private lives of citizens' suffers no problems of logic or coherence. While the Opposition might be surprised that the Proposition had decided to rest its case on a single argument (media intrusion into the private lives of citizens) when there were a variety of other arguments available for claiming the media has become too powerful (ownership concentrations; the media's effect on public perceptions of politicians and public figures; biased and distorted news coverage), there is no necessity for the Proposition to raise every argument that might have been raised. Media intrusion into the private lives of individuals is not an unexpected argument in this sort of debate, and the Opposition needed to be able to counter it. Unlike the Proposition in the semi-final debate mentioned, the Proposition here has defined the motion at the correct level of abstraction: 'the media' and 'powerful' are not being interpreted in an unexpected or unduly narrow manner. The Proposition has not arbitrarily declared the debate is only about television media or that it is restricted to the western world.

The Proposition's case in the 2002 Grand Final became muddled when it failed to set out clear criteria for assessing 'too powerful', simply linking this with the media's intrusion into individuals' private lives. The Proposition said its 'model' was to restrict the media to reporting on individuals' private lives when this impacted on their jobs. In terms of the discussion of models and criteria above, this being a 'judgement' rather than a 'change' debate, the Proposition should have focused on setting out criteria for judging when the media's power became excessive rather than providing a model for how to change this.

The Opposition in turn misread the debate when it attempted to 'broaden' the definition so as to include the sort of arguments it had been expecting (which it could then rebut by pointing to regulatory schemes that inhibited ownership concentration and news distortion, and an educated populace able to deal with the same). In addition to questioning whether the media had gone too far in its coverage of individuals' private lives, the Opposition may have fared better by coming back to the overall question posed and establishing a framework for assessing whether the media was 'too powerful'. Media intrusion into individuals' private lives was, at the end of the day, only *one* argument towards proving the media was 'too powerful' and it could be contended that, even conceding some unjustifiable media intrusion into individuals' private lives, this was outweighed by the controls on the media and the media's lack of power in a host of other significant areas (thus introducing the arguments the Opposition wanted to make about mechanisms preventing media distortion and the like).

Whereas an unduly restrictive *definition* (such as limiting a general motion to a single example) is illegitimate and can be challenged or broadened, a Proposition that runs a restrictive *case* (limiting itself to a single argument) acts legitimately and cannot be challenged for doing so, but runs the risk of the Opposition being able to more easily counter that case (by disproving that one argument and/ or by raising other arguments that disprove the motion, as defined).

The moral of the story is as mentioned at the outset. To debate the motion set. There are dangers in trying to run restricted definitions or restricted cases at the World Schools Championships, where teams are expected to take the obvious meaning of a motion and to debate the issue posed. Sometimes motions will be extremely specific, at other times they will be very general, and the Proposition's definition is expected to follow suit. Specific motions should be defined specifically and general motions generally. Good debating involves an effective blend of argument, rebuttal, speaking ability and teamwork. It means displaying the best material, presentation and strategy on the motion set, not seeking to handicap the Opposition before the debate begins or confounding the reasonable expectations of audiences and adjudicators who have come to watch an exchange of ideas and arguments for and against a particular motion.

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Disclaimer: Mention has been made of particular debates for the purpose of discussion and analysis. Not all aspects of these debates have been included, meaning that the commentary given should not be taken as any reflection on which team should have won or lost a particular debate. The commentary given is the opinion of the author and other adjudicators and people present at the debates mentioned should not be taken as necessarily agreeing or disagreeing with what is written.