GUIDELINES FOR BUILDING MAJOR ARGUMENTS

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Everyone has his or her own argument style. The following recipe is based on an understanding of the empirical basis for how listeners absorb and accept information, on my experience and my own preferences.

Major arguments should be developed in steps. Make sure that you make it clear when you are going from one step to the next.

Here are the components I suggest.

TITLE:
• This is the “name” of your argument. It is what you will call it, it is what you want judges to write down, and it is how your opponents are likely to refer to it. This repetition helps you.
• The title should be a complete thought.
• The title should be short.
• The title should be as near a complete descriptor of the argument as you can get.
• The title should be rhetorically snappy. But, do not sacrifice accurate description for a snappy title.
• You always want to say the title of your argument slower than the rest of your speech, because you want judges to write it down word-for-word.
• In front of some English second language speakers you might want to repeat the title.

THESIS:
• This is a one or two sentence description of the entire argument.
• It should come right after the title.
• Studies show that if listeners understand the context of the whole idea first, they will more successfully assemble the pieces of the idea as you go through them.
• You will want to say this portion of the argument at a little slower speed.
• While judges are writing down your title, you should be on your thesis, thus reinforcing the whole concept behind your argument.
• Your goal is to have the judge understand what the argument is and where it is going by the time you finish your thesis.

STEPS:
• The number and kind of steps you have in an argument are based on the nature of the argument.
• Steps are necessary components of a linear reasoning process.
• Causes come before effects, links come before impacts, assumptions come before implications, etc.
• When in doubt, put in that extra step. The more explicit you are in argument construction the better.

REASONING:
• You need to explain the logic and reasoning behind the operation of the argument.
• If logical connections are not explicitly stated then the process of persuading the judge ends.
• Logical reasoning is not that difficult, we use it every day, and we use induction, deduction and causation. Use these in your arguments. For a fuller explanation, see https://vimeo.com/53775237
• For some reason we may have been taught that you do not need to make these logical operations explicit, as if it was somehow beneath you, but I can assure you that it is not. When the audience understands the “logic” behind your argument they are more likely to “buy in.”

EVIDENCE AND SUPPORT:
• You need evidence to link your abstract argument to the real world.
• Americans tend to use expert opinion and read “block quotations” but these are used less in international debate.
• When you use different types of evidence to support the same argument you have a stronger argument. Different forms of evidence work for different people.
• Here are some types of support you can use:
  Current Event – something happening now proves your point.
  • Example that mirrors what is happening in your argument.
  • The more similar the better.
  Expert opinion – some expert agrees with you
  • Need name and who they are
  • Theory, prediction, idea that you can use to support your argument.
  Quotation – Some famous person or expert makes a statement
  • Identity
  • Slogan or statement
  • Relevance
  • Churchill most common – Democracy, Talk over war.
  • All politics comes fro the barrel of a gun. -Mao
  • For every complex problem there is a solution that is clear, simple, and wrong. H.L. Mencken
  • History is prolog – Jefferson
  Statistics – Data that supports your argument
  • Current is important
  • Suggest a trend or direction
  • Absolute precision not needed.
  Empirical or case study – A study of an actual case proves your point
  • More detail than an example
• Similarity in crucial aspects essential
• May predict result or important causal forces

Analogy, comparison – Your point is very much like something else
• Literal - better
• Figurative – not so good

Personal testimony – What happened to you that supports your argument
• Real life example and you were there.
• Avoid too much detail

Narrative about another person - Tell a story about another person to support your argument
• Same as personal testimony, yet not as powerful

Visualization – Paint a word picture and have the audience imagine they are in that picture
• Map out a situation
• Place listeners in that situation
• Ask them to draw their own conclusion

Historical example – Event in history supports your point
• Known
• Analogous
• Not too distant

Commonly accepted idea – Something almost all people believe
• Often about motivations and what moves people
• Money motivates people

LINKS:
• Many arguments need to link directly to the advocacy and/or plan in the debate.
• Links need to be obvious and clear, almost intuitive. Just because they are intuitive does not mean you can afford not to develop them fully.
• In some debate formats we often tolerate links that occur in many steps, such as “A leads to B, B leads to C, C leads to D, D leads to E and E is bad.” If it takes this many steps the direct causation seen by the audience will be minimal. If you need that many link steps, you might want to consider a different argument altogether.
• In some debate formats links are accepted if explained, but it is better if the link is clear, real world and intuitive. They need to “see it” to “buy it.”

IMPACTS:
• Obviously, you want to answer the question, “Why is this important?”
• Many debate formats go too far in explaining the impact to their arguments (“Global thermonuclear war destroying all life,” for example).
• Do not have an extreme impact that lacks credibility. You need enough impact to win the debate, but too much can hurt you.
Explain numbers effected, severity of each instance, and what it means to those involved. Do not assume “unemployment is bad,” but explain specific harms that it has. Likewise, “money” is not an impact.

Things that can be repaired or reversed are less important than things that cannot.

Rights are issues that need to be explained, so you just answer the question, “Why is this right important?” It is not always bad when government takes choices away from people to protect them, just one example of how Americans may think versus people from, for example, Singapore.

At times you need to describe the scenario for the impact to take place. This is a narrative about how the impact comes about. It needs to be a good story.

Explain time frame, with sooner being more important.

Explain the probability dimension, especially when predicting future events.

Impacts based on moral absolutes need to be fully explained. Failure to do so will cost you. Yes, “slavery is bad,” but when arguing that it is a moral absolute you must explain fully.

Use impacts later in the debate to compare the two sides. Remember, in a good debate both sides will win some stuff; you need to be able to explain why yours is more important.

For a discussion of this, you might review https://vimeo.com/80465328

Generally, debates are won or lost on the basis of your substantive arguments. It is very hard to win the debate on rebuttal alone.

VIDEOS

Zheng Bo, China
Deeper Arguments - https://vimeo.com/102084807

Geetha Creffield, Singapore Coach

Mariel Golden, University of Vermont
Argumentation Do and Do Not - https://vimeo.com/71398733