TYPES OF TOPICS IN DEBATES

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Basic Ideas

• Topic is what the debate should be about. The debate should be about the ideas and concepts of the topic. You want to remain focused on those ideas.
• The proposition or government side must uphold the topic.
• The opposition side must oppose the topic.
• Proposition must interpret the topic so as to create a good debate. They should not interpret the topic so that it is easier for them to win the debate, but so that the main issues can be fully debated.
• The audience will punish proposition teams who attempt to define the topic to make it much smaller or easier for them to win. Sometimes a proposition team thinks they are being “smart” by interpreting the notion in an unexpected way so that they can take the other team by surprise. But, in taking the audience by surprise they actually are being unwise.
• When the audience see that the proposition is debating the topic the way they expected, they approve. You want approval.

Types of Topics

While there may well be an infinite number of different types of topics, for the purposes of advising debaters on strategy and method, I find that three types of topics provide a fairly good framework.
Different types of topics have different obligations and requirements. This is why you need such a categorization system, because it can help you discover quickly and accurately what it is you are supposed to do within a given topic.
• FACT: Something is or is not.
• VALUE: Something is of inherent worth or not.
• POLICY: Something should be done or should not be done.

TOPICS OF FACT

Something is or is not true. The topic calls for a factual interpretation. It is the most basic and straightforward sort of topic.
Very much like a court decision – guilty or not guilty, a factual determination. The crime was or was not committed is a factual determination.
Examples:
THBT advertising does more harm than good for society.
THBT that China and the USA will be allies in the 21st Century.

Weigh the facts. Do not be distracted by the “harm” and “good” in the topic. The advertising topic is asking you to look at all the harms and goods in this instance and then decide which one predominates. This topic is very much like a civil court case.
The China topic is set to determine a fact, but it is a future fact. This is still quite legitimate to do within a factual framework.

Need a standard to determine who wins. Here are some common ones
- Majority of examples.
- Preponderance of evidence.
- True beyond a reasonable doubt.

TOPICS OF VALUE

Something is or is not of inherent value.

THBT Shakespeare is the world’s greatest writer.
Locate the value term and then define it to determine how to win the debate.
“Greatest writer” is.. You develop a list of criteria, and when you meet them you have proven it.
Name some criteria you would use to prove this topic. Which ones are the more reasonable?

THBT Deng Xiao Ping was a greater Chinese leader than Mao Ze Dong
Locate the value term (“greater Chinese leader”) and then define it to determine how to win the debate.
Name some criteria you would use to prove this topic. Which ones are the more reasonable?

Without a clear definition of this term the debate will be a mess.
Definition should be reasonable but favorable.

TOPICS OF POLICY

Something should be done. Action – government, international, individual.

THW legalize prostitution.
Proposition needs a model – how they would do this.
Relevant detail – who, what, how, who pays for it?
Build the model anticipating the opposition arguments. For example, unless you say prostitutes must be of age you are advocating child prostitution.
Must show that the model addresses a problem and reduces it.
Some detail, but not too much. Audiences dislike models that have too much self-serving detail.

OTHER MATTERS

Might be in more than one category.
THBT parents should not hit their children.
This could be done as a policy or as a value topic (with “should not” being the value).
Pick the version that makes it easier for you to win:
Policy: investigate and prosecute all parents who hit their children (losing option).
Value: parents should not hit their children because it is morally wrong, for a number of reasons (better option).

Agent might be specific, like “developing nations” or such.

Anticipate interpretations when you are opposition. Anticipate several possible interpretations, and remodel your strategy based on the one they choose.

WHICH TYPE?
- THW execute convicted war criminals.
- THBT humanity will not reach the 22nd Century.
- THBT state-run media cannot serve the function of a free press.
- THBT it is wrong to eat whales and sharks.
- THW not watch videos of beheadings.

MORE....
- THBT viewing violent media leads to violent behavior.
- THBT NATO is an outdated institution.
- THBT standardized testing is the enemy of learning.
- THW require all candidates for national office to undergo lie detector tests with questions submitted by their opponents.

VIDEOS

Geetha Creffield, Singapore coach
Topic Analysis - https://vimeo.com/99471267

Alfred Snider
Topic Analysis for Beginners - https://vimeo.com/72703007

Patricia Johnson-Castle, McGill University, Canada
Topic Analysis for Different Topic Types - https://vimeo.com/71375180

Stephen Boyle, Irish National Champion
Topic Analysis Methods - https://vimeo.com/14211625