



Christian Communicators Northwest

Christian Communicators Northwest Guidance on Teaching and Handling Topicality 2007-2008 Debate Year

Purpose of this Document

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance to debaters, parents, coaches and club leaders on the philosophical and practical approach CCNW wants taken with regard to topicality.

General Philosophy

“Topicality is a protection for the negative team and should not be challenged frivolously or unnecessarily.” (Christian Communicators of America)

Discussion

Christian Communicators Northwest strongly endorses and supports the Christian Communicators of America’s emphasis on and approach to topicality. The heart of good debate is a clear focus on the matter under discussion. Thus, when combined with a well crafted, carefully worded resolution, a strong emphasis on topicality provides a firm foundation from which both Affirmative and Negative debate teams can work.

Topicality is unique among the stock issues. It divides the ground between what is intended to be debated, and what has been left outside and should be avoided.

If a topical case is brought forward for discussion, the Negative Team is responsible for being prepared, and the stage is set for meaningful exchanges regarding the substance of the case. Are the harms sufficiently egregious as to necessitate action by the government? (The stock issue of significance.) Is there a good case to be made that without government action these harms will continue to persist? (The stock issue of inherency.) Does the course of action proposed by the Affirmative Team appear likely to solve or at least substantially ameliorate the harms? (The stock issue of solvency.) If the case presented by the Affirmative Team is not topical, there is nothing to debate, and thus the other stock issues become completely irrelevant.

Thus, Topicality is to be viewed as a gate, or a hurdle that the Affirmative Team must clear. However, once cleared and the foundation for a debate has been laid, the issue of Topicality should be laid aside and the round should proceed to a debate over the substantive matters highlighted by the remaining three stock issues of Significance, Inherency, and Solvency.

As noted above, “topicality is a protection for the Negative Team.” It is the Negative Teams defense against being forced to debate against issues for which they did not have a legitimate opportunity to prepare. Such a situation is truly unfair and a strong deterrent against it arising is fully justified. If an Affirmative Team truly fails to bring a topical case, they deserve to lose, and it is a waste of everyone’s time to discuss any other issue.

Conversely, if the Affirmative Team does set forth a topical case, the basis for a legitimate debate has been provided and the Negative Team should not abuse the power provided by the topicality ruling. While it may be tempting to try to gain a “quick and easy win” through a topicality challenge, to do so degrades debate as an academic activity and turns it into a game.

Guidance for Affirmative Teams

1. **Choose cases that are Topical.**
2. **Construct your cases with care. Use proper definitions and set forth the issues such that conformance to the resolution is as obvious as you can make it.**
3. **Come prepared with a strong topicality defense. The best deterrent to a Topicality Challenge is to be known as a team that is always prepared to respond vigorously to such. A failed topicality challenge is a waste of time for the negative. The time could have been better spent attacking the substance of the case.**

Guidance for Negative Teams

1. **Never attack a case you sincerely believe is topical.**
2. **Always attack any case you sincerely believe to be non-topical. As stated above, debating non-topical cases is a waste of time and should not occur. The Topicality ruling is specifically intended to discourage non-topical cases. Make sure it fulfills its purpose.**

What to do with Questionable Cases

Such situations must be handled based on the considered judgement of the Negative Team. The question that should be asked is “Is the case Topical?” The question should not be “What are my chances of winning a Topicality Ruling?” Remember, the goal is to have a debate on the substantive issues whenever it is possible.

What to do if a Topicality Challenge is Made

Assume the challenge was done in good faith with a clear conscience.

Accept the decision of the judge with every good grace.

Remember that debate is an academic activity intended to make debaters better communicators for Christ, and whether you won or lost said challenge, to learn as much as possible from the experience. Remember that in this league we are all Brothers and Sisters in Christ, and don't let any disagreement over academic issues spoil the unity of Christian fellowship.

Concluding Remarks

At various times there will be differences of opinion regarding Topicality. Ultimately the matter must rest on the desires and attitudes of those involved. Christian Communicators Northwest wants to see Topicality retain its rightful place in the world of debate. For it to do so both Affirmative and Negative Teams must approach the issue with care, restraint, and even humility. The Topicality ruling is intentionally powerful. It must never be abused.