Analyzing a Resolution

1. Statement of value versus a statement of fact.

    a. Leads to the importance of "ought" and "should" in a resolution.

    b. Otherwise, the burden of proof would be on the affirmative side to prove the resolution is true 100% of the time.

        i. Instead, the affirmative needs to show that the statement is true "as a matter of principal" or as a general case and, though there might be small exceptions, these exceptions aren't so large as to invalidate the overall claim being made.
        ii. The negative side should show that the specific arguments provided by the affirmative side are either **not sufficient** to uphold the resolution or are **not true** in and of themselves.

2. "What would we need to logically prove or know to affirm or negate this resolution?" Or in other words, **what burdens** are placed upon the affirmative debater due to the text of the resolution.

    a. An effective textual analysis includes the following:

        i. **an understanding of the <u>definitions of the words</u> in the resolution**

Start by breaking down the important words in the resolution. Research or look up words that you don't know. Be careful of "terms of art," which are phrases that have very specific meanings in specific contexts (e.g. "due process" is a legal term meaning the set of procedural safeguards that prevent the government from overriding individual rights but the words due and process individually would be nonsensical. Recent past resolutions have included such terms of art as "separation of church and state," "judicial activism" and "eminent domain").

        ii. **an understanding of the <u>type of resolution</u> at hand**
            1. comparative ("x" is more desirable than "y"),
            2. absolute ("x action" is just)
            3. superlative ("x" is the best form of government)

Generally, **comparative resolutions** require the students to examine both ideas that are in contrast and explain the comparative benefits of one of the two options. Many students will just try to give reasons why the option they have to uphold is good but the burden of these resolutions is to show why one ought to preference one thing as opposed to another thing. This could mean that the students have to show why benefits of the option they are upholding are comparably better than the benefits of the other option and that the harms of their side are not as severe as the harms of the opposing side.

Absolute resolutions ask the students to uphold a general principle and prove that it is, on balance, correct. This means that students will have to prove that in most cases the action or idea being put forward is correct.

Superlative resolutions are fairly rare as they ask students to defend some notion as being preferable to all other options. To affirm such a resolution, students are going to have to really focus on the advantages of the notion being advanced and be able to explain why the possible harms are not that important.

iii. An understanding of <u>the context</u>, if any, provided by the resolution

Some resolutions posit specific contexts such as "in the United States," "in the US judicial system," or "when in conflict." Ask the students what the purpose of such clauses could be. Does this resolution provide a specific context? In what way do these contexts seem to limit or narrow the debate? How do these contexts clarify the conflict of the resolution? How do these contexts suggest burdens for what the affirmative or negative debater has to prove?

iv. an understanding of the <u>actor and action</u> of the resolution

The actor is the agent/person/entity that will presumably carry out the action in the affirmative world. Common actors in Lincoln Douglas resolutions include "a government," "the US government," "the individual," "society," "the international community," "the UN," "the US judicial system," among others. The actor is crucial to understanding the scope of the resolution. Sometimes the actor of the resolution is explicitly stated but other times it is implied and therefore open to interpretation. Whereas in the resolution "The United States has a moral obligation to mitigate international conflicts," it is clear that the US federal government is the logical actor, in the resolution "Civil disobedience in a democracy is morally justified," the issue of the actor is a little more unclear. The actor could be the individual who is deciding whether or not to be civilly disobedient or a society in terms of society's mores and values. Additionally, the action of the resolution is critical. This is what the agent will do in the affirmative world. In the past two resolutions, the actions are "mitigat[ing] international conflicts" and "civil disobedience" respectfully. The combination of these two specifies the resolution and should act to limit the scope of topical arguments. Have the students identify the actor and action of the resolution you are examining.

v. a recognition of the <u>evaluative term</u> of the resolution

Evaluative terms are those that pose the moral, legal or ethical question of the resolution. For example, in each of the resolutions below, the evaluative term is bolded:

- It is **morally permissible** to kill one innocent person to save the lives of more innocent people.
- In the United States, jury nullification **is a legitimate check** on government.
- International lenders **ought** to cancel the debt of highly indebted poor countries.
- Capitalism is **the most just** form of economic system.

In each of these examples, the bolded term informs how the resolution should be thought about. For example, with the first resolution, the question is not whether the action posed by the resolution is "good" or "right" but whether a coherent system of morality could permit such an action to be endorsed. For the second resolution, the question is whether or not the action of the resolution functions as a check on government action and whether that check is legitimate in the context of a democratic republic.

Now that the resolution itself has been analyzed, you can pose the question, "What would we need to logically prove or know to affirm or negate this resolution?" Don't focus on arguments and examples but towards outlining what logically must be proven to affirm or negate the resolution.

In other words, make a distinction between **arguments** that affirm or negate the resolution *versus* the **ideas that frame** how a resolution can be affirmed or negated.