

# Building Your Framework

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## **The Judge's Weighing Mechanism**

Very simply put, a framework in academic debate is the set of standards the judge will use to evaluate a case. It is the judge's duty to listen to both sides of the debate and determine a winner. The judge will either use criteria you provide or her own or a combination of standards. When we say "standards" we refer to something that is deemed true or accurate. For example, when weighing an item on a balance beam, the unknown weight is placed in one tray, then known weights are placed in the other tray until balance is achieved. The known weights, are "standards" and so we can declare the unknown weight because we trust the standards are accurate. In academic debate, the judge will evaluate the truthfulness or accuracy of a claim based either on known facts (those the judge knows to be true by experience) or based on criteria revealed in the debate. For example, you may make a claim the judge knows nothing about, say, herds of cattle contribute to global warming. The opponent may claim the impact of cattle is insignificant. How does the judge decide which is accurate without a standard upon which to base the decision? If neither debater provides a standard, the judge will try to evaluate things such as the source or timeliness of the data. More than likely though, the judge will simply dismiss the offsetting claims and defer to a higher standard such as, "well, the Pro's other claims seem accurate so this one about cattle probably is as well". You need to understand, the judge will fulfill her duty and make a decision and to do so she will go through a series of evaluations, weighing the claims. In most cases, it is to your advantage as a debater to give the judge the standards of measure rather than having her apply her own or worse yet, applying standards given by your opponent. How the judge uses these standards, that is, yours or her own, is a function of the judging paradigm and in practically every round is a huge unknown (unless you know the judge very well). Therefore, it is to your best interest to ensure the standards used are the one's which favor your case.

## **Framework Definition and Context**

For the purposes of this discussion I shall define framework as a set of beliefs and standards and we shall apply these beliefs and standards to the context of the debate case. I think it is important to narrow the scope since we are not trying to establish a worldview. These are not necessarily standards by which we want to live our lives and they may not be beliefs we hold outside of the context of the debate round. The framework is merely a set of standards you wish to apply for the twelve minutes (minus cross-fires) you are arguing your case. Nevertheless, it is to your best interests to ensure your framework does not contradict the judges overall worldview too much or you run the risk of alienating your position. I shall expand upon this throughout the discussion.

**Rules-Based Framework** (I skipped this-fairly rare; example: one side never advocates and establishes a position, but only seeks to negate the opponent's position OR refusal or failure of one side to provide Evidence Cards when asked; in these cases you would appeal to the judge)

## **The Interpretive Framework**

One the first things that should be done prior to debating any resolution is undertake a thorough analysis of the resolution, specifically how to interpret its intent and what is the **stasis point** (the point at which the two sides of the debate separate). Your interpretation of the resolution likely forms a framework around which you will build your case and so it is reasonable you should try to convey that framework to the judge. On one level, your approach to establishing the interpretive framework is define each of the words in the resolution then restate the resolution based upon the interpretation of those words. Going through that exercise often narrows the scope of the debate to a specific interpretation which is then expressed in the constructive speeches. That does not mean you must define each word for the judge and certainly does not mean you must restate the resolution

in different wording. All you need in the case is to define your approach based upon what your team believes is the reason for the debate. It sort of answers the question, "what does the resolution want us to debate?"

When stating the interpretive framework a team will declare something like: "we believe this resolution is asking us to advocate [some position] and the other side to advocate [the other position]. The team which best meets those burdens will win this debate..." There are potential traps in these kinds of frameworks which must be avoided. The framework must allow debate on both sides. It is bad form to create a tautological interpretation or a kind of **unopposable truism** which preempts any possible position by the opposition. An example of a tautological framework for the resolution, "Use of unmanned drones should not be used in the war on terror" would be to define unmanned drones as an illegal weapon. While it may sound favorable to frame the case as "illegal weapons should not be used in the war on terror" it creates a logical fallacy for the opposition which is forced to defend that "illegal weapons should be used to fight terror". The opposition, if they are smart, will reject your framework in favor of one of their own and thus the ability of the judge to favor your framework is compromised. Hopefully you can see from this example the idea is not to establish a framework which ties the opponents hands. The idea is to create a framework the judge will favor over any other.

Since either side is free to define the resolution there is the possibility that **clashing interpretations** will arise. This happens quite often when one wishes to define a certain term in a way which is restrictive to the opposition and so the opponent will offer **a counter-interpretation**. Think about the judge's possible responses to the counter-interpretation. It is not enough to merely offer another interpretation. One must also give the judge a reason why the interpretation should be preferred. Commonly, preference is given to interpretations which promote fairness by allowing a better division of ground and promote a better educational experience, but even better is when one can offer an evidential or logical rationale as to why the interpretation should be preferred. For example, an interpretation from an authoritative body is often preferable to a dictionary depending on the resolitional context.

Finally, since the interpretive framework establishes an approach to the resolution and presents evaluative positions to the judge, there is another very critical kind of evaluation that is sometimes required and is often overlooked. For each resolution, no matter what side you are advocating you should ask yourself, not only what must I defend but to which degree must I defend it? Must my position (and my opponents') be true always or true most of the time? What exceptions can be made and which exceptions cannot be tolerated? Your interpretive framework should explicitly answer these questions.

### **The Comparative Framework**

Many resolutions will require the judge to decide between two competing propositions on the basis of comparative advantages. Sometimes, these resolutions are very clearly delineated as a choice between options; popular vote versus electoral system, costs of college education vs the benefits of college education. More often they are implicitly comparative. For example, the rise of China is beneficial to the interests of the United States suggests an analysis of the benefits versus the harms of the rise of China; our current foreign policy in the Middle East undermines our national security suggests a debate about the advantages of our current policy versus the harms. In fact, since the very nature of Public Forum Debate (in fact all debate) requires opposing points of view a judge will very likely be making a decision based on some kind of comparison of the advantages of one side versus the other. (Not always, because there are times when a debate becomes less about the comparative advantages and more about the rules-based or interpretive evaluations.)

At this point, we could break off into a lengthy discussion about various techniques for how to argue advantages and disadvantages. They must have uniqueness, they must have an evidential link to the claim and they must have impacts. Once the uniqueness and link are clearly established the

impact becomes the primary aspect of concern and is the basis for comparison to other advantages or disadvantages. For the purposes of this article, I would like to assume the reader has a certain familiarity with the techniques and focus more on setting up the comparative framework.

If we look, for example, to the resolution which says the United States should prioritize tax increases over spending cuts, it should be clear the debate will look at the comparative advantages of tax increases versus spending cuts. It would be very simple to research, say, tax increases and come up with a laundry-list of benefits arising from tax increases and perhaps multiple reasons they should be supported. One may even discover and cite many reasons why spending cuts are bad. All of these facts could be written into a case and read to the judge. Nevertheless, this approach is not desirable because it is reminiscent of a "scatter-gun" approach of pitching a laundry-list of claims, and then narrowing down to those which seem to be winnable based upon how the other team deals with the case. This approach can win debates because, as I have stated several times in this series, the judge must make a decision and she will. However, by setting up a framework early in the debate and grounding your entire approach to the case based upon the framework you choose, you are able to focus the debate much earlier, center the judge on the key issues and provide a basis for determining the winner at the start rather than the end of the debate.

To further illustrate the concept, let us assume you have reviewed your evidence and believe your strongest arguments focus on unemployment and the national debt. At the beginning of the case you create the framework for the comparative analysis: "the key issues at stake in this debate are the current high rate of unemployment and the soaring national debt. We believe the side which better reduces unemployment and the debt without creating other problems in the process will win the round." Now the judge knows what will be compared and in this case the basis for the comparison will be the one which reduces the indicated items with the least amount of negative side-effects. Just knowing this is your framework helps you as a team focus your arguments on the key issues right from the beginning.

Like Lincoln-Douglas debate, the framework creates a kind of "value" structure. These are the standards. Everything in your case will be aimed toward achieving the standards you establish while your attacks against the opponents will be directed toward showing how their case fails to achieve those standards. The case which meets or exceeds the standards wins the round. More importantly, the framework provides a mechanism for you to impact your attacks on the opponent's case. For example, the opponents may claim cuts in entitlements spending will reduce the national debt, you counter with evidence cuts will increase the burden on families which will cause them to tighten their belts. With the framework you have a mechanism for extending the counter-claim and explain why belt-tightening matters. "When people tighten their belts, consumer spending drops which increases unemployment and the high rate of unemployment is one the key factors we are addressing in this round." Everything ties back to the framework which is the standard you want the judge to use when evaluating the round.

### **Selecting the Framework**

It goes without saying the framework one chooses needs to be one which is winnable and a winnable framework is one **the judge can agree with and understand**. In the tax increases versus spending cuts example in the preceding part, we used reduced unemployment and reduced debt as the comparative standards. These are objectives that any judge should easily be able to accept and understand because the concepts have direct impact in the experience of the judge. If the framework was based on reducing imports from China, the value of doing so starts to become more obscure and debatable. Practically no reasonable person questions the value of reducing unemployment. Many will debate the value of reducing imports from China. If possible you want your framework to avoid becoming the focus of the debate.

Another key aspect of a good framework is it **will tend to simplify the debate rather than**

**complicate it.** It is very important to reduce your case complexity rather than increase it. This is achieved by first selecting a framework which is understandable to any person of general intelligence and making sure the framework is not comprised of multiple steps or parts. Another important part of reducing the case complexity is **making sure your contentions, arguments, claims and counter-claims link as directly as possible to the framework.** For example, if you say, this contention does this which leads to that which results in another thing which links to my framework then maybe you need to rethink the claim or the framework. Multiple links to the framework are complicated and vulnerable.

### **Framework as a Research Tool**

Establishing a framework early in your case development cycle allows you to focus your research. Since you will want to build upon the selected framework, it is possible to direct your research toward evidence which links to the standards. Not only is this important for supporting your own case but it is equally important for researching answers or rebuttals to possible arguments which will be made by your opponents. If you can link, with evidence, your counter-claim to your framework, you provide a direct impact for the judge's evaluation.

### **Adding the Framework**

Building the framework into the case, or perhaps more properly, building the case around the framework will require one to first figure out, what is the framework I want to use? This is not always simple but a good place to start is by trying to figure out, what do you want the judge to use to evaluate your case? Try to evaluate your case like a judge and focus upon what should be the deciding factor which determines who wins. Referring to the example already given which states tax increases should be prioritized over spending cuts, it is obvious the Pro will advocate tax increases but what the resolution does not specify is why one should prefer tax increases instead of spending cuts? By what standard of measure do we determine that tax increases are better? By choosing reduction in unemployment and national debt, we create a clear standard the judge can use and one that is measurable and tracked by relevant agencies. There is nothing abstract about it. For a topic like, the rise of China is beneficial to the interests of the United States, again Pro must advocate the rise of China is beneficial but by what standard of measure? Once again, after some research, Pro could decide, the position which better protects security interests or which better protects economic interests should win. Since these also tend to be broad we can further refine the standards to the side which better prevents nuclear proliferation or which increases economic prosperity. These refined standards are sufficiently narrow yet carry large impacts which the judge can understand and agree. (I am not suggesting you actually use these particular standards - I am merely illustrating the concept which demonstrates how to narrow the standards to something real, measurable and impactful.)

Once you have decided upon a framework, which may be a combination of comparative and interpretive elements, **you should state it early in the body of the constructive speech.** This does not mean you should say, "our framework is...", in fact it may be a good idea to not even mention the word framework since many PF judges are not sure what you are talking about in the first place. Nevertheless, it is legitimate to **let the judge know early what are the criteria you feel are vital to evaluating the case and so you mention this in the beginning prior to the contentions.**

**When the framework is declared, the remainder of the case and indeed the remainder of the debate should somehow always link back to the framework.** Each of your arguments, whenever possible, should demonstrate they are supporting the standards whereas, the opponents' case is not. These standards then carry through, all the way to final focus and serve as the basis of the key voting issues.

### **Framework Abuse**

I only want to make a few brief comments about the abuse of "framework" and abusive frameworks. I differentiate because I have seen debates where one side will say something late in

the round like, our opponents have not challenged our framework or some other "framework" comment which tends to rattle novice or inexperienced debaters. But the truth is, I as the judge, failed to see any framework as well and yet the team suddenly is chirping on about its framework. Not only was this confusing to the other team, it was confusing to me as judge. If you have a framework, declare it in observations or some obvious way and run it. Don't try to play games and mask it or disguise it in some way. Also, don't try to be clever and set up some ridiculously restrictive or unreasonable framework which attempts to kill the opponents' offense. It serves no purpose other than irritate many judges and just increases the chance your framework will be dismissed early.

### **The Opponent's Framework**

Perhaps your opponent speaks first (or second) and establishes their own framework, or least you think they do. It is important, perhaps in the cross-fire that you understand what exactly is their framework. Knowing this will provide insight into the direction their case will take but that is not necessarily an advantage for you. What you must do, however, is decide how to deal with the opponent's framework. You have two choices. You may decide to debate under their framework or you may offer a framework of your own. Even if for some reason you decide not to debate under their framework but offer no competing framework then you will in fact still be forced to compete with their framework whether you like it or not unless you can give the judge a good reason to reject their framework.

Of course you may always reject the opponents' framework by claiming it is somehow abusive, overly restrictive, unfair, or a misinterpretation of the intent of the resolution or your burden. There is a good chance that if the opponent's framework is bad, the judge will see it too. Nevertheless, I caution against turning the round into a debate over framework.

Likewise, the opponent will want to reject your framework or somehow discredit it. If your framework is one a reasonable judge can support, it simplifies the debate, and if it is fair, don't let the opponents' objections sway you. Stick to your case framework and debate the issues. Again, don't let the debate degenerate into a dispute over the framework.

### **Conclusion**

At the end of the debate, the judge will evaluate the positions advocated and determine a winner. For most judges that evaluation will require a "weighing" of the positions against some kind of standard. Given nothing else upon which to evaluate, a judge may simply decide to defer to standards of style and give the debate to the best speakers. Since, more than likely, you don't want this happen to you, at some point you must provide the judge a mechanism for decision and in a well-framed debate you will have been doing this all along since the opening speech and not merely as a KVI in the final focus.

One of the key complaints I hear from debaters are criticisms of mom and pop judges who lack experience and often judge on criteria which seem inconsistent with the arguments delivered in the round. Using the techniques presented in this article may help you, help the judge by presenting in the clearest terms possible, the criteria and standards which can be used to determine the winner, hopefully, the correct winner. Here are my guidelines for using a framework:

- Simplify - avoid complex standards and chains of links.
- Focus - stick close to the framework when building, attacking and defending
- Objectify - choose standards which are measurable and realistic for judges