

Writing a Case

Guide for Penn for Youth Debate Lesson Plan 4

It's difficult to know where to start when you first see the "resolution" for a debate topic. The words are often loaded, the topics foreign. How does one go from reading that topic to coming up with well-developed arguments? This guide describes step-by-step how to break down a topic and come up with arguments to form a case.

This lesson plan will focus on:

- Understanding resolutions
- Forming contentions

Understanding resolutions

Before you begin researching and thinking about arguing for and against a resolution, we should make sure we understand the stance that is taken. How do we understand the resolution?

A general rule of thumb is to highlight all the subjects, verbs and to look into each further. But let's look at how that works in a specific example.

In April of 2017, the resolution for Public Forum students was: "The United States ought to replace the Electoral College with a direct national popular vote."

How did we approach this? The first thing we did was underline the important words of the resolution.

See below what we underlined. We've used different colors here to differentiate between parts of speech.

"The United States **ought** to replace the **Electoral College** with a **direct** national **popular vote**."

Looking up "The United States" might seem obvious in this case, and you might be right, but that doesn't mean we should skip considering the importance of the wording of the resolution. Thinking about "The United States" actually reveals a lot about potential arguments. Who exactly is "The United States" referring to? Is it the national

government, the state government, or both? The resolution doesn't specify, so it could be any one.

Or “The Electoral College.” What exactly is this? A lot of us may have heard about this through the news, but how exactly does it work? **Notice the usage of direct.** The resolution specified “direct” popular vote, not just “popular vote.” What are the differences between the two, and what does the current system look like? **Look at the word ought.** There's a difference between words like “should” and “ought”. Had the resolution been “The United States should replace the Electoral College...”, what would that have changed?

The point of this exercise is to understand that the *exact* wording of the resolution matters. Even if a resolution initially appears straightforward, it is best to work through the resolution word by word to make sure that you are interpreting it correctly. You should come out of this stage with questions you want to ask and research. In this case, some examples might be:

1. What's the difference between a direct popular vote and a popular vote?
2. How does the Electoral College work?

Research any words in the resolution that you are not sure about as well as the questions that you come up with. The goal is to be able to explain the resolution in plain English and make sure that you, your opponents, and your judge are all on the same page.

Forming Contentions

To come up with potential arguments for the topic, we need to begin researching. How do we go about researching a brand new, foreign topic?

Tip 1: Look for existing opinions

Topics are selected when there are lots of arguments that can be made for both sides. These topics are usually popular, controversial, and relevant to current news. This means that more often than not, the topic has already been debated online and many people have published their opinions of the topic.

1. Debate forums
 - a. One of the most common ways you can see what people are thinking about the resolution is by typing it into Google and clicking on a forum. Forums are websites where people can make accounts and publish their

opinions and interact with others. Examples include procon.org, pf.debate.us.org, or debate.org.

- b. You can use these forums to learn basic arguments on the topic, and you can then do a separate search for each of these arguments to find more articles related to them.
2. Searching Google for opinions
 - a. Another way to find people's opinions on the topic is by typing key phrases from the topic, and then adding "opinion" words like "pros," "cons," "advantages," and "disadvantages."
 - b. For example, with the sample resolution you can search: "Disadvantages of the Electoral College" or "Why we should have a national popular vote" and this will help you find articles describing the disadvantages of the Electoral College.
 - c. When you are doing this, remember to try to find additional evidence to back up your arguments. These methods will help you find existing opinions, but to make these arguments stronger and more persuasive, you should try to find numbers or other evidence to show the impact of these points.

Tip 2: Finding ideas from Google and word associations

This section will describe how you can find a diversity of research and argument ideas by taking advantage of Google. Most of the time, you won't know much about a topic. Let's let Google do our work for us.

1. Relevant topics
 - a. Google is very powerful. You can put in a phrase that makes little sense like "Electoral College bad" and get back incredible results. The best tip for finding research and arguments is to take advantage of Google's power.
 - b. We recommend that you **brainstorm** different word associations that you have with the resolution. What do we mean by word associations? Essentially, what comes to mind when one says "Electoral College" or "popular vote"? When I think of the Electoral College, I think of for example Republicans, Democrats, rich, poor, Obama, and more. Though it might not make sense to you, searching "Electoral College Obama" or "Electoral College Republicans" or "direct vote poor," etc., will give me a whole array of different results. Doing a quick read of the title usually will be good enough for you to determine if the results are relevant. You might get something like "Electoral College heavily favors Republicans," which is what you find upon searching for "Electoral College Republicans." From

there, you can gather even more ideas and further flesh out your arguments!

2. Generalized search tips

- a. In general, most topics will also have some association with certain topics and words. Adding these words to searches may yield relevant results.
- b. For international topics:
 - i. Diplomacy
 - ii. Influence
 - iii. Relations
 - iv. Trade
 - v. Investment
 - vi. Military
 - vii. Economy
 - viii. Oil
 - ix. Jobs
- c. For topics about the United States:
 - i. Cost
 - ii. More jobs
 - iii. Less jobs
 - iv. Environment
 - v. Climate change
 - vi. Investment
 - vii. Deaths/lives
 - viii. Healthcare
 - ix. Fair/unfair
 - x. Poverty
 - xi. Inequality
 - xii. Tax

3. Synonyms

- a. If you're stuck and you can't find results, a quick and easy way to get more results is to take what you've searched so far, and to come up with another layer of connections.
- b. For example, if you're interested in jobs, you might think: work, manufacturing, GDP

As you research, you will naturally come upon ideas. These ideas can be developed into full contentions by following the structure provided in Lesson Plan 2 as well as by looking at the example on the next page.

Case example

Here is an example of an introduction blurb:

“My partner and I affirm the resolution that the United States government should increase immigration to promote greater economic growth. We define economic growth as an increase in the capacity of an economy to produce goods and services compared from one time to another.”

We can see that the resolution is clearly stated as well as the team’s stance on the resolution.

Contentions should be well organized in a list-like manner: state what the first contention is, then all of the evidence for that particular contention, and then move on to the second contention, etc. In order to elaborate on contentions, statistics and credible evidence should be used to warrant your claim. Government sites, universities, professors, economists, and notable news publications should be cited in your contention in order to prove the point that you’re trying to make throughout the round. Refer back to Lesson Plan 3 for more information on what makes a source credible. You do not need to have an overflow of evidence, but finding a nice balance of statistics and points that can be referenced throughout the round is very helpful, especially when flowing.

Here is a snippet of a sample contention to see how they can be organized:

“Our first contention is that productivity in the United States has increased when the flow of immigrants into the United States increases, thus creating more jobs. In an economic analysis written by Michael Greenstone, Director of the Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago, “...on average, immigrant workers increase the opportunities and incomes of Americans” and “economists do not tend to find that immigrants cause any sizable decrease in wages and employment of U.S.-born citizens.” [...] In fact, according to the 2011 Current Population Survey from the Census Bureau, 7.5 percent of the foreign-born/immigrant population are self-employed. Economics professors John McLaren, (of the University of Virginia,) and Gihoon Hong, (of the University of Indiana at South Bend) writes that each immigrant creates 1.2 local jobs for local workers, with most of them going to native workers, and 62% of these jobs being in non-traded services. Immigrants appear to raise local non-tradables sector wages and attract native-born workers from elsewhere in the country.”

This contention has been shortened for the purpose of this guide (with much of the analysis removed), but we can see that there is evidence supporting the contention and our contention is clearly stated as a topic sentence. Contentions should be organized in a way that works for the team. Debaters can choose to use direct quotations, paraphrase evidence, or use a combination of the two as seen in the example paragraph.

The above sample shows one example of how a case can be written. For another example (of a full case), see the sample case included with Lesson Plan 4.