

Topicality

Topicality is a procedural argument that negative teams use to defeat cases that are outside the parameters set by the resolution. The topic exists to provide notice to both teams as to what is to be debated. If affirmative teams advocate a plan that outside the resolution, it would be unfair to a negative team to expect them to be prepared to answer it. Therefore, topicality is an important tool for negatives to preserve their ground. Topicality arguments are generally broken into four subpoints. They are: definition, standards, violation, and voting issues.

Definition

In order to win a topicality argument, a negative needs to isolate one word or term in the resolution that the affirmative has not upheld in their interpretation of the resolution. Then, the negative needs to define that term. A definition can come from a variety of sources. Dictionaries, articles about the topic, and many other sources can provide definitions for the purposes of a topicality violation.

Make sure when you choose your definition to keep in mind the standards you will use to evaluate it. The definition should come from a source that you consider the most credible for the reasons you state in the standards section of your violation. It would make no sense to define your term with American Heritage Dictionary if you claim in your standards that definitions from legal dictionaries are the best.

Standards

Next, the negative needs to set the standards by which definitions should be evaluated. In other words, standards are the ways to determine what the best definition of the term is. There are many standards that negatives can use to evaluate definitions, but again it would be wise to make sure they relate to the definitions you have chosen. For example, a negative can claim that common dictionary definitions are the best because everyone has access to them. Or a negative can claim that definitions should come from

experts in the field of the topic, or that definitions should set a clear bright line between what is topical and not topical.

There are a lot of commonly used standards that you can use, but you may also come up with a creative one that works for you as well. The key to a good standard is that you give a reason why that standard is the best way to evaluate definitions. It isn't enough to just claim that your standard is how definitions should be measured; you have to warrant that claim. For example, if you claim that definitions from field-related sources are the best, a good reason would be that they are more relevant to a specific discussion of a topic within that field than are definitions from other sources.

Violation

The next step is the easy part. Once you have established a definition of a term and that your definition is the best one given the standards you have laid out, the next thing to do is explain why the affirmative's interpretation of the resolution does not meet your definition. Make sure you are specific as to what the resolution requires of the affirmative, what the affirmative actually does, and why the affirmative hasn't met the resolutorial burden.

A good way to phrase your violation is to say something to the effect of, "The proper definition of (term) requires the affirmative to do (action X). However, they do (action Z), which isn't topical given the definition of (term)." Again, make sure you are as specific as possible.

Voting issue

The final element of a basic topicality argument is to argue that topicality is a voting issue. Here, you must give reasons why the judge should vote against the negative team once you have established that they are outside the resolution. The best reason to vote on topicality is because it is necessary in order to provide fair ground for both teams to debate. In this instance, you again need to be specific about how the negative team has skewed competitive equity; give examples of how this has happened rather than just claiming it has.

Also, some judges may be persuaded by a claim that topicality is a rule of debate. You may want to make this claim; however, claims relating to competitive fairness are more likely to be persuasive reasons to vote on topicality.

Policy - Topicality

Topicality can be one of the best tools to use in a cross-examination debate. Topicality can win you rounds because the other team is simply not topical or because the other team does not know how to answer a topicality argument. One of the best times to run topicality is when the other team's case may be questionably topical. At this point you can run topicality as a winning argument or as a time-suck. Either way you should put out the shell at the top of the first negative and get it out as quickly as possible. At this point the affirmative will either cover the topicality in depth, dropping other important arguments, or the affirmative will undercover the topicality argument and you can straight-up win the round on topicality. If you run topicality as a time-suck make sure you cover the affirmative's answers, it does not have to be extremely thorough, but at least give it a few seconds to lure the affirmative into the trap. In the second negative rebuttal drop the topicality argument. The time-suck part of topicality is needed so the 1AR will waste time on it.

There are three general types of topicality. Straight-up topicality, the affirmative does not meet the resolution, effects topicality, the effects of the plan make the case topical, and lastly, extra-topicality, part or all, of the plan does something that is beyond what the resolution demands.

The basic format for all of these topicality arguments is, definition, violations, standards, and voters. In the case of extra-topicality the definition is not necessarily one word, but the resolution in its entirety.

Standards (reasons why the judge should accept your definition):

Limits – your definition puts limits on the number of cases that can be run which is beneficial because it allows for a fair debate in which the negative team does not have to research every single thing in the world and it increases education.

Ground – Your definition gives both teams substantial ground, which will make the debate better

Bright line – Your definition sets a clear delineation between what is topical and what is not.

Framers intent – Your definition is what the framers intended, they wanted the debate to be about the oceans this year, not the land

Predictability – Your definition collapse the topic down to a level which will allow the negative a chance at predicting the case.

There are more standards, you can make reasons that say why your definition is the best, the ones listed above are only five common standards that are used

Voters (reasons why a judge should vote on topicality):

Jurisdiction – As the judge you have the responsibility and the power to vote for untopical counterplans, other wise the affirmative team would always win.

Prima facie burden – the first burden of the affirmative team is to uphold the resolution, at the point where they fail to do so, you must vote against them, otherwise the affirmative team would always win.

Ground – the negative team has no ground in the debate, which prevents a good debate from occurring and again the aff would always win

Education – the purpose of debate is to increase our education about a certain topic, when the affirmative goes outside the bounds of the resolution, the negative is forced to engage in a procedural debate instead of a debate about the actual resolution.