

by

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Introducing Topicality

Topicality arguments are similar to disadvantages, kritiks, and counterplans in that they are major forms of negative arguments that are presented in the 1NC. They are different however, in that they are procedural arguments that question the very legitimacy of the affirmative's plan.

Topicality arguments claim that the *plan* presented by the affirmative does not fit within the bounds of the resolution. For example, if the affirmative argues to incentives for nuclear power, the negative may argue that nuclear power is not a form of "alterantive energy."

Most affirmative teams will claim that they do fit with an interpretation of the resolution. To win that the affirmative is not-topical, they have to prove that the affirmative does not meet one or more of the terms of the resolution as defined/interpreted by the negative and that the negative's definition (often referred to as the negative's "interpretation") is best for debate.

Negatives should always make an effort to include a topicality argument in the 1NC. First, teams may simply not be prepared to answer it. Second, if find after the 2AC that you are unlikely to defeat the affirmative with the substance of the arguments you have introduced, you can always extend topicality. Third, it is a no-risk argument. The affirmative can't "turn" it. If they prove that they are topical the debate simply moves on from there. The affirmative can't win just because they are topical.

Structure of Topicality Arguments

A negative topicality argument has three parts.

Definition/interpretation. The first part of the topicality argument is the definition or interpretation. To continue with the example above, the affirmative may define "alternative energy" to be solar, wind, and geothermal energy, but not nuclear power. This is their interpretation of what the term "alternative energy" should mean *for the purposes of debate*.

Violation. This second part of the topicality argument is simple—they will argue that the affirmative's plan is inconsistent with their interpretation of the topic.

Standards. This is the more complicated part of the topicality violation, but it really isn't that confusing. In the standards section, the negative outlines reasons why their interpretation of the term(s) in the resolution is the one that the judge should accept when evaluating the debate. Negative teams can create their own standards, but the following are popular ones:

Limits. Negatives will argue that words should be understood to have limited meanings in order to limit the potential size of the topic. Topics that are interpreted too broadly make it very difficult for the negative to prepare.

Bright-lines. Negatives will argue that there should be clear meanings behind terms and that there should be a clear dividing line between topical and non-topical cases.

Ground. Negatives will argue that particular interpretations of the topic provide better ground for the negative. For example, they will argue that if substantial is interpreted to mean at least one percent, an increase of this size will at least be somewhat expensive and politically controversial, giving the negative solid links to specific disadvantages.

Voting issue. In this part of the argument, debaters will argue that the affirmative should lose if they are non-topical. Topicality is generally accepted as a voting issue, so this does not require a lot of in-depth work, but negatives should make arguments such as, "Topicality is a voting issue. If it were not, affirmatives could argue for almost anything, making it very hard for us to prepare. And, they could argue things that aren't controversial, such as $2+2=4$, essentially rigging the debate in favor of the affirmative."

You should always present your topicality arguments in the 1NC as an off-case position. Since you are only likely reading one short piece of evidence when making topicality arguments, it makes sense to slow down when presenting the topicality arguments so that the judge clearly understands it.

Answering Topicality Arguments

Topicality arguments are the easiest to answer because there is a basic formula that you can use.

We meet. Affirmative teams should use "we meet" arguments to explain why they meet the

original negative interpretation/definition. If the affirmative meets the interpretation, then they have defeated the negative's topicality argument.

Counterinterpretation. A counterinterpretation is a different way of interpreting/defining the word. Affirmatives should present a different definition of the word and explain how they meet it. Given that it is not possible to predict every topicality argument that the negative will make, affirmatives should have a definition of each term in the resolution with them and an explanation as to how they meet it.

Counterstandards.

Counterstandards are standards that the affirmative introduces into the debate to argue that the judge should accept their definition/interpretation instead of, or at least in addition to, the negative's interpretation. Popular counterstandards include the following:

Reasonability. Since words have many meanings, negatives can always find definitions/interpretations that affirmatives don't meet. Instead of looking for the most limiting interpretation, the judge should accept any reasonable interpretation of the term. Reasonable interpretations still provide opportunities for the solid negative arguments.

Field context. Terms should be taken to mean what they are generally assumed to mean in the topic specific literature. Affirmatives teams will often find topic-specific meanings when researching their affirmative and advocate these in the debate.

Affirmative predictability. Affirmative teams cannot fairly predict every odd definition of a term that the negative could read. Interpretations of the topic should be limited to common-sense meanings.

In order to be prepared to defeat topicality arguments, it is critical that you consider the resolution when writing your plan and that you write your plan in a way that is consistent with a reasonable interpretation of the resolution. If you do not do this, this combination of arguments is unlikely to help you, but if you do this then this combination of arguments should enable you to defeat common topicality arguments.

Arguing Whether or Not Topicality Should Be A Voting Issue

There is some debate as to whether or not topicality should be a voting issue, though most agree that it is. Debaters who challenge the idea that topicality is a voting issue argue that topicality is bad because it excludes individual from debate who want to talk about other issues. The rhetoric they use to support this claim is that topicality "silences the voices" of many would-be advocates.

While this "silencing the voices" argument has definitely won debates, it is a very weak argument. First, topicality doesn't silence any voices. Debaters are free to say whatever they want, but if they engage in non-topical argumentation they should lose. There is no reason that winning is important to having your opinion expressed. Second, debaters are free to say whatever they want as long as they have a topical *plan*. Topicality doesn't constrain any things debaters say other than the plan. Only the plan has to be topical. Third, even if topicality creates some social harm by silencing voices, it is far superior to silence the voices than to allow affirmative teams to argue anything they want. This would lead the negative team unprepared to discuss whatever ideas the affirmative chooses to express at any given moment. Fourth, there is

some literature that concludes in favor of switch-side – debating both sides of the resolution. If topicality were not a voting issue, the affirmative could argue both sides of the resolution (the negative) in every debate and would fail to capture any of the educational benefits of switch-side debate.

Strategic Advice for Answering Topicality

Always put the negative's topicality argument(s) first in your 2AC, 1AR, and 2AR order. If you put a disadvantage last and fail to get to it, you can always try to outweigh the disadvantage with your affirmative harms. But, if you put a topicality argument last and fail to get to it you will automatically lose the debate. *Always* put topicality arguments first.

When creating your 2AC answers, be sure that there aren't any additional "hidden" topicality arguments. Sometimes negative teams will add additional violations in the standards in hopes the affirmative teams will miss the arguments. Often, affirmative teams do miss the arguments, so be very careful. If you are the 2AC, it is wise to have your partner clarify in the cross-examination what all of the topicality arguments are so that you can be sure to answer each of them.

Extending Topicality Arguments in the Negative Block

When extending a topicality argument, be sure to give an overview that clearly identifies the interpretation the negative is advocating, why the judge should accept the particular interpretation, and how the affirmative violates it.

When explaining how the affirmative violates the interpretation, reference their affirmative plan as

specifically as possible, pointing to exactly the language in the plan that supports the violation.

When extending the standards you do not need to limit yourself entirely to the 1NC arguments. You can come up with new reasons (standards) why the judge should accept your interpretation over the negative's interpretation and you do not need to extend all of the original 1NC standards. Extend the standards that the affirmative most clearly violates and prove why your interpretation of the topic term(s) is better than the negative's interpretation of the topic term(s).

After giving this overview you should proceed through the rest of the 2AC answers.

If you advance multiple topicality arguments in the 1NC, and you do not decide to extend all of them, make sure there aren't 2AC arguments on the other topicality flows that apply to the argument that you are making. The potential for cross-application is a reason to limit the number of topicality arguments that you present in the 1NC. The fewer you present, the less the chance of a deadly cross-application. Especially if you think you will likely extend topicality in the 2NR as a round-winning argument, I strongly suggest reducing the number of topicality arguments presented in the debate.

The negative block is also your opportunity to explain to the judge what similar types of cases would be allowed under the affirmative's interpretation of the topic. For example, you could argue that if the judge allows a nuclear power case to be topical, there are multiple different reactors that the affirmative could argue for.

When creating your examples you need to strike a balance between

pointing out the affirmative's counter-interpretation is ridiculous without being so ridiculous that you end up suggesting cases that are so silly that no one would ever run them or could be easily defeated by a couple of simple, logical arguments.

Other Forms of Topicality Arguments

Effects topicality. Effects topicality argues that the affirmative cannot be topical as a result of a series of steps. For example, it would not be topical to claim to increase alternative energy by cutting taxes in a way that would improve the economy and thereby trigger greater investment in alternative energy sources. In this instance, the development of alternative energy is only an effect of the plan. The affirmative plan should be as direct as possible.

Extra topicality. Affirmative plans may be basically topical, but may also include elements that go beyond the resolution. For example, affirmatives may increase alternative energy incentives and eliminate missile defense. The latter would be extra-topical – it's something "extra" in the plan. It is really something "extra" that is "non" topical.

There is considerable debate as to whether extra-topicality should be a voting issue. Many argue it should not be a voting issue because the affirmative could simply just sever the non-topical part of the plan and continue defending the rest of the topical action. Others argue that it should be a voting issue because if it isn't it will just encourage the affirmative to write frivolous things into their plan to force the negative to spend time on extra-topicality. Also, if the negative is going to win the argument they usually need to invest a significant amount of time in it. That time commitment means

they have less time to spend on other substantive issues that they'll need to win the debate on if the affirmative is simply allowed to advocate the topical portions of their plan.

Topicality in the 2NR

Some judges believe that you should only go for topicality in the 2NR if you extend it, since it is an all or nothing issue. They think that you are not taking topicality "seriously" if you choose to extend other arguments or they will say that you have not spent enough time on it.

Generally, I do not think this is a great way to judge topicality debates. As with any arguments, the amount of time you invest in it should be the amount of time that it takes to win it. If you can win the argument in thirty seconds, the judge should vote on it.

That said, however, I do not judge every topicality debate and you should consider this when deciding whether and how to extend topicality in the 2NR.

Conclusion

It is obviously important the affirmative's advocacy be limited to what the resolution can realistically be taken to mean and that affirmative should lose if their advocacy is not limited to the resolution.

Since topicality is an absolute burden, however, it has spawned the spread of topicality as a strategic weapon for the negative where they aim to think of every potential way the affirmative may violate the resolution. Sometimes this produces relatively trivial debate, but given the absolutist nature, it is debate that the affirmative must be prepared for.

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