

A Coach's Notes¹

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Resolved: Christopher Columbus' role in American history should continue to be celebrated in the United States.

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Introduction

This is the first in a planned series, one for each CDA tournament. Each issue will cover one or two topics on debate with examples from the recent tournament. I will also provide a copy of my notes of the final round—my flow chart—in a separate document titled “The Final Round.” I will email these to CDA-registered and CDA-interested coaches as they are finished. I hope that you will find them useful teaching tools. Please feel free to use them as you see fit.

I would appreciate any feedback you have, good and bad. The best comments and suggestions will find their way into subsequent issues. I would also consider publishing reasoned comments or replies from coaches or students in subsequent issues. If there is sufficient interest, this could evolve into a CDA newsletter.

Reviewing the Most Recent Tournament Results

One of the most useful coaching exercises is to review the most recent tournament results. This is especially true for CDA's extemporaneous debate format, where a new topic is debated each month. The final round of the tournament is the only time that the entire team, coach and debaters, sees the same debate. Students should be encouraged to take notes as a basis for review, discussion and improvement.

There are any number of ways to discuss the final round with your debaters. I would lead the discussion as follows:

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First, start by asking your debaters who they thought won the debate—Affirmative or Negative—and more importantly, why they thought so. Ask them what the Affirmative and Negative contentions were, and what the main points of contention were in the debate. If some of your debaters have notes, make sure they bring them, and spend some time recreating the flow of the final round on the blackboard. Note any differences of opinion among your debaters as to what was said by one side or the other. If no one has any notes, ask them how they were able to recount the debate and judge who won and who lost so many days later.

Second, distribute a print out of the transcript. I prefer the flowchart version, but the transcript version would work almost as well. Give them a few minutes to review it. Then repeat the main question—which team won and why? What were the contentions? What changes, if any, should be made to the recreated flow chart on the blackboard? Did reading the transcript change their minds? Do they agree with the transcript? If not, what errors do they see? How does their recollection of the debate differ from the transcript?

Third, how would they have argued the cases differently? What contentions did they use when on the Affirmative? When on the Negative? How do their contentions compare with those used in the final round? Ask them to consider not only the content but also the form of the contentions—is there a better way to state essentially the same argument? Finally, ask them to consider how well the Affirmative and Negative contentions held together as a whole to support or deny the resolution.

Fourth, how well did the two teams argue their cases? What were the strongest arguments on each side? What were the weakest? Did the teams clash well, arguing directly against their opponents' arguments, or were there arguments that passed by unconnected to the opposing side? Were there any points either team missed that they should have made? At the end, what were the main points of contention and the key arguments that decided the debate?

Fifth, how well did each team use cross-ex? Did either team score any important points in cross-ex? Did they use the results of cross-ex to make or support their arguments in subsequent speeches? What other questions should they have asked, and why?

Finally, how well did each team summarize the debate in the final rebuttal speeches? Did they do a good job of highlighting the main points of contention and explaining why their own arguments should carry the debate? How would your debaters summarize the round? One good speech exercise would be to have several debaters stand and present an Affirmative or Negative summary, and let the rest of the debaters judge among them.

Defining Terms and Arguing about Definitions

I've never seen a good debate that turned on the definition of the terms of the resolution. And there is nothing more tedious than a debate in which the sides argue definitions back and forth through all of the speeches. Yet I have repeatedly seen debates flounder

because terms were not defined and the teams were either arguing different versions of the resolution or had no clear idea of what they had to demonstrate in order to support or refute the resolution. I have also seen teams present terms that they never used, or argue over terms that made no difference to the content of their arguments or the course of the debate. And I have often seen the affirmative fail to define terms (or the negative fail to object to terms offered) and later suffer for it when their opponents defined terms to their detriment. Finally, I have frequently seen teams that do not know how to properly object to definitions offered by their opponents or to find the right grounds to challenge the fairness of the definitions.

I'd like to use this month's resolution to discuss four points:

- Why are definitions important?
- How to define terms efficiently.
- How to decide when definitions are unreasonable.
- How to argue over definitions.

The Importance of Definitions

We can only engage in debate when we agree on certain points, most points in fact. In particular, we must agree on the point of contention between ourselves and our opponents in order to have the debate in the first place. A well-stated resolution concisely embodies the disagreement to be resolved. However, even a well-stated resolution may have different interpretations or shades of meaning. In a debate one side or the other may try to choose an interpretation that gives it an advantage in presenting its case. The meaning of the resolution must be fixed early in the debate with sufficient precision so that the real business of arguing the issue can proceed.

Not all of the terms of the resolution need to be defined, because not all terms of the resolution are of equal importance to the success of the arguments that you are planning to make. Your definitions need to be matched to your case so that it is clear to all participants why your contentions follow from your position on the resolution, and why your position on the resolution requires your contentions.

Defining Terms Efficiently

The third thing² every first affirmative speaker should do is to define terms, no exceptions! The Negative team in this month's final round took advantage of the failure of the Affirmative to offer terms by defining the resolution around Columbus Day, when the Affirmative had only been concerned with Columbus' legacy. This certainly wrong-footed the Affirmative and forced them to go back and spend time to argue over the definitions rather than their case.

You do not have to offer dictionary definitions of each word. The simplest and most efficient method is to restate the resolution to make clear what you will be arguing. For

² In case your wondering, the first thing is to introduce himself and his teammate, and the second is to state the resolution.

this month's resolution the Affirmative team in the final round might have used something like this:

“My partner and I interpret this to mean that there should be a publicly supported commemoration of Columbus as a symbol of the effective discovery, settlement and ultimate development of the New World. We do not believe the details of this commemoration are significant to this debate, and we will confine our arguments to the consequences of his historic voyages starting in 1492.”

An Negative team in that round actually offered something very close to this:

“My partner and I interpret this to mean that Columbus Day should continue to be a national holiday in the United States.”

Notice that these definitions fix the terms of what could be very different debates. In the first case, the Affirmative has stated that the debate will be about whether what followed after 1492 is something to be celebrated and whether Columbus is the appropriate symbol of those events and their consequences. The Affirmative could rightly dismiss any Negative argument about the merits of Columbus Day as irrelevant to the debate in this case. The Affirmative might also argue that Columbus' personal actions are of less significance than what he has come to represent.

On the other hand, in the second instance, the precise form of the celebration, a national holiday, is the bone of contention. Arguments over the need for a fall holiday, and the importance of Columbus Day versus Veterans Day are all admissible.

One can also define individual terms or words. In this resolution “role in American history” and “celebrated” (or “continue to be celebrated”) are the ones to be made clear. Is “role” Columbus' actions or what he symbolizes? To what level do commemorative activities have to rise to be considered a “celebration?” Does “continue” imply keeping existing commemoration unchanged or does it permit variation in form or degree? Note how the “sense of the resolution” definition can encapsulate all of this without the cumbersome process of looking at each part of the resolution in isolation and then gluing it all back together again.

Contesting the Definitions

The second thing³ that every First Negative Speaker should do is either accept or reject the Affirmative definition of terms. Again, no exceptions! If you intend to debate the Affirmative on their terms, then say so. If not, then make your objections clear up front.

The Negative cannot reject the Affirmative definitions just because it does not like them, or because the Negative would prefer to debate another interpretation of the resolution. This is what we mean when we say that the Affirmative has a right to a reasonable definition of terms. Consider the two interpretations given above. If the Affirmative

³ The First Negative should introduce himself and his partner, but does not have to repeat the resolution. The First Affirmative already did that. Move on!

offered the first interpretation, the Negative cannot reject it simply because the Negative prefers to debate the second interpretation. If the Affirmative definition is reasonable the Negative is required to debate it.

Note that this presumption works both ways. If the Affirmative does not define terms, then the right to propose a reasonable definition of terms passes to the Negative. If the terms the Negative offers are reasonable, the Affirmative cannot reject them just because it doesn't like them or would prefer to debate a different reading of the resolution.⁴

Consider what happened in the final round at Ridgefield. I believe that if you look at the Affirmative case, they wished to debate the resolution as defined by my first example above, emphasizing Columbus' legacy and ignoring the form of the celebration. They did not, however, define terms, they simply presented their case. The First Negative then stood up, noted the Affirmative had not defined terms, and offered a definition similar to my second example, focusing on Columbus Day. At this point the Affirmative had the burden to show the Negative definition is unreasonable. While they made some attempt to assert their own definition, they largely conceded the Negative terms and addressed arguments about Columbus Day.

But didn't the Affirmative implicitly define terms when they presented their case? The Affirmative could always make this claim in any debate. But this would permit them to shift their definitions by pulling out whatever shade of meaning seemed most advantageous to the course of the debate at the time the issue came up, rather than having it made clear to all from the beginning. The Affirmative speaks first, and it doesn't take long to offer terms. I believe that if the Affirmative isn't explicit, then they have conceded the choice of definitions to the Negative.

Arguing Definitions

In order to reject the Affirmative definition of terms, the Negative must do three things: state that the Affirmative definition is unacceptable, offer an alternative and provide an argument as to why the alternative should be accepted over the original. Rejection is easy, but once you do so you are required to provide an alternative so the debate can proceed. If the Negative simply rejects the Affirmative's terms and does not offer an alternative there would be nothing to debate.

While the Negative has to provide a reason for rejecting the Affirmative's definitions and accepting the Negative alternative, certain reasons are not acceptable. As noted, the Negative cannot simply argue that it doesn't like the Affirmative terms and prefers its own. Along the same lines, the Negative cannot argue that its definition is better or superior to the Affirmative definition. The rules of debate give the Affirmative the right to make a reasonable definition of terms. The question is, what constitutes an unreasonable definition of terms?

⁴ Just because I believe that either definition is reasonable does not mean that you should agree. I can think of ways one might argue that either of the definitions I offered are unreasonable. In a debate, everything is debatable. I just don't believe those potential challenges would be useful or conducive to a good debate.

First, the definition can simply be wrong. This is probably the argument that most debaters use. Words have meanings. Dictionaries can be quoted. But the meanings of words stretch over time. Look up a word in the Oxford English Dictionary and behold the list of alternative meanings, even for every day words. The list may include meanings that are a distant cry from the common use of the word.

I judged one round where the Affirmative team defined “to celebrate” as meaning “to recognize, to commemorate, to remember.” On this basis, they argued that Columbus ought to be celebrated—remembered in some way—regardless of what he did. Even if one believed that Columbus’ legacy was the deaths of millions of Native Americans and the enslavement of million of Africans, this event should be “celebrated” in the sense of remembrance. Is this definition valid or not?

Personally I feel that the definition is incorrect in a dictionary sense. “Celebrate” carries a connotation of joy and happiness. While it has become common to speak at funerals of “celebrating” the life of the deceased, it is typically meant to recount family, friendship and achievement. Few “celebrate” tyrants other than their overthrow; no one celebrates criminals. Simple “remembrance” is a stretch from the traditional usage: we “celebrate” birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas, New Years and Guy Fawkes Day! We don’t just remember them.

But I believe the real problem with the Affirmative’s definition, and **the second grounds for rejecting a definition, is that it eliminates any real point of contention or controversy.** If “celebrate” simply means “remember,” certainly Columbus deserves to be remembered. We remember any number of players for their role in history who had far less impact than Columbus. If the resolution simply means that Columbus should be remembered in some way, whether as discoverer of the New World, nemesis of the Native Americans or simply as the most famous Italian since Dante, who could or who would bother to argue the point?

The purpose of a resolution is to concisely state the point of contention between two parties. If there is no point of contention, then there will be no debate. If the Affirmative or Negative offer terms that eliminate or significantly reduce the possibility of conflict, then those terms are unreasonable. One of the most common Affirmative tactics, and I see it in almost every CDA tournament, is to try to reduce their burden of proof by reducing the resolution to insignificance. Such definitions are inherently unreasonable because they destroy the whole point of getting together on a Saturday for a debate tournament.

The Affirmative must offer terms that provide an opportunity to debate. Definitions that gut the resolution of controversy are unreasonable. The Negative must debate on the terms offered by the Affirmative, so long as they meet this reasonableness test, even if the Negative prefers another set of definitions.