Argument Construction

Congressional Debate and Public Forum Debate are distinct activities but have much in common. The most fundamental element of each event, and, in fact, all debate events, is the construction of solid arguments. This chapter will explore the process of argument construction.

Elements of an Argument

Arguments may take many forms, but successful arguments share a specific set of elements. A complete argument contains:

- a **claim**, or the basic idea of the argument;
- a **warrant**, or an explanation why the claim is true;
- **data**, or evidence; and
- an **impact**, or a reason why the argument is important.

These elements should be present in all forms of argumentation. They are especially important in verbal argumentation because the audience must be able to follow the argument. In written argumentation, readers may absorb and process the argument at their own pace; if they are confused, they can reread a passage or sentence.

Structure of an Argument

Claim	The main point of the argument; what the debater seeks to prove true.
Warrant	The logical justification for the claim; why the claim is true.
Data	The information or evidence used to bolster the warrant.
Impact	The reason the argument should matter to the audience.

Example of Each Element of an Argument

Claim	Legalizing marijuana will increase government revenues.
Warrant	Governments can place taxes on legalized marijuana.
Data	*Business Week*, March 29, 2009—Legalized marijuana, if sold in stores at the same prices as sold on the street, would yield $40 to $100 billion in new tax revenue.
Impact	In a country where both federal and state governments run massive deficits, and where programs from welfare to education are being cut across the board, we need to do whatever we can to increase revenue streams.

In verbal argumentation, the audience (and the speaker) only have one chance at comprehension. Each of these elements ought to be presented in a very specific way in order to enhance the audience's understanding (and, by extension, their likelihood of agreeing with the speaker).

CLAIMS

A claim is the main point of an argument, a statement of what the debater intends to prove. It is sometimes called a "tagline" and should be contained in the first sentence of an argument. The claim should intuitively resonate with the audience by using powerful and direct language.

In the context of a debate round, a debater must use her claims to accomplish three goals:

1. **Label the argument.** A claim should always include some system of numbering or sequencing to help delineate major ideas. Speakers should label arguments clearly and simply: "The first reason to affirm this legislation" or "the next argument in favor of the resolution."

2. **Relate back to the purpose of the argument.** In Public Forum Debate, debaters should make consistent references to the resolution and their advocacy (to affirm or negate the resolution). In Congressional Debate, speakers should reference the legislation and their advocacy (to pass or defeat the legislation). Using the specific language of the resolution or legislation in place of the generic terms is acceptable. For example, instead of "The first reason to affirm the legislation," a speaker may opt for the more specific "The first reason to impose sanctions on Iran."

These two elements of strong claims, labeling and linking the claim back to the topic, serve the same purpose: helping the audience follow the argument. Without clear labels, arguments have a tendency to blend together; without linking back to the topic, arguments may fail to resonate with the judge and audience. Additionally, and this is especially true in Congressional Debate where speech times are limited and participants are competing for attention with 20 of their peers, repetition of the student's basic advocacy (affirm or negate the legislation) will help cement the student's speech in the audience's mind.

3. **Include specific language that immediately reinforces the advocacy of the speech.** The claim must immediately and intuitively establish the central premise of the argument to follow. Here is an example of a claim that does *not* immediately reinforce the advocacy of the speech: "The first reason to affirm the resolution is because of the economy." To explore the ambiguity of the claim a bit more, imagine that the speaker is speaking about a resolution to cut taxes for the very wealthy. He may be about to argue that because the economy is doing poorly, we need to cut taxes to provide a short-term stimulus; alternatively, he may be about to argue that cutting taxes is the best way to ensure long-term economic stability; worse yet, he may be about to argue that cutting taxes will further aggravate existing income disparities, hurting the economy in the long term. Any of these arguments could easily fit under the label "the economy," and so the audience has no way of predicting what will follow.

With a vague claim such as this, the audience asks themselves, "What does that mean?" and then they immediately and involuntarily begin forming their own answer. This will often clash with what the speaker is saying; the result is that the audience is now working against the speaker—or at least not with her. This is an example of dissonant communication.

Let's look at the same claim made specific and immediate: "The first reason to affirm the resolution is because it will stimulate economic growth." No audience will wonder if this is positive or negative; the audience will immediately understand that this resolution accomplishes something good and therefore should be passed.

The claim does not clarify *how* the resolution will stimulate economic growth, but this is fine and even encouraged. The question the audience will be asking themselves at this point would only be, "How does the resolution accomplish that?" or "Why is that true?" This sets the stage for the next component of a successful argument, the warrant, which the speaker will immediately provide. This is an example of convergent communication.

WARRANTS

A warrant is a reason that a claim is true. A claim without a warrant is merely an assertion; it is a statement of opinion without explanation or justification. If the claim is important because it gets the audience pointed in the right direction, the warrant is important because it helps the audience start moving down the path of the argument. The warrant should immediately follow the claim and should specify, explain, or justify it.

Like claims, warrants should be structured in a very specific way. They should be introduced with language that indicates the speaker is providing a warrant. The most basic way to do this is with a phrase such as "This is true because . . . " or "This is the case because . . . " This language works *with* the audience, answering the questions they have naturally formed. Using this type of language ensures that speakers remember to provide warrants; it not only reminds the speaker that a warrant is necessary, but also helps her form sentences that actually provide warrants. By beginning warrants in this specific way, speakers are verbally prompting themselves to make clear arguments; this is important because debaters are often speaking extemporaneously from notes and may otherwise stray from the structure of their argument.

Many types of warrants are possible for claims. The sample claim above, "The first reason to affirm the resolution is because it will stimulate economic growth," can be advanced with several different warrants. For example, a warrant may specify *how* the claim will occur: "It will do this by putting more money into the hands of investors, who pass the money along to businesses and boost production." A warrant may also explain *why* a claim will occur: "This is true because tax cuts lead to an increase in investor confidence." Hundreds of variations are possible for this one argument, and dozens of other arguments to be explored; what is important is that the warrant clarify the claim and provide argumentative momentum. Every sentence in an argument should advance the argument in some way, but this is especially important when first presenting an idea. If the argument stalls in the first two sentences, or if the argument grows less clear in the second sentence, then the audience will lose interest.

Some warrants will require their own warrants; sometimes multiple warrants are required to prove a claim; sometimes a single warrant will need additional exposition. The speaker is largely free to make her own decisions about how to continue with the argument, but can do so only if the initial claim/warrant pair is clear and concise. Once a speaker has explained her initial idea and warrant, the audience will have bought in and will be willing to listen to additional information.

DATA

In Congressional and Public Forum Debate, this additional information should include data, or evidence. Evidence can take many forms: statistics, expert testimony, and specific examples are some of the most common. Because speakers are not established experts, they cannot simply argue for a position; no matter how reasonable their arguments may be, speakers are still merely students. Thus, they must conduct extensive research to prepare for the topics they will debate. (More detailed information about conducting research can be found in Chapter 12.)

In an ideal situation, evidence would be provided whenever the speaker makes a claim about the world; in the limited time of a debate speech, however, she must make choices about when to provide evidence and when to cite sources. Speakers would cite a source for two reasons. First, and most obviously, they should never present the ideas of any other person as their own; plagiarism is as serious an issue in a debate speech as it is in an essay. If a speaker is using a quotation or argument from a particular source, he must attribute it to that source. Additionally, if information is likely to be challenged, the speaker should provide a citation; for example, probably dozens of estimates of

future federal deficits exist, and so the source of the estimate becomes more important.

Source citations are not necessary when ideas or data are so widely available that they are common knowledge. One rule of thumb is that if a piece of data can be found in 10 different sources, a citation is not necessary because no one is likely to challenge the information and because the information can be said to be part of the public domain. In fact, not citing a source in this situation may be to a speaker's benefit: by citing a source, the speaker is suggesting that he did not know the information and had to do research to find it. This may be true, but it does not establish credibility. To establish themselves as well-read, speakers should present commonly available information as accepted fact.

IMPACTS

The final piece of any soundly constructed argument is the impact—the reason why the argument should matter to the audience. Without an impact, an argument is meaningless in a debate round; the speaker may be making a true argument, but the audience will not assign it any value.

Like claims, warrants, and data, impacts should be clearly delineated through the use of exact phraseology. A few ways to introduce impacts are "This is important because" and "The impact of this argument is." Such language lets the audience know that the logical flow of the argument is complete and that the speaker is now performing a distinct task, which is evaluating the weight of the argument in the context of the round.

Impacts should build on the language of the claim and extend the scope of the argument to include large benefits

or harms. If the claim established that the resolution will "stimulate the economy," then the impact should establish the specific and tangible benefits of economic growth. The best impacts involve people. Rising economic indicators may sound good to an economist, but are not clearly related to everyday life; when crafting impacts, tie general statistics to tangible effects on people's lives. "Rising unemployment" should become "millions of Americans out of work and unable to provide for their families"; "improved American image around the world" should become "fewer lives lost to violent attacks." Illustrations and examples are especially effective when describing impacts: where claims and warrants are abstract, impacts should be concrete.

Impacts should begin by focusing on concrete, real-world effects and should always end by relating the argument back to its purpose: affirming or negating a resolution or piece of legislation. To continue with the example of economic stimulus, a complete impact would look like this: "This stimulus is important because it will lift millions of American families out of poverty and affirming this resolution is the only way we can help these people." In this way, the argument comes full circle, returning to the initial language of the claim.

Filling in the Gaps

The core components of a complete argument—claims, warrants, data, and impacts—can and often do stand on their own. Debaters could make a series of four-sentence arguments, providing each piece of each argument in turn, but this would make for choppy and somewhat superficial

debate. More sophisticated speakers will supplement this basic structure with exposition and illustration. Warrants may require two or three sentences to fully explain; data will often need to be illustrated, especially if the data presents abstract or complicated statistics; impacts are strongest when they are illustrated and rhetorically powerful.

The key to developing sophisticated, effective arguments is to maintain the underlying argumentative structure. If the claim/warrant pair is strongly linked and clearly explained, the argument will be able to carry additional exposition; if the basic structure of the argument is unclear to the audience, then additional exposition will only further confuse them. Speakers should always provide the warrant immediately after the claim and should avoid adding more than two or three sentences each between the warrant, data, and impact.

Finally, debaters should remember that arguments may require more than one warrant, piece of data, or impact. If an argument has two distinct impacts, for example, then the speaker should indicate that when introducing the impacts: "This argument is important for two reasons." Whenever a speaker deviates from the basic argumentative structure in any way, he needs to be especially clear about labeling and explaining his choices. This not only helps the speaker stay on track and prevents rambling, it also gives the audience additional support in their effort to follow along with the argument.

KEY CONCEPTS

- Each argument has four elements: a claim, a warrant, data, and an impact.

- A claim serves as the title for an argument; it conveys the main idea of the argument while also providing a compelling reason to support one side or the other.

- A warrant is the logical reason why the claim is true; it is the underpinning of the argument.

- Data is the research used to support the argument; it comes from sources found outside the debate round.

- An impact is the reason the argument is important; it establishes a compelling reason why the argument matters in a broad context.

- While arguments should contain each of these elements, strong arguments also contain illustration and in-depth explanation; arguments should not merely be four sentences long.