Topicality and Accuracy

BRANDON MERRELL, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO
TODD GRAHAM, SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Introduction

Topicality is both a rule and an argument. One of the foundational assumptions in debate is that the government team's plan must comply with the resolution.[1] This is known as the "burden of topicality." More precisely, topicality mandates that the plan must be an action that exemplifies or illustrates the resolution.

For example, if the resolution was "The United States should increase restrictions on gun ownership", then the government team could advocate a range of legitimate plans. The government side might propose that Congress should adopt more stringent laws governing handgun sales to individuals with a history of crime or mental illness, or that American ownership of assault-style weapons should be outlawed, or that citizens should be required to complete weapon-safety classes before becoming gun owners, etc. In each case, the government plan is an action that exemplifies that change called for the in resolution.[2]

In addition to serving as an example of the resolution, a legitimate plan should not *exceed* the bounds of the topic. For instance, a plan that calls upon Congress to criminalize the sale of armor-piercing bullets would be illegitimate. The resolution only allows the government team to advocate for restrictions on gun ownership; it does not call for limits on ammunition sales.

---

[1] For an extended discussion of how this assumption evolved and how topicality should be debated, see Graham and Merrell (2016).

[2] Sometimes a plan is considered illegitimate if it is not large enough in scope or mandate. For example, a plan that bars one particular person from owning handguns may not be a "sufficient" example of the resolution above. When opposition teams levy this argument against the government side, they often claim that the plan constitutes a "minor repair", that the plan is a "hasty generalization", or that the plan has "failed to demonstrate significance." Although mildly distinct from one another, such arguments are similar in that they claim the plan was not a sufficiently large change relative to the status quo to demonstrate the truth of the resolution. Importantly, these are not "Topicality" arguments unless they show that the plan's insignificance prevents it from complying with one of the terms in the resolution.

Although ammunition is intuitively related to the topic of gun control, a plan that addresses ammunition directly would be considered "non-topical" because it goes beyond the explicit scope of the resolution itself.

In many cases it is immediate and intuitively apparent whether the government plan is topical. However, other resolutions include words that are vague or difficult to define. For example, imagine that the resolution is, "The United States should increase development assistance to the Greater Horn of Africa," and that the plan provides food aid to Yemen. Some definitions of the "Greater Horn of Africa" exclude Yemen, but others include the country. How should the debaters select the appropriate definition? How can they determine whether or not the plan complies with the mandate of the resolution? To answer these questions, debaters turn to topicality *the argument*. When the opposition side suspects that the government plan does not comply with the topic, the LOC should indict that plan by reading topicality.

How are topicality arguments structured?
There are four parts to a complete topicality argument: the definition, the violation, the standards, and the reasons to vote.

First, the opposition side should provide a *definition* of the word or term from the resolution that they believe the government plan violates. It is essential that this is a genuine definition as opposed to merely an interpretation. In other words, the opposition should have identified a valid definition of the term during prep time; they should not simply fabricate an "interpretation" that they believe would be desirable.[3] In our example scenario, the opposition team might argue that the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) defines the Greater Horn of Africa as a region comprised of ten African countries: Burundi, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda.

Next, the opposition side must offer *"standards"* in support of their definition. Standards explain why this particular definition is the most accurate means of defining the term in question. In the example, the opposition team might argue that their definition is "field contextual", because it is used by the government agency responsible for providing American development assistance. We provide a list of example standards and a rationale for identifying appropriate standards in the sections to follow. Standards are important because at the end of the round the judge will compare the accuracy of the opposition side's definition relative to any counter-definition that the government side presents. The more accurate of the two definitions is the one with which the plan is required to comply.

Third, the opposition side should explain the *violation*. This is the reason

---

[3]In particularly egregious cases where the government plan is intuitively non-topical in an unpredictable way, the opposition team may attempt to define the term as accurately as possible according to their recollection, but genuine definitions will almost always prove superior.

(or reasons) why the plan does not comply with or "meet" the preceding definition. In our example, the violation is obvious: the opposition team should argue that the plan violates the definition because Yemen is not one of the ten countries that comprise the Greater Horn. In cases where the violation is subtle, the opposition team should attempt to explain it as clearly as possible. If they fail to convince the judge that a violation exists, they cannot win the debate on topicality.[4]

Topicality concludes with a list of *voting issues*. These are the reasons why a judge should reject the government plan and vote for the opposition if the plan is not topical. In general, teams argue that topicality is the preeminent voting issue in the debate in order to protect topic-specific education, predictable ground, and the rules of the game. We discuss these voting issues and the broader importance of topicality later in this chapter.

How can either side "win" a topicality debate?
The government team's best defense against topicality is to carefully define the resolution during prep time and present a plan that is genuinely topical according to the most accurate definitions of relevant terms. When teams follow this procedure, they rarely need to worry about the issue of topicality.

However, if the LOC does choose to challenge the government side on the basis of topicality, the member of government will typically respond in several ways. If possible, the MGC will attempt to argue that the plan *does comply* with the opposition team's definition. Additionally, the MGC will generally offer a *counter-definition* and will argue – using *counter-standards* – that this definition is more accurate than the one offered by the opposition. Importantly, the government team should demonstrate that their plan complies with the counter-definition that they present. Finally, the MGC will sometimes respond to the voting issues by arguing that the judge need not reject the government team even if the plan is proven non-topical. This claim, however, is particularly weak, as we discuss below.

To evaluate the round and select a winner, the judge will first use each team's standards or counter-standards to identify which of the definitions is the most accurate. The judge will then determine whether the government plan complies with that definition. Finally, the judge will assess whether the opposition side has justified topicality as a voting issue. The opposition team wins the debate if they have demonstrated that the government plan does not comply with the best definition of the term in question and if they have successfully argued that topicality is a voting issue.

Is topicality a procedural?
Coaches and competitors often refer to topicality as though it is "just another procedural" or as if it is akin to any other "theory" debate. Unfortunately,

---

[4]Teams often switch the order of the standards and the violation, so that the violation follows the definition.

these sentiments are incorrect. Topicality is fundamentally different than other procedural and theory arguments. To accurately understand topicality, it helps to acknowledge why this is the case.

The purpose of any procedural or theory position, from framework to specification to "PICs bad" is to set the parameters of the debate and to determine how the judge should evaluate the round. For example, when the government side reads framework to answer a kritik, they are often arguing that the plan's fiated impacts should take precedence over the rhetorical, methodological, or presentational choices of the opposition side. Similarly, in a specification debate, the opposition team might argue that the government plan should be required to include an explicit statement describing the particular mechanism that its policy utilizes. Finally, in a debate about PICs (plan-inclusive counterplans), the two teams argue about whether the opposition side should be allowed to advocate an action that aligns with the government plan in all but one minor respect. In each case, the arguments attempt to determine for the judge what types of behaviors are acceptable from each team, what should be required of each team, and what arguments the judge should consider when evaluating the debate.

The same pattern does not apply to topicality. When competitors argue topicality, they don't often discuss what is *required* of the government side. Rather, participants normally take for granted that the plan should comply with the resolution.[5] Instead, the topicality debate answers two sets of questions: (1) "How can we most accurately define the words in the resolution and then understand the resolution as a whole?" and (2) "Does the government plan comply with that resolution?" If the answer to the latter question is "no", then the government plan isn't topical and the government side should lose the debate. Thus, a topicality debate is an attempt to determine whether or not the government side has fulfilled a burden that is already commonly agreed upon, rather than a forum for discussing what the government's obligation should be in the first place.

What are Topicality Standards?

Standards attest to the accuracy of a particular definition. There are a variety of such arguments,[6] including the following:

(1) Limits:
A definition may be accurate if it is limiting and precise. For example, one possible definition of "terrorism" is "the threat or use of violence against non-combatants." That definition, however, is quite broad. Should hostage-takings

---

[5]For a discussion of kritiks of topicality and how topicality relates to framework, see Graham and Merrell (2016).

[6]For a detailed discussion of appropriate and inappropriate standards, see Graham and Merrell (2016).

be considered acts of terrorism? What about mass murders or school shootings? All such acts would fall within the umbrella of this definition. An alternative definition might specify that terrorism involves "the threat or use of violence against noncombatants that is designed to advance the perpetrator's political goals." By introducing the requirement that the act of violence must be politically motivated, this definition is more precise and limiting than the former. When definitions are limited, they facilitate a nuanced understanding of the terms under discussion. Rather than debate about any acts of violence that are conducted against civilians, the debaters now understand that they should focus on acts of violence that are carried out for political reasons.

(2) Intent to Define:
Many authors define words carelessly. A reporter may casually describe "development assistance" as "aid given by one government to support the growth of another country." Unfortunately, in most cases, offhand claims like this one are made without careful consideration. They express the general meaning of the term, but no more. Rather than settle for such 'casual-use' definitions, debaters should seek definitions that are carefully crafted to accurately express a particular concept. Dictionary definitions fulfill this goal, as do research papers or scientific studies that define technical terms in nuanced ways. Finally, treaties and articles of legislation often include definitions that are intentionally defined in specific ways.

(3) Field Context & Term of Art:
The field context standard proposes that the word should be defined in a specific manner when it is used in a particular context. The term, "bill", for instance, may refer to a proposed law in a legislative context or to an amount owed in a financial context. The particular definition that is appropriate depends on the broader context within which the word is used. Field context is somewhat similar to the "term of art" standard, which argues that a particular phrase that would otherwise apply to a generic set of objects is currently being used to refer to a specific item. For example, if the resolution was "The United States should enact the comprehensive immigration reform bill," the term of art standard would argue that the resolution intended to reference the particular piece of legislation that was currently debated in Congress rather than a generic comprehensive immigration reform package.

(4) Resolutional Context or Grammar:
Grammatical rules and interactions between the words in the resolution also inform the accuracy of each definition. For example, if the resolution said, "The United States should increase its financial support for nuclear energy development," a team might argue that the term "increase" should be defined as "raise from a preexisting amount." Because the word "increase" interacts with the term "financial support" in the resolution, this definition would re-

strict the range of potential definitions of "financial support" to those types of support that currently exist. Otherwise, the resolution would ask that the United States "provide new forms of support for nuclear energy development." In other words, if the United States currently provides research grants for nuclear development but does not provide loans for the construction of power plants, a plan could topically increase the amount of funding available for such grants but could not create a new set of lending packages.

Why is accuracy important?
In order for a productive debate round to occur, the teams must share a common understanding of the resolution. Returning to our earlier example about the "Greater Horn of Africa", it is easy to imagine how confusing and frustrating the debate round would be if one team came prepared to debate "Yemen" while the other believed that "Yemen" was not even part of the topic.

To prevent such disagreement and confusion, the two teams must not only agree on the language of the topic, they must also define that topic in an identical fashion. If the teams' definitions are inconsistent with one another, a productive debate is impossible. Common definitions are most likely to emerge if teams adhere to the same accuracy-seeking procedure when they analyze the topic during prep time. As soon as the topic is announced, each side should consider the words and phrases that are contained within the resolution. They should then define each term as accurately as possible, keeping in mind how the words interplay with one another. Finally, they should view the resolution as the sentence that is formed when all of the constitutive terms are accurately defined. If the teams follow the same procedure, they should arrive at a common understanding of the topic. This "interpretation" of the resolution, in which all of the terms are accurately defined, is the only one for which both teams are obliged to prepare.

What about "ground" and "education"? Why do people refer to those as standards?
You may hear your opponents refer to arguments such as "ground" and "education" as topicality standards. Unfortunately, this is an incorrect – albeit incredibly common – manner of debating topicality. Why? Because neither argument attests to the accuracy of the definition in question. In fact, "ground" and "education" are ways of justifying inappropriate definitions in lieu of accurate ones.

Consider the issue of "ground." Is a definition more accurate because it provides better ground in the debate? The answer is "no." Consider a scenario in which the resolution asks the United States to deploy a team of military doctors to address a public health crisis in Africa, but where the government plan instead deploys hundreds of thousands of grapefruits to the region. We intuitively recognize that "grapefruits" is neither an accurate nor an acceptable definition for "military doctors." However, the government team could easily

justify defining "military doctors" as "grapefruits" on the basis of ground. After all, the qualities of grapefruits are deeply contested. Even the authors of this chapter are divided: one is a staunch supporter of grapefruit, the other a dire critic. Indeed, the government side might argue that by defining "military doctors" as "grapefruits", they actually expand ground for their opponents. The opposition can now read invasive species disadvantages, food dependency disadvantages, locally-grown food aid counterplans, kritiks of aid dependency and industrial agriculture, and solvency arguments about the short shelf life of produce in topical climates or the inadequacy of grapefruit as a panacea. Clearly, defining "military doctors" as "grapefruits" would serve a useful function in the round and would provide desirable ground. But does the ground standard help us understand what "military doctors" actually means? Is "grapefruit" an accurate or valid definition for "military doctors"? Of course not.

The same logic applies to the "education" argument when it is claimed as a standard. For example, assume that the resolution was, "The United States should increase funding for higher education," but that the plan increased funding for NASA. In this case, the government side might argue that defining "higher education" as "NASA" was desirable from an educational perspective. After all, it would facilitate a discussion of space exploration, the hazards posed by comets or meteors, the potential discovery of alien life, and even the efficiency of major government administrations. However, the fact that some education benefit may result does not prove that "NASA" is an accurate definition for the term "higher education."

Whenever opponents present a new "standard" that you have not heard before, you should ask yourself whether the arguments genuinely demonstrates the accuracy of the definition they present. In many cases, it does not. Instead, the opponent is often attempting to justify a definition that provides a creative advantage for their side despite the fact that the definition is inaccurate. In summary, when an argument does not attest to the accuracy of a definition, then by definition it is not a genuine standard.

Topicality as a Voting Issue

Topicality is voting issue for several reasons. First, when the government team fails to defend a topical plan, predictable ground is skewed. By presenting a non-topical plan, the government side gains access to ground that the opposition could not have predicted. Likewise, the opposition team loses access to ground that they did predict. Thus, violating topicality inherently skews the terms of the debate against the opposition team.

Second, when the government plan fails to comply with the resolution, topic-specific education is automatically lost. Because the plan takes an action that falls outside the purview of the topic, a component of the discussion and education that occurs in the round is non-topical. Similarly, a non-topical plan

inherently forgoes a discussion of issues that might have been discussed if the plan was topical but which are no longer pertinent.

Third, the NPDA Rules of Debating stipulate that, "the proposition team must affirm the resolution by presenting and defending a sufficient case for that resolution". This language strongly implies that the government plan is required to be topical and that the government side cannot win the debate if they fail to meet the topicality burden.

Finally, it is essential not only that topicality is a voting issue, but also that it is preeminent in the round. If other arguments are able to supersede topicality or take priority over it, then teams could use such arguments to justify their use of non-topical plans.[7]

Abuse, Competing Interpretations, and Reasonability
Two final issues that affect the evaluation of topicality merit discussion. The first is the issue of "abuse"; the second is the distinction between "competing interpretations" and "reasonability."

First, many judges are hesitant to vote on topicality unless the opposition side demonstrates that it has suffered "in-round abuse". Such judges insist that the government side has not harmed the opposition team unless they blatantly "no-link" or otherwise avoid a position that they would have been forced to directly engage if the plan was topical. This perspective, however, is misguided. It overlooks the fact that predictable ground and topic-specific education are automatically impinged as soon as the government presents a non-topical plan. These forms of "abuse" are every bit as real as a no-linked disadvantage or link-turn made possibly by a non-topical plan.

The issue of in-round abuse is also very difficult to fairly evaluate. In order to demonstrate abuse, judges often ask the opposition side to present a disadvantage that would have linked to a topical plan but which does not intuitively link to a non-topical one. If the government team "no-links" the position, the abuse is proven. However, a strategic government team can simply concede the link on the disadvantage, thereby denying their opponent an abuse claim. As such, the government team no longer needs to worry about topicality when debating in front a judge who demands "abuse". They can therefore spend the remainder of their speech time reading impact turns or uniqueness arguments against the disadvantage. Because they do not have to answer topicality, they may even gain a time-tradeoff in the process. Thus, forcing the opposition side to prove an "abuse" claim actually poses a significant and unreliable burden.

Second, it is important to understand what the terms "competing interpretations" and "reasonability" imply. To begin, "competing interpretations" should be used to connote the fact that topicality is a process of selecting between potential definitions. In other words, the two definitions are compared against one another and the plan is evaluated against the more accurate of the

---

[7]For a detailed discussion of topicality's importance as a voting issue, see Graham and Merrell (2016).

two. However, competitors and judges often use "competing interpretations" in a different sense. To some participants, the term "competing interpretations" implies that judges should weigh the *impacts* associated with different definitions against one another. In other words, the teams will argue that a particular definition provides desirable ground or education and the judge will take these arguments into account when selecting definitions.

Unfortunately, this method of evaluating topicality is inherently misguided for three main reasons. First, as we argued above, ground and education are not mechanisms for evaluating the *accuracy* of a word and can in fact detract from accuracy. Second, individual words do not divide ground or provide education. The term "economic sanctions" does not provide any ground for either team until we know whether the resolution tasks the government with increasing or decreasing sanctions and against which country those sanctions are targeted. The ground for the debate would be very different if the resolution asked the U.S. to "increase economic sanctions against Iran" rather than "decrease economic sanctions against North Korea." Ground and education are determined by the resolution as a whole, not by individual words. But because the resolution can only be interpreted once the most accurate definitions are identified, asking a judge to endorse a definition on the basis of ground or education puts the cart before the horse. Third, it is almost impossible for a judge to evaluate how much argumentative ground and education are available even once the resolution is defined.[8] The reduction of *predictable* ground and *topic-specific* education that occur whenever the government plan does not comply with the most accurate definition of the topic should therefore always take priority over speculated increases in *other* ground or education.

"Reasonability" is another argument that competitors use to justify inaccurate definitions. In this case, teams argue that words can be defined in many different ways and that definitions should be accepted as long as they attain some minimum level of quality. By definition, however, this argument disregards the importance of accuracy. When the government plan is not required to comply with the most accurate definition of a word, predictable ground and topic-specific education are inherently reduced.[9]

Conclusion

Topicality is one of the most common arguments in parliamentary debate. Nevertheless, the position is widely misunderstood. Learning to debate topicality correctly will be of significant long-term benefit to your career. This chapter provided an explanation of the logical structure of topicality, demonstrated why standards should attest to the accuracy of a definition, and argued that topicality is a preeminent voting issue for reasons of predictable ground,

---

[8] See Murphy (1994) for an extended discussion of why this is the case.

[9] See Graham and Merrell (2016) for a detailed description of why reasonability is an inappropriate method for evaluating topicality.

topic-specific education, and the rules of the game. Hopefully it will help you learn to think more clearly about topicality, to recognize your opponents' logical mistakes, and to explain these problems coherently and convincingly to your judges.

References

[1] Graham, T. and Merrell, B. "Back to its Roots: Accuracy as the Litmus Test for Topicality." *Parliamentary Debate,* Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 21-68, November 2016.

[2] Murphy, T. L. (1994). The legitimacy of non-truth-based standards in competitive academic debate. CEDA Yearbook, 15, 1-9.