

Most debate coaches recommend that the topicality challenge be presented in the first negative constructive speech. Much of the credibility of the argument is lost if the negative team waits for the second negative constructive speech to issue the challenge. After the discussion has been underway for forty minutes, it is a bit unusual to say that the whole discussion up to that point has been irrelevant to the resolution.

The structure of the topicality challenge should include an argument label, a standards section, and a violation. The main argument label should stipulate that the argument is topicality and should indicate the word or phrase in the resolution the plan fails to meet. Following is an example of a label for a topicality argument: “Substantially: The plan is not topical because it fails to substantially increase public health assistance to sub-Saharan Africa.” This label tells the judge and the opposing team that the argument is topicality and that the particular violation claimed will relate to the term *substantially*. The inclusion of the word or phrase being violated is important because some teams make three or four different topicality arguments claiming that the plan violates several words of the resolution. The participants in the debate round must have a way of distinguishing one topicality violation from another; this is typically done by including the word or words being violated in the argument label.

The standards section provides a brief explanation of ways the judge should determine which definition is superior. In most debate rounds, the judge will have definitions from each side supporting its interpretation of the resolution. The topicality standards debate helps the judge assess which definition is the better of the two.

The each-word-has-meaning standard argues that the better interpretation of the resolution is the one that offers an independent role for each of the key terms in the resolution. One should assume that the framers of the resolution placed each word in the resolution for some reason other than to be redundant.

The debatability standard argues that the better interpretation of the resolution is the one that more fairly divides the ground between the affirmative and negative teams. Consider the example of an affirmative case that claims global warming is undermining public health in sub-Saharan Africa. The affirmative plan calls for the United States to sign the Kyoto Protocol and get serious about meeting carbon-dioxide emission reduction targets. The negative team should argue the importance of making a distinction between what is public health and what affects public health. It may well be true that global warming affects public health, but allowing such an effects topicality standard would unlimit the resolution, making it undebatable. By such an effects standard any of the following cases would be topical:

- A nuclear war would undermine public health in sub-Saharan Africa, so the United States should pursue nuclear disarmament.