

The people who set motions for World Schools Championships have an obligation to ensure that each poses a clear issue to be debated. This being so, the teams have an obligation to take the obvious meaning of the motion and to debate the issue posed. A Proposition that avoids doing so deserves criticism. Refusing to engage with the plain meaning of a motion deprives the Opposition of its preparation time and results in debates on unduly narrow or bizarre subjects, or disputes over the definition. Audiences, who anticipated a certain subject being debated, see something substantially more limited or unexpected, and come to regard debating as overly technical and confusing.

On receiving a motion, both teams must ask: 'What is the issue that the two teams are expected to debate? What would an ordinary intelligent person reading the motion think that it is about?' This should give a good idea as to what the audience, adjudicators and people setting the motion expect to see debated.

(b) Taking the obvious meaning

If the motion poses a clear issue for debate (i.e. it has an obvious meaning), the Proposition must define the motion accordingly. When the motion has an obvious meaning (one which the ordinary intelligent person would realise), any other definition would not be reasonable.

The motion 'This House believes that governments should subsidise the arts' can be used by way of illustration. The motion poses the issue of whether government money should be spent on cultural activities such as art exhibitions, music and drama performances, and building and operating museums. Not much more needs to be said by way of definition. None of the words in the motion cause any real problems; 'subsidise' simply means 'pay some of the costs of'.

Finding the correct level of abstraction

Debating the obvious meaning of a motion means that if the motion poses a very specific issue, the debate will itself be specific and must focus on the narrow, particular question posed. If, on the other hand, the motion expresses a very general principle, the debate will be much broader in scope and will include a correspondingly greater range of material. *The definition must match the level of abstraction (or specificity) of the motion, so that the debate is as specific or general as the motion itself.*

'This House would maintain United States military bases in Asia' was debated as one of the prepared rounds at the 2002 World Schools Championships in Singapore. The motion posed a clear issue and required to be defined accordingly. The Proposition would be defining the motion too generally if it ignored the words 'United States' and 'in Asia' and took the debate to mean that countries should have off shore military bases (and spent much of its time on examples from the Roman and British empires and their alleged benefits). The motion is more specific than this and requires the teams to focus on American bases in Asia today. The Proposition could validly use the more general principle in support of its specific argument (saying that American bases should remain in Asia because there are benefits to countries having off shore military bases, and the sorts of benefits derived during the time of the Roman and British empires show, by analogy, the sorts of benefits gained from having American bases in Asia today). However, the focus must remain on American bases in Asia, meaning that material directly related to this will be much more relevant. The Opposition