

(d) Would the ordinary intelligent person accept the definition?

Once the Proposition has decided upon a definition following the above guidelines, it should check this is a reasonable definition by asking whether it is one the ordinary intelligent person would accept.

The phrase 'ordinary intelligent person' has no particular magic. It is just a means of trying to express the idea that motions and the words in motions should be defined in accordance with what the average member of the audience would expect ('ordinary intelligent person' being used instead of 'average member of the audience' to cover the fact that an adequate level of education and general knowledge must be assumed).

The reason for this last provision is to reinforce the point that a reasonable definition involves doing what is expected; it is not about trying to win by playing tricks with words. It is not reasonable to take the obvious meaning of the motion and set up a debate which addresses the anticipated issue, but at the same time to define one word in the motion in quite an unexpected way, so as to give the Proposition a much easier burden of proof than the Opposition when debating this issue.

In one debate on the motion 'This House would break unjust laws in democracies', the Proposition team correctly discerned the issue for debate, whether civil disobedience was justified when living in a democracy. The Proposition quite rightly made much of the fact that majorities might oppress minorities and that, even although the United States was a democracy in the 1950s, black Americans faced immense difficulty enforcing civil rights through legal means. Nevertheless, the Proposition in this debate made a critical mistake when it defined the word 'democracies'. The Proposition wanted to talk about South Africa and to say that people like Nelson Mandela were quite justified in breaking the laws of the apartheid regime there. Quite clearly those laws were 'unjust', but was apartheid South Africa a 'democracy'? The Proposition argued yes, by saying there was a democracy if there were elections, no matter if some people were ineligible to vote in them.

The Proposition's desire to use a strong example which the Opposition would have difficulty answering led it into the trap of distorting the definition to do so. As the Opposition correctly pointed out, no reasonable person would have considered apartheid South Africa a democracy when ninety percent of its populace was not allowed to vote in free elections. The Proposition had got the right issue in one sense (civil disobedience) but had missed it in another (the exact issue was civil disobedience *in democracies*). Its unreasonable definition of one word meant it was not in fact debating the motion set.

Dictionaries and Common Usage

The Proposition's task is to define the motion, not every word in it. Individual words need not be defined if their meaning is obvious. But when words do need to be defined (such as 'democracies' in the above example), the question is what would the ordinary intelligent person expect those words to mean. Dictionary definitions may assist in finding a commonly accepted meaning and can provide speakers with quick, concise explanations. But a dictionary has no particular authority; it is nothing more than an aid to determining the commonly accepted meaning of a word.

Taking an obscure dictionary definition and claiming that this is what the motion must mean is clearly illegitimate. Some time ago, a Proposition team defined 'rape' in the motion 'This House believes that rape is a problem for us all' to mean the oil-producing seed called rape.