

the adjudicator must be left in no doubt whatsoever that she can agree with one or the other, but not both.

This need for disagreement poses a particular challenge for the first speaker in the debate. As well as having a particular job to do, First Affirmative is in a unique position: she is the only speaker who does not follow somebody else and, as a result, has nobody to whom she can respond. In debate, First Affirmative is often considered to be the hardest position—she has nothing to refute, no opportunity to fill her speech with criticisms of other people’s arguments or to build on what’s gone before. Instead, she has to set out an idea that everybody else at the table will get to poke and prod, try and test.

If that prospect seems a little unsettling, however, glance across the table. First Negative has a fairly daunting task as well. Even in formats that announce the motion well ahead of time, he enters the debate armed with only an educated guess as to what his case is likely to be. The particular elements First Negative will be expected to tackle are only revealed once the Affirmative starts their case. First Negative has the duration of the First Affirmative’s speech to pull together a case on which the rest of the Negative team can build all of their arguments. No mean feat.

Of course, in all probability, both teams will have a fairly clear idea of the general area for debate and should have used whatever preparation time is available to put together the arguments that they expect to use. However, the definition of the motion sets out the actual issue for debate. Once it is set out, speakers should focus on that and ignore any areas they may have preferred to discuss.

The Definition

If you think about it, the average motion is around 10 words long—and some of these words are standard: “This House Believes that” or “Resolved.” It’s not a lot of space to express the details of nuclear disarmament or a major shift in macroeconomics. Nor should it be. Where is this policy to be implemented? How can a particular course of action be pursued? How will it be paid for? What are the metrics that would determine success? Answering these and other questions is the sole preserve of the First Affirmative speaker. It is her duty to give what is termed “the definition,” giving answers to the sorts of questions just mentioned. This definition is a statement of what the debate is actually about. From the moment the First Affirmative has set out the definition, it replaces the motion as the focus of the debate.