

Different formats and competitions have different rules and varying suggestions about what makes a good definition. However, broadly speaking, they can be reduced to two simple statements:

1. The definition should be *reasonable*.
2. The definition should be *debatable*.

“Reasonable”—a definition should cover material that a typical competitor could be expected to know about and should be clearly linked to the motion. “Debatable”—a definition should clearly allow for two sides in a debate.

Let’s take an example of a “reasonable” definition. If the motion is THW Scrap School Uniforms, it’s fairly clear that the motion should be about the wearing of standardized clothing in schools. However tempting it might be to try to redefine it into being about a national curriculum—Resist! Beyond wildly off-topic definitions, First Affirmative has some leeway. It’s perfectly acceptable to say that the Affirmative is applying the motion only to high schools—or just to elementary schools for that matter. However, the Affirmative should give a reason for narrowing the focus. Further, that reason should relate to their wider case. If, for example, their case is based on scrapping school uniforms because they’re expensive, they might choose to limit the exemption to ages when children are still growing quickly.

In terms of a “debatable” definition, speakers should avoid forcing the Negative to defend the indefensible. In a debate on euthanasia, defining the motion in such a way as to require the Negative to defend nonvoluntary euthanasia is wrong. Asking a team, in effect, to defend murder makes for a lousy debate, and you can rest assured that the adjudicators won’t blame the Negative for struggling; they’ll place blame fair and square where it belongs—with Affirmative’s bad definition.

What, then, are the hallmarks of a good definition? It should be clear. It should answer all basic questions about the process of what is being proposed and should also underpin why the Affirmative is suggesting a particular course or position. From the strategic point of view of First Affirmative, the definition should also be “tight.” A tight definition is one that stands in its own right without requiring lots of clarification to be done by later speakers. That certainly doesn’t mean that it shouldn’t allow plenty of room for development; quite the contrary, it should. However, by the time First Affirmative sits down, everyone in the room should have a clear idea of what the Affirmative is going to be talking about.

Let’s take an example.

Motion: THW Legalize Prostitution