

Establishing a Perspective

The opening speakers should also be aware of the importance of being seen as reasonable in the eyes of the adjudicator. We shall see in Chapter 15 how the final speeches on both sides will be used to encourage the adjudicator to assess the debate from a particular perspective. The groundwork for that needs to be laid in the opening speeches. If, at this early stage, you can persuade the adjudicator that any possible answers to the question you have set out must come from a particular perspective, then you will make life much harder for opposing speakers. To take the example of the debate we considered earlier on the legalization of prostitution, if the Affirmative speaker can persuade the adjudicator that the problem she is trying to address is, ultimately, one of public health, she will almost certainly win. By contrast, if Negative can persuade the adjudicator that this is really a matter of morality or public order, then his team will win. It's unlikely, although not impossible, that you would state such a perspective explicitly at this stage. However, the arguments you select and the evidence with which they are supported should draw the adjudicator in that direction. You should try hard to make that selection process seem as reasonable and natural as possible, so as to give the impression that anyone failing to address the issue in terms of your perspective has completely missed the point.

Conclusion

Good opening speeches frame what will happen in the rest of the debate; bad ones encourage squabbling over what was or wasn't said and arguments over irrelevant points. A debate is largely an exercise in asking an audience to make a decision or answer a question. By the end of the first speeches, the listener should be in no doubt about what that decision or question is and the standards by which they are being asked to make or answer it.

Strong opening speeches may not necessarily win debates, but problematic ones can certainly lose them. A lack of clarity or focus on what is being discussed is one common error, a failure to set out the direction of the debate is another. Failing to fulfill the function expected of an opening speaker—especially First Affirmative—is, perhaps, the most common error.