

The Role of First Negative

First Negative has the task of setting out the general direction of clash, highlighting where the two sides will disagree. He needs to do considerably more than just say “we disagree”; he must demonstrate why the change proposed by the Affirmative team would be wrong. This might be because there is a fundamental disagreement with the principles that underpin the case or because the mechanism put forward to deliver the change won’t work. Chances are, it’s a little of both.

Within the first minute or so of his speech, the First Negative should give the audience a clear idea of what he sees as the main problems with the Affirmative, framing the points of clash in just a few sentences—one, if possible:

We agree with Affirmative that drug addiction is a serious problem, but the solution they suggest won’t work because it further alienates addicts from the medical support they need by compelling them to risk imprisonment if they discuss their problem with a doctor.

Obviously, the speaker will then need to provide details of the arguments that he and his teammates are planning to use, but the adjudicator and the other speakers now have a clear idea of Negative’s approach, and the debate can begin in earnest. First Negative next rebuts some of what First Affirmative said, divides his team’s case between himself and other speakers, and sets out in detail their first argument, usually the strongest one. In Karl Popper format the two opening speakers set out their teams’ cases in entirety, establishing two clear perspectives, to which the second speakers can then respond. The adjudicator now has two perspectives on how to tackle the problem and a clear idea of the framework for her decision as to which team has the stronger case.

Running Through the Whole Debate

In theory, after the two first speakers, everyone could take a vote and go home. In reality, that wouldn’t make for a very satisfying process because lots of questions would still be hanging in the air waiting for someone to answer them. So, the debate—and the clash—continue.

Where cross-examination has taken place before we hear from the second speakers, the listener will have a far clearer idea of which arguments are strong and which are questionable and is waiting for the second speakers to confirm or refute her perception. In other formats, listeners who were entirely convinced by the First Affirmative may well have