

**Back to its roots  
Accuracy as the litmus for topicality**

**Todd Graham  
Southern Illinois University**

**Brandon Merrell  
University of California-San Diego**

Abstract

Opinions diverge regarding the proper role of topicality standards and the rationale that judges should use when voting on topicality. We argue that such confusion stems from two relatively recent developments. First, contemporary debaters rarely use standards to assess the accuracy of their definitions, but rather to evaluate the consequences that result from a topical violation. Second, a diminishing number of critics believe topicality is a preeminent voting issue; instead, judges assess its “impacts” in direct comparison with other arguments. In this paper, we show that the new approaches to topicality are logically flawed and that they fail to adequately distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable plans. We therefore provide a new framework for evaluating the argument that is founded in definitional accuracy. In the process, we highlight the logical merits of an accuracy-seeking approach, illustrate a coherent rationale for voting on ‘T’, and characterize key areas of overlap and distinction between topicality and framework.

*Keywords:* argumentation, debate, topicality, definitions, framework

“Most controversies would soon be ended if those engaged in them would first accurately define their terms and then rigidly adhere to their definitions.”

—Jonathan Edwards<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

Topicality<sup>2</sup> is among the most frequently deployed arguments in competitive debate, yet participants rarely agree about its composition and evaluation. In particular, no consensus exists regarding the proper role of topicality standards or the precise rationale that judges should use when evaluating the argument. Why and on what basis should one definition be prioritized over another? In what circumstances must a judge reject the affirmative as a result of topicality? Answers to such questions are both diverse and inconsistent.

Despite its current ubiquity, disagreement about ‘T’ is a relatively recent development. Throughout its history, topicality rarely served as a source of controversy. For much of the twentieth century, the argument was evaluated within an intuitive, precise, and logical framework that was endorsed by nearly all participants. What factors gave rise to the modern divergence in paradigms? How might we reconcile these different approaches? Can previous conceptions of topicality usefully inform our modern practice?

We argue that the current confusion regarding topicality stems from two interrelated shifts in the argument’s structure. First, the received view of topicality standards has changed over time. Whereas standards were originally used to identify the most accurate definition of an individual term, they are now used to evaluate the in-round desirability or consequences of a particular interpretation for the entire resolutive sentence. For example, teams who once justified their definitions as ‘field contextual’ or ‘historically accurate’ now argue particular

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Berkeley (1853), p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> Topicality is often abbreviated as ‘T’.

interpretations of the overall topic are desirable because they ‘provide valuable argumentative ground’ or will ‘facilitate an educational discussion.’ In this paper, we refer to the traditional means of assessing topicality as the “accuracy-seeking” paradigm, because standards are used to assess the accuracy of particular definitions. In contrast, we label the recent approach the “consequentialist” paradigm, because teams who follow such an approach are interested in the in-round consequences of reinterpreting an entire resolution. We show that the consequentialist approach is logically flawed and that its widespread adoption has bred significant confusion regarding the role of topicality.

A second, related change to topicality is its reevaluation as a voting issue. Many contemporary judges are hesitant to vote on topicality in the absence of clearly articulated ‘in-round abuse,’ ‘potential abuse,’ or an ‘impact’ that outweighs other issues in the round. Similarly, many critics regard topicality as equivalent to an alternative theory, procedural, or framework argument. We show that this view is misguided. In particular, evaluating topicality as a disadvantage with links and impacts is inappropriate on several grounds.

Collectively, the profound changes in participants’ understanding of standards and voters have obscured the essential goals of topicality and inhibited the argument from fulfilling its intended purpose, which is to accurately define specific terms in the resolution and to ensure that the affirmative plan adheres to the stipulated topic. As a result of this distortion, affirmative and negative teams are able to bypass topical restrictions in ways that significantly reduce the overall quality of debate. Unfortunately, the distinctions between the historical and contemporary approaches to topicality are not widely recognized—an omission that allows confusion to persist and disagreement to grow. We hope that this paper will remedy these problems by improving how topicality is understood, argued, and ultimately adjudicated.

The remainder of this article is divided into the following sections. First, we review the historical origins of topicality, outline the argument's evolution over time, and briefly identify several turning points in the development of the position. Next, we examine the current state of topicality in parliamentary debate and other common formats. Third, we demonstrate the appropriate role of topicality standards by evaluating the relative logic of accuracy-seeking and consequentialist arguments. In the fourth section, we consider the overall importance of topicality and justify its preeminence as a voting issue. Thereafter, we discuss the relationship between topicality and its counterpart, framework, and highlight areas of commonality and contrast between the two arguments. Finally, we describe potential limitations in our analysis and offer concluding suggestions for argumentation researchers and debate practitioners.

### **Defining Topicality: Origins and Evolution**

#### **Foundations in Accuracy and Common Understanding**

In academic debate, topics are selected in advance of competitions to encourage research, facilitate the development of informed arguments, and direct the focus of attention during rounds (Cantrill, 1988; Panetta, 1981; Paulsen & Rhodes, 1979; Ulrich, 1984). To prevent teams from straying too far from their stipulated resolutions, early debate organizers developed a 'topicality' or 'resolutionality' requirement that restricted the boundaries of discussion. As outlined by Thomas (1973, p. 16), "the affirmative is vulnerable to topicality attacks (1) when the plan fails to fully implement the resolution in all of its terms; [or] (2) when the plan goes beyond the requirements of the resolution." In other words, the affirmative plan is non-topical if it either fails to comply with the resolution or includes an action that exceeds the scope of the topic. Non-topical plans fall outside the judge's jurisdiction and therefore cannot be endorsed with the ballot (Madsen & Loudon, 1987; Ulrich, 1983).

Unfortunately, although topicality is at its heart a binary question—the affirmative plan either does or does not comply with the prescribed topic—its evaluation is complicated by the fact that words in the resolution are often themselves indeterminate. As early as the 1920s, competitors complained that the authors of debate resolutions rarely provided clear definitions for the terms that they used (Nichols, 1935, p. 168). Likewise, participants opined that many topics suffered from a general “looseness of wordings” (Taylor & Barnard, 1930, p. 359). Because even minor distinctions in a topic’s meaning can significantly alter the boundaries of discussion and influence the range of arguments available to each team, debaters developed a procedural method of determining which definitions ought to be used. Topicality quickly expanded into a two-stage process whereby (1) debaters identified the most accurate definition for each contested term and, in so doing, determined the meaning of the resolution as a whole, and then (2) debaters evaluated the plan’s compliance with the resolution as it was defined. Rather than allow judges to use their intuition to determine whether the affirmative plan was topical, the competitors themselves began to debate the strengths and weaknesses of particular definitions during rounds.

This two-pronged approach to topicality persisted for nearly half a century. As debate evolved, teams proposed a variety of distinct ‘standards’ for selecting between opposing definitions. For example, they argued that definitions were preferable when they were contextual to the field under discussion (Herbeck & Katsulas, 1985; Parson, 1981), when they were drawn from dictionaries (Pellegrini & Stirling, 1936), when they were grammatically accurate within the resolutive sentence (Herbeck & Katsulas, 1985; Parson, 1981), when they were defined by an authority on the controversy (Naylor & Unger, 1971), when they were commonly acknowledged by the average person (Patterson & Zarefsky, 1983), or when they reflected the

historical and social context of the topic under discussion (Brownlee, 1981; Eisenberg & Ilardo, 1981; Luck, Paulson, & McCown, 1978; Nobles, 1978; Windes & Hastings, 1965). The common thread was that all these standards sought to answer the question, “What definition most accurately defines this particular word?”

### **The Equal-Ground Standard**

Topicality standards were thrown on their head when Dudczak (1989) proposed a new criterion for evaluating definitions: “equal ground.” According to Dudczak, because the resolution determines the range and amount of argumentative ground that is available to each side, judges should prefer definitions that divide ground equally between the affirmative and the negative. The logical shift in this approach was profound. Rather than accurately define the terms of the resolutive sentence and then abide by the result, Dudczak urged debaters to identify a desirable interpretation of the resolution and then justify that interpretation by finding definitions that could facilitate it.<sup>3</sup>

Although Dudczak intended the equal ground standard to supplement existing accuracy-based standards, it soon began to replace them entirely. Freed from the requirement that they abide by accurate definitions, teams began to justify previously indefensible interpretations by claiming that they would establish equal ground. Debaters began to propose ever more arcane, archaic, and lexically inaccurate definitions in hopes of surprising their opponents. Standards were no longer used to assess the accuracy of individual definitions, but rather to attest to the desirability of debating each competitor’s preferred interpretation of the overall resolution.

### **Weighing Impacts**

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<sup>3</sup> This article details why consequentialist standards ought not be used to assess topicality in competitive environments. For a discussion of the equal ground standard and its misapplication in classroom settings, see Merrell, Calderwood, & Flores, 2015 and Merrell, Calderwood, & Graham, in press.

The new approach to standards proliferated throughout the 1980s and culminated when “topicality lost its aura as an invincibly a priori argument... [and] debaters started to apply the logic of the (dis)advantage to topicality debates” (Shanahan, 2004). By the end of the decade, two distortionary processes had become widespread. First, the affirmative perspective on topicality permanently shifted. Rather than a strict requirement that bounded the range of acceptable advocacies, debaters began to view topicality as an impact that could be weighed. They attempted to justify non-topical plans on the basis of the ‘in-round utility’ that such plans provided. Some teams openly acknowledged that their advocacies did not comply with the requirements of the resolution. Nevertheless, they claimed that their arguments should be tolerated because they established fair ground and/or facilitated a discussion of important educational issues, thereby resolving the harm associated with a non-topical plan. In essence, they were attempting to ‘link-turn’ or ‘no-impact’ the ‘topicality disad.’

Negative teams pushed in an opposite and equally distortionary direction. Upon confronting affirmative plans that were intuitively topical, negatives nevertheless challenged those plans for providing ‘too little ground’ or ‘insufficient education.’ Rather than argue that the affirmative’s stipulated definitions were inaccurate, negative teams sought to exclude from consideration any plans that they deemed unfair. In the process, topicality moved even further from its roots as means of accurately defining individual terms in the resolution. Instead, it became a platform in which debaters advocated for particular interpretations of the resolution by claiming that those interpretations would allow them to incorporate or exclude particular plans. The dual changes in how standards are interpreted and how topicality is evaluated have significantly influenced common approaches to the position. In the next section, we discuss contemporary thinking about topicality in parliamentary debate and other common formats.

## **Current Approaches to Topicality**

### **Parliamentary Debate**

More than a decade has passed since Taylor and Andersen (2003, p. 81) reviewed the opinions of National Parliamentary Debate Association (NPDA) judges regarding topicality, but casual observation suggests that their quip, “topicality is a dirty word in parliamentary debate” still rings true for a significant portion of the judging pool. Due to a variety of historical and structural phenomena, topicality remains one of the most commonly used and yet least respected arguments in contemporary parliamentary debate. Three main factors have shaped contemporary approaches to topicality in NPDA and merit discussion: the history of the format, the rules regarding topic rotation, and restrictions on the use of evidence.

First, the organizational history of NPDA has predisposed many participants to either disregard topicality entirely or assume the argument is of low importance. Critics of topicality often claim that, as a procedural, the issue strays from the public-debate focus with which NPDA was originally conceived (Taylor & Andersen, 2003). In addition, many judges, coaches, and directors were introduced to parliamentary debate during the late 1990s and early 2000s—a period in which resolutions were substantially vaguer than they are at present. Until recently a majority of tournaments, including the NPDA National Tournament, endorsed a conception of debate whereby policy, fact, and value resolutions were each debated with similar frequency. When confronted with fact and value topics, affirmative teams often declined to include plans in their cases, thereby attenuating the value of topicality and substantially altering its evaluation.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, even policy resolutions were traditionally open-ended and provided the affirmative team with substantial leeway to define the specifics of the topic as they desired. For example, a

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<sup>4</sup> For further analysis of the role of topicality in value debate, see Ulrich (1984) and Tolbert and Hunt (1985).

list of resolutions used between 1996 and 2006 includes, “This house believes that old enemies can become new friends,” “This house would take it back,” and “This house would retire.”<sup>5</sup>

Such broadly-phrased resolutions were likely necessary in the days prior to significant pre-tournament research or guaranteed internet availability during prep time. However, during the mid-2000s, resolutions gradually became more specific. Topic committees began to craft narrower topics in hopes of improving predictability for the negative side and therefore facilitating in-round clash.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, judges remain conditioned to a system in which resolutions were unbounded and indeterminate. Accustomed to a format in which that affirmative teams enjoyed generous flexibility, critics continue to provide affirmatives with broad leeway, and a substantial proportion of judges are hesitant to vote on or vigorously evaluate topicality arguments.<sup>7</sup> Rather than reject plans that do not comply with an accurately-defined topic, judges prefer to declare that such plans are ‘reasonable’ and that the negative has no basis for complaint unless irreparable in-round abuse was documented. The end result is that many participants remain less concerned with carefully defining the words in the resolution than with evaluating abuse claims between sides.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example: <http://www.parlidedebate.org/debate/resolutions/>

<sup>6</sup> Note that topicality has little relevance when resolutions are *deliberately* vague or metaphorical. Teams can still use topicality as a means of accurately defining the words in the resolution, but when those words are ultimately assembled as a metaphor the resolutive sentence will remain vague. This is *not* a reason to distort the topicality argument to analyze entire resolutions. If negative teams lament the lack of predictability from a topic that is deliberately opaque, they should either (1) lobby for changes in the topic writing process or (2) construct an alternative procedural argument explaining that debate would be improved if the negative side had access to stable ground *beyond what was defined by the topicality process or intended by the topic committee*. Although this type of procedural may constitute a persuasive argument on the basis of fairness, it is not grounded in an accurate definition of the words in the topic and hence should not fall within the umbrella of topicality.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, of the 120 judges who submitted philosophies to the 2015 NPDA tournament, 93 discussed topicality—though many did so only briefly. Of the 93, more than a quarter indicated that they dislike the argument, are willing to disregard topicality, or do not consider it a requirement for the affirmative.

<sup>8</sup> Critics disagree about the importance of abuse in relation to topicality. Of the judges who submitted philosophies to the 2015 NPDA tournament, 27 wrote that they either require or strongly prefer that competitors demonstrate abuse when debating topicality, but an equal number remarked that they considered abuse unnecessary.

Second, limited prep time and topic rotation discourage parliamentary (parli) debate teams from expending significant energy in their attempts to either define or adhere to the topic. Whereas in policy debate it was once common for coaches and teams to “spend considerable portions of time analyzing resolutions from a definitional standpoint prior to developing affirmative and negative positions” (Cantrill, 1988), such behavior is less common in parli. Because parli teams lack advance opportunity to sculpt plans and arguments, they are more likely to resort to arguments that do not strictly adhere to the confines of the topic. Rather than ask, “what does the resolution require us to debate?” before selecting a plan, teams are apt to wonder, “which of our files would we most like to use?” They then identify an interpretation of the resolution that would allow them to read their preferred arguments.

The current approach is flawed both logically and pedagogically. First, it allows affirmative teams to redefine the resolution. In the process, they sidestep their logical obligation as advocates. Consider a round in which the resolution asks the affirmative side to defend the expansion of support for “renewable energy.” If two debaters personally advocate the expansion of nuclear power, they might like to shoehorn such a plan into the topic despite the fact that nuclear power is more accurately classified as “alternative energy” as opposed to “renewable energy.” To justify their plan, they might argue that the debate topic should be interpreted in a way that allows the inclusion of nuclear energy. This, however, would not be an accurate means of defining the term “renewable energy.” By presenting a plan that is imperfectly congruent with the resolution, the team has failed its burden in the round. Rather than support the stipulated topic, they have instead endorsed an alternative resolution. The judge therefore has no jurisdiction to vote for their side.

In addition, the current approach to topicality is pedagogically harmful. Allowing competitors to reshape the resolution to suit their preferences significantly attenuates the expectation that debaters will tailor their own arguments to fit the topic at hand. One of the most valuable educational aspects of competitive debate is that students are asked to research and defend positions that conflict with their own opinions or with which they are unfamiliar. A team that reinterprets a “renewable energy” topic to include “nuclear energy” is resting on their intellectual laurels. On the other hand, asking them to develop, present, and defend a plan that advocated for the expansion of wind, solar, tidal, or geothermal power would likely facilitate useful gains in the students’ collective education. As Ulrich (1984, p. 2-3) argued, “we should attempt to discover the best definition of the terms in the resolution before we support that resolution.” Students should discern the meaning of the resolution before selecting the arguments they intend to use in the debate.

The third and final factor that has significantly influenced thinking about topicality in parliamentary debate relative to other formats is the restriction on the use of evidence. Definitions in policy debate are bounded by the availability of literature that includes the term in question. In parli, however, definitions are often merely assertions from the debaters. Cantrill (1988, p. 46) recognized that even in policy, “there is little insurance that terms, as they are defined in resolutorial analysis, are commensurate with meanings embedded in specific pieces of documentation.” Nevertheless, the evidentiary requirement in policy creates at least some minimum bounds on what can be justified; increasingly strict requirements on the quality of the evidence in question also check against the proliferation of potential definitions. By contrast, NPDA rules against the use of evidence encourage teams to offer interpretations of words that may not reference actual usage in the literature. When they involve a comparison of two

fabricated interpretations, topicality arguments in parliamentary debate often neglect altogether a comparison of definitional accuracy. In summary, the unique history and structure of parliamentary debate has encouraged judges and competitors to downplay the significance of topicality and to approach the discussion in a way that serves their competitive interests rather than seeks to accurately define the terms in the resolution.

### **Topicality Across Formats**

Across all debate formats competitive pressure has profoundly influenced the evolution of topicality. Because the manner in which the resolution is defined significantly affects the range of arguments that are available to either team, competitors face an incentive to select definitions that shift the terms of the debate in their favor. In formats such as NFA-LD, where topicality is still viewed as a strict requirement and is rigorously enforced by judges, teams face a risk-return tradeoff: although they may want to identify an obscure definition that will provide their side with a competitive advantage, esoteric definitions are also more likely to be summarily rejected by the judge or easily countered as unreasonable by the opposing side. Thus, affirmative teams are encouraged to debate within the intuitive confines of the resolution.

However, in many other debate formats—including policy debate—the assumed preeminence of topicality as a voting issue has faded over time. In the period since Sigel (1984) argued that the theoretical parameters for debate should be established by debaters themselves and could therefore vary on a round-to-round basis, it has grown increasingly common for judges to allow theoretical issues to be resolved in-round by the participants. Indeed, norms in favor of tabula rasa approaches to judging and against intervention have grown increasingly strong within NPDA and policy debate. As a result, judges no longer act as referees to prevent abuse. Because of this shift, one key disincentive against reading a questionably-topical plan—the fear of being

penalized by the judge—has been substantially reduced. Similarly, because judges are asked to accept arguments without question, debaters' capacity to justify counterintuitive definitions has improved significantly. In essence, the risk-return tradeoff has shifted increasingly in favor of obscure definitions.

Finally, since Dudczak's (1989) proposal of an "equal ground standard," additional arguments have emerged that fulfill similar functions. For example, debaters often seek to justify a particular interpretation of a topic by arguing that the interpretation would 'limit the number of potential affirmative plans,' or 'provide teams with links to their preferred arguments,' or even 'allow the affirmative to approach the topic in a way that facilitates access to novel education.' Such arguments do not attest to the accuracy of a specific definition but instead argue that adopting a particular interpretation of the resolution would yield beneficial impacts within the debate round.<sup>9</sup> In the next section, we distinguish between these consequentialist arguments and traditional, accuracy-seeking standards.

### **An Accuracy-Seeking Test for Topicality Standards**

#### **Understanding Standards: Accuracy or Consequences?**

As we describe in the previous section, topicality was historically a two-stage process. Teams began by identifying the most accurate definition of each contested term. By defining each of the words within the topic, the appropriate meaning of the overall resolution gradually emerged. After definitions were selected and the resolution was clear, debaters then evaluated whether the affirmative plan complied with the resolution as it was defined.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The authors acknowledge the importance of establishing an equal playing field for competitors in the debate. Indeed, we argue elsewhere that parity is essential for fair competition (see, for example, Merrell & Graham, 2016). However, this article demonstrates that appeals for the use of a definition on the basis of its in-round consequences should not be considered part of the topicality framework proper. For further discussion, see the section on "Consequentialist Critiques of Topicality."

<sup>10</sup> The structure of the argument originally adhered to this setup. In early topicality shells, the definition came first and was followed by standards of support. The violation was *third*, after the standards, and voting issues came last.

Standards play an important role only in the first stage of the topicality process: they are the criteria that debaters use to demonstrate that a specific definition is an accurate and appropriate means of defining a particular word. For example, a team might argue that their definition is accurate because it was coined by a qualified source or because it is widely used in the historical literature. We refer to this category of arguments as “accuracy-seeking standards.” However, it has become increasingly common for teams to sidestep the discussion of accuracy. Instead, debaters attempt to justify their definitions because of those definitions would allow the overall resolution to be interpreted in ways that yield in-round benefits. For example, an affirmative team might argue that by adopting a particular definition, the resolution could be interpreted in a way that would increase argumentative ground or improve education. We refer to these claims as “consequentialist” arguments.

### **Why Consequentialist Arguments Fail as Standards**

Although consequentialist arguments are now ubiquitous in topicality debates—and teams often *refer* to them as ‘standards’—they actually fail to fulfill this role. Consider the issue of ground: can ground demonstrate why a particular definition is accurate? The answer is “no” for two reasons. First, even if we could accurately measure the division of ground between sides,<sup>11</sup> that division is not produced by individual words but rather is formed by the resolution as a whole. As such, it should not inform the judge’s thinking on topicality, where the goal is to select the appropriate definition of an individual term. To see this, consider a topicality debate about the term “foreign assistance.” There are myriad ways to define the term, but none of the

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Over the last 25 years the standards and violation have changed places so that the definition leads, the violation follows, the standards are third, and the voting issues are last. Due to this reorganization, debaters often mistakenly believe that standards describe the importance of the violation or voting issues when in truth they should demonstrate the accuracy of the proposed definition.

<sup>11</sup> See Murphy (1994) on why this is likely impossible or at least impractical.

definitions inherently provide ground to either side when considered in isolation. The division of ground between teams can only be determined by looking at the entirety of the resolution.

Defining foreign assistance as “debt relief” does not change the division of ground until we know what the remainder of the resolution requires of the affirmative plan. Thus, measuring “ground” does not help us to determine which definition of “foreign assistance” is independently accurate. Rather, it tells us whether the resolution as a whole would be desirable if “foreign assistance” was defined in a particular way. Evaluating the merits of the resolution, however, is not the goal of topicality; topicality is merely a process for accurately defining the words in the resolution and then determining whether the plan complies with the resolution so defined.

Crafting an appropriate topic is the role of the topic committee.

Second, ground is actually counter-informative. When debaters are allowed to support definitions on the basis of ground, they are able to justify inappropriate definitions in lieu of accurate ones. For example, imagine that the resolution asked the affirmative side to deploy a team of U.S. military doctors to address a public health crisis in West Africa, but that the affirmative plan instead deployed thousands of grapefruits to the region. Intuitively we recognize that “grapefruits” is not an accurate or acceptable definition of “military doctors.” However, if ground is an acceptable standard then the affirmative team could easily justify “grapefruits” as a definition for “military doctors” on that basis. After all, the affirmative might argue that by defining “military doctors” as “grapefruits” they actually expand their opponents’ ground. The negative side now has access to invasive species disadvantages, food dependency disadvantages, locally-grown food aid counterplans, kritiks of aid dependency and industrial agriculture, and solvency arguments about the short shelf life of produce in tropical climates or the inadequacy of grapefruit as a panacea. Clearly, defining “military doctors” as “grapefruits” would provide

desirable ground. But does the ground standard help us understand what “military doctors” actually means? Is “grapefruit” an accurate or valid definition for “military doctors”? Of course not. For the purpose of clarity, this example is deliberately extreme.<sup>12</sup> The flawed logic of consequentialism, however, also applies when the gap in accuracy between two definitions is much closer.

Similar logic applies to another argument that consequentialists often use as a standard: “education.” For example, assume that the resolution is, “The United States should legalize marijuana,” and that the affirmative plan legalizes the sale of the drug. In this case, the negative team might read a topicality argument in which they define “marijuana” as “prostitution,” arguing that a discussion of prostitution would be far more educational than a discussion of cannabis. After all, the issue of prostitution more directly facilitates a discussion of important issues such as violence against women, sexual discrimination, and gender biases in society, all of which are important issues that should feature prominently in debate. Just as above, the team advocating in favor of a counterintuitive definition may be correct that adopting their definition would yield a desirable consequence in the debate round. However, the fact that some educational benefit would result from this definition does not prove that “prostitution” is an accurate way of defining “marijuana.”<sup>13</sup>

In each of the above examples, the teams have actually critiqued the topic and advocated a different topic in its place. Rather than attempt to accurately define the words in the topic as a means of understanding the resolution they are required to debate, the teams have proposed a

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<sup>12</sup> We also deliberately use hypotheticals rather than real examples from debate rounds so as not to criticize debaters or judges for their behavior or analysis in actual rounds.

<sup>13</sup> Once again, we use an extreme definition for illustrative effect. However, consider a debate in which the negative team defined “marijuana” as hemp. In that case, the interpretation may seem justifiable on its face. The negative may also persuasively argue that using the “hemp” interpretation in the round would provide useful education. However, “hemp” is not a valid definition for “marijuana,” as *cannabis sativa* and *cannabis indica* are distinct species.

different interpretation of the topic and then identified definitions that will enable that interpretation. For example, rather than debate about the deployment of military doctors, the affirmative would prefer to debate the deployment of grapefruits. Instead of a debate about the costs and benefits of marijuana legalization, the negative team would rather engage in a discussion about prostitution. The teams may even be correct that their preferred topic would in some sense be “better”: more interesting, more educational, and/or more balanced. However, neither team can demonstrate that their proposed resolution results from an accurate or appropriate definition of the terms in the resolution that was written by the topic committee. As such, this process is perfectly consistent with a kritik of topicality in which teams argue they should not be forced to comply with the topic because discussing an alternative issue would be more valuable. When teams use consequentialist arguments to justify their definitions, they are actually kritiking topicality without realizing it.<sup>14</sup>

### **Why is Accuracy Important?**

Why is it essential to accurately define the resolution? As Brownlee (1981, p. 32) argued, “for meaningful debate to occur both teams must share an understanding of the focus of the topic.” Put simply, in order to have a productive debate the two sides must first agree on the issue they are debating. A common understanding of the resolution can only exist if both teams follow similar methods of analysis when they confront the topic before the round.

The easiest means of ensuring this is for both teams to begin their preparation by defining the words and phrases that are contained within the topic as accurately as possible. The resolution should be understood as the sentence that is formed when all of the relevant terms are

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<sup>14</sup> This is the most charitable characterization of the argument. However, because teams rarely recognize that the consequentialist approach is nontraditional, they seldom offer an explanation for why accuracy-seeking standards should be forgone in favor of consequentialist arguments. Thus, even when viewed as a kritik, the consequentialist argument typically lacks explicit links and impacts.

accurately defined. This becomes the only predictable interpretation of the resolution and the only topic for which both teams are obliged to prepare. Only after the terms in the resolution have been rigorously defined and the overall resolution has been interpreted should teams begin to brainstorm arguments that may fall within its bounds.

Imagine an alternative world in which the two sides speculated about possible interpretations of the topic without first defining the included terms. Their competitive biases, personal histories, and varying familiarity with commonly used debate arguments would lead them to distinct—perhaps even entirely exclusive—interpretations of the resolution. As such, they would have different opinions about the ground to which either side had access and the literature that surrounded the topic. Only by following a consistent method of analysis that begins with a genuine effort to define the terms included within the topic in the absence of personal expectations and competitive biases can we expect teams to arrive at interpretations of the resolution that are consistent with one another.

### **Accuracy as a Litmus Test**

We propose a new litmus test for determining whether or not arguments are appropriate standards to assess topicality. True standards should evaluate the accuracy of a single definition. They should not evaluate the consequences of using that definition in the debate round or the desirability of interpreting an entire resolution on the basis of that definition.<sup>15</sup> We provide a list of legitimate, accuracy-seeking standards in the next section.

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<sup>15</sup> Murphy (1994) also attempted to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate standards. He argued that “truth-based standards assume resolitional focus and are concerned with finding the most realistic definition of the term involved... they are the only standards designed to arrive at the actual meaning of the resolitional sentence.” Unfortunately, even this depiction conflates standards—which define individual terms—with consequentialist arguments, which evaluate entire resolutions.

Consequentialist arguments do not help debaters identify accurate definitions for individual terms. For example, if the affirmative argues that their counter-definition is desirable because it ‘improves ground for both teams,’ that argument would fail our litmus test. Although the team has argued why using the definition might yield a desirable interpretation for the overall resolution, they have not explained why the definition is an accurate means of defining the term in question. Similarly, arguments that a particular definition will facilitate ‘improved education’ do not demonstrate the accuracy of that definition. Instead, they claim that the debate round would be improved if a particular definition was used to interpret the resolution as a whole. Once again, this does not comply with the accuracy-seeking model because the inherent accuracy of the definition itself is not addressed.

In summary, the consequentialist arguments that the teams offer are not actually standards. Standards are criteria that allow participants to select a definition that best and most accurately encapsulates the meaning of a given word. They are not criteria by which the desirability of an entire resolution is judged.

### **Example Standards**

There are a variety of genuine accuracy-seeking standards that can be used in support of topicality definitions, including the following:<sup>16</sup>

#### **(1) Limits.**

A specific definition may be preferable because it is more limited and therefore more precise than any alternatives. For example, one possible definition of “terrorism” is “the threat or use of violence against noncombatants.” That definition, however, is quite broad. Should

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<sup>16</sup> Our argument is not that all of the following standards are equally desirable (indeed, several stand in conflict with one another). Rather, these standards seek to demonstrate why defining a term in a particular way is accurate. Debaters would still need to argue which of these standards should be most preferred as tools for evaluation.

hostage-takings be considered acts of terrorism? What about mass murders or school shootings? All such acts would fall within the umbrella of this definition. An alternative definition might specify that terrorism involves “the threat or use of violence against noncombatants that is designed to advance the perpetrator’s political goals.” By requiring that the act of violence is politically-motivated, this definition is more precise and limiting than the former.

The ‘Limits’ standard is important because it facilitates a nuanced understanding of the terms under discussion. As we argue above, a fundamental tenet of any debate is that both teams must identify a common starting point for the round. The resolution provides a focal point for their preparation, but the teams must do more than agree on the language of the topic: they must also define that topic identically. If the teams’ definitions are inconsistent a productive debate is impossible. Teams are most likely to arrive at a common understanding of the topic when they precisely define and limit the meaning of each term in the resolution. Rather than debate about any acts of violence that are conducted against civilians, the debaters now understand that they should focus on acts of violence that are carried out for political reasons. This allows them to distinguish between conventional crimes and genuine acts of terrorism.<sup>17</sup>

## **(2) Intent to Define.**

In casual circumstances words are often defined carelessly, without the explicit intention of defining a term as accurately as possible. For example, a reporter describing “development assistance” in an article might include the casual explanation that such assistance is “aid given by one government to support the growth of another country.” Unfortunately, in most cases, offhand

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<sup>17</sup> The limits standard described here is not the same as a contemporary “limits” argument. This standard does not argue that restrictive definitions are useful for debate because they narrow the number of viable affirmative plans. Rather, limited definitions are preferable because they are likely to have been crafted more selectively based on a sober judgment of what a term does and does not encapsulate. Thus, limited and precise definitions can better inform us of what the terms in the resolution actually mean.

claims such as the one described are made without careful consideration. They provide readers with a vague understanding of the term being discussed, but little more. Rather than settle for such ‘casual-use’ definitions, debaters should seek definitions that were intentionally crafted to convey a particular concept as accurately as possible.

The authors of most dictionaries, for example, investigate the etymology of the terms that they define. Similarly, when scientific researchers study a particular phenomenon, they often begin their analysis by listing boundary conditions or specific characteristics that define their subject matter.<sup>18</sup> Legislation is a third area in which definitions are carefully crafted and intentionally defined. A debater may be able to reference a definition that is used in a law or bill and then argue that the definition was deliberately selected with sound justification. This is particularly relevant for definitions that relate to highly complex or technical issues, such as the environment or healthcare. Overall, an “intent to define” is good because it indicates that the definition was carefully crafted and is intended to be used in academia or policymaking.

### **(3) Field Context & Term of Art.**

The field context standard proposes that literature on the topic is focused in a specific way and that a particular definition supports that focus. For example, in some countries “capital punishment” does not refer to the death penalty because those governments do not execute criminals. Instead, the term might refer to a fiduciary penalty (i.e., a fine on “capital”). However, if the resolution is “The United States Federal Government should promote human rights in the criminal justice system by banning capital punishment,” then the debaters should acknowledge

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<sup>18</sup> For example, an author whose book focuses on military alliances might begin by defining alliances and explaining how they differ from other seemingly similar arrangements such as alignments or protectorates.

that in the context of a discussion about the United States and the criminal justice system “capital punishment” consistently refers to the execution of criminals.<sup>19</sup>

The “term of art” standard is similar to the field context standard. A term of art is a phrase that is commonly used in contemporary practice to refer to a particular object or class of objects. For example, if the resolution is “The United States Federal Government should pass the Health Care Bill,” and a particular health care bill is currently being debated in Congress, then the phrase “the Health Care Bill” within the resolution can most accurately be defined as a term of art referring to the current piece of legislation, even though hundreds of other health care bills have been proposed in the past. Likewise, if the resolution included the term “the blue dogs,” then the words should be defined as a collective noun referring to a caucus of Democratic U.S. Representatives.

#### **(4) Common-Person & Source Credibility.**

Teams may argue that “common-person” or “common-understanding” definitions are preferable because they allow others to better access the round (Patterson & Zarefsky, 1983). Contrastingly, teams might argue that their source is more credible on the issue in question (Naylor & Unger, 1971). For example, if the Department of Defense defines a specific military term in a certain way, then their preferred definition is likely a more accurate method of defining the term than the average person’s interpretation.

#### **(5) Resolutional Context / Grammar.**

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<sup>19</sup> Field contextual definitions often go hand-in-hand with definitions that are intentionally defined. For example, when debating legal issues, a definition from Black’s Law Dictionary is both field contextual and intentionally defined in a particular way. As such, it may be superior to either a definition from a generalist dictionary, which is intentionally defined but not field contextual, or a casual definition from a lawyer, which is field contextual but not intentionally defined.

Finally, grammatical rules and interactions between the words within the resolution can inform which definitions are most accurate (Herbeck & Katsulas, 1985; Parson, 1981). For example, assume that the resolution is “The United States should increase its military support for Japan.” In that case, although “military support” can be defined in a wide variety of ways, teams should also consider the impact of the term “increase” in the resolution. Because “increase” implies that the “military support” must be raised from a pre-existing amount, it thereby restricts the range of potential definitions for “military support” to those forms of support that the United States currently provides to Japan.<sup>20</sup> Otherwise the resolution would ask that the United States “provide new forms of military support to Japan.” Thus, the grammar and overall context of the resolution are often important in determining how the terms included within the topic can be most accurately defined. This process of justifying a definition by demonstrating the interrelationship of multiple words within the resolution is sometimes also referred to as “defining a phrase.”

### **Topicality as a Voting Issue**

#### **Why is Topicality a Voting Issue?**

In order to develop a coherent and logical method for assessing topicality, one must recognize the four fundamental reasons why topicality is a voting issue. In short, these include the allocation of predictable ground, the provision of topic specific education, the fact that topicality is a rule of the game, and the jurisdictional expertise of the judge. First, when the affirmative fails to defend a topical plan, predictable ground is skewed. As explained in the previous section, prior to the round both teams should first identify the most accurate definition of the terms within the resolution and then understand the resolution on the basis of those terms.

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<sup>20</sup> This argument functions similarly to the semantic analysis of “bound modifiers.” See, for example, Palmer, 1974 and McNally, 2005. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this recommendation.

The negative team's preparatory burden is to develop answers against any affirmative plan that complies with that particular understanding of the resolution.<sup>21</sup> Whenever the plan is non-topical, the affirmative has gained access to ground that the negative could not have predicted. Likewise, the negative side has lost access to ground that was predictable given an accurately defined topic. Even if the new distribution of ground favors of the negative, it does so in an unpredictable way. This is one of the fundamental reasons why topicality exists, and is especially pertinent in parlis where prep time is highly restricted and where negative teams lack files or blocks that can aid them in debating unpredictable plans.

Second, when the affirmative plan fails to comply with the resolution, topic-specific education is automatically lost. Because the plan takes an action that falls outside the purview of the topic, a component of the discussion and education that occurs in the round is non-topical. Similarly, a non-topical plan inherently skirts any discussion of issues that might have been raised if the plan was topical but which are no longer pertinent. It is possible that the two teams might receive more education from an improperly interpreted topic than one whose terms are accurately defined. Indeed, some may argue that the shift in information might even be desirable. However, the education that teams receive is no longer topic-specific.

For example, "military assistance," as defined by the Department of Defense, covers a list of seven categories that include the sale of military equipment, de-mining assistance, giving money directly to another country's military, etc. If the resolution was "The United States should increase its military assistance to South Korea" and the plan stationed 10,000 additional American troops in South Korea, teams might still receive education about US-Korean relations

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<sup>21</sup> Expecting the negative to prepare against every possible interpretation of the resolution regardless of accuracy would pose an insurmountable burden. Thus, the negative need only prepare responses to plans that comply with the interpretation of the topic that emerges when all terms are defined as accurately as possible.

and about how North Korea or China might react. They might even receive additional education that they would not have enjoyed under a topical plan, such as a discussion of how additional American troops would function in Korea. However, the teams lose education about an actual increase in military assistance, because the plan increases military personnel instead. Thus, the augmented information is no longer topic-specific as conceived by the framers of the resolution. Whenever the affirmative plan is non-topical according to the most accurate definition of words in the resolution, some amount of topic-specific education is automatically lost. This is especially relevant in *parli* because the topic changes every round and thus education about the resolution at hand is novel and unique.

Third, many debate formats codify the requirement of topicality into the rules. For example, the NPDA Rules of Debating stipulate that “the proposition team must affirm the resolution by presenting and defending a sufficient case for that resolution... [i]f, at the end of the debate, the judge believes that the proposition team has supported and successfully defended the resolution, they will be declared the winner.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the official NFA-LD rules stipulate that “All affirmative proposals must fit within the jurisdiction established by the NFA LD resolution... Topicality is a voting issue.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, affirmative plans are required to be topical and the affirmative team cannot win the debate if they fail to comply with this burden.

Fourth, in NFA-LD, policy debate, and other formats in which teams debate a single topic for an extended amount of time, topicality is often considered a voting issue for jurisdictional reasons. Topicality in debates is similar to jurisdiction in a court of law. If a case falls outside of the judge’s area of expertise or authority, then judges must acknowledge that they

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<sup>22</sup> “NPDA Rules of Debating (Modified June, 2008).” National Parliamentary Debate Association. <http://www.parlidebate.org/pdf/npdarules-0608.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> “NFA By-Laws (Modified 2015).” National Forensics Association. <http://www.nationalforensics.org/about-nfa/governing-documents>

lack the jurisdiction to evaluate that case. In debate events with stable topics the judge develops expertise only on the issues that relate to the resolution. If a plan is not topical, the judge does not have expert knowledge on the area that the plan discusses. As a result, the judge is unable to render a qualified and fair decision when evaluating a non-topical plan. Maintaining a jurisdictional voting issue on topicality is necessary to ensure high quality judging. As such, debates are limited to topics about which the critics are qualified to adjudicate.

Finally, we note that “in-round abuse” is unnecessary and uninformative with respect to the voting issues on topicality. Predictable ground automatically shifts when the affirmative plan fails to comply with the most accurate interpretation of the topic, regardless of whether or not the abuse is visible. From the beginning of the round, the negative team has lost access to ground. The negative is also uncertain whether the affirmative team will choose to access the new ground that they obtain by virtue of a noncompliant plan. Likewise, the affirmative enjoys an automatic preparatory advantage. By defining the topic inaccurately, they throw their opponents off-guard, once again shifting predictable ground. These forms of abuse are every bit as “realized” as a no-linked disadvantage or a link-turn made possible by a non-topical plan. Finally, by zeroing in on the issue of ground, the question of abuse sidesteps three of the four voting issues. In light of the education, rules, and jurisdictional voting issues, the presence of abuse is largely irrelevant.

### **Why is Topicality Preeminent?**

Topicality as a voting issue must take precedence in the round for several reasons. First and most fundamentally, if other arguments were able to supersede topicality, teams would consistently use those arguments to justify their introduction of non-topical plans. If judges failed to enforce the topicality requirement, advocating a non-topical plan would instantly become the preferred choice for most affirmative teams. After all, they would be free to select a biased topic

or defend an imbalanced plan during every round. Through trial and error, most teams would eventually settle on the single case or small set of cases that yielded the greatest bias in their favor.

In the process, the overall quality of debate would decrease, as would the value of debating. For example, in-round clash would be significantly diminished in a world without topic rotation or topic balance. Freed from the burden of topicality, affirmative teams would select topics or advocacies that minimized the amount of viable ground available to their opponents (e.g., “Racism is bad”). Similarly, education and incentives for research would also be reduced in conjunction with the removal of topic rotation.

The long-term consequence of ignoring topicality is the death of the activity. With no incentive to follow the topic, affirmative debaters will advocate whatever pet-case provides the best chance for a win. This has three immediate ramifications, all of which threaten the future of the activity. First, the negative side, having to debate against their opponent’s strongest and most thoroughly researched arguments in every debate, will have a nearly impossible task to win a judge’s decision. Realizing this, students would choose not to participate rather than continue to suffer through an unfair and heavily redundant activity. New students would refuse to join debate and current students would drop out quickly once they realized the topics never mattered. The fun of debating different topics and defending various resolutions and the joy of the activity would be lost. Also, without guidelines provided by a fair resolution and a topical affirmative, the competitive aspect of the game would be eroded. Tic-tac-toe is boring for skilled players because they know how to guarantee a stalemate every time. Debate without topicality would end up in a similar predicament: all teams would finish tournaments with even records, having won every affirmative debate and lost each negative round. Second, parliamentary debate would lose its essential quality of topic rotation. Without the capacity to distinguish themselves from

teams in other formats, many parliamentary debate programs would be at risk of folding or switching over to another form of debate. Finally, if school administrators became aware that affirmative teams argued the same set of biased issues every round, then administrators would recognize that this implied an absence of traditional benefits of debate and would likely reduce their support for university debate programs. At the very least, administrators would likely determine that program directors and debate coaches were irrelevant. Minimal coaching is required without topic rotation, research, or relevant prep time. Unfortunately, student-run programs are much more likely to suffer funding cuts than programs that are run by faculty members.

### **Consequentialist Critiques of Topicality**

If alternative—albeit inaccurate—interpretations of the resolution exist that could provide better ground or education, why should teams debate the resolution as it can most accurately be defined? We propose a series of four answers to this question. First, as described above, predictable ground and topic-specific education are inherently linked to the resolution. Only when the affirmative plan complies with the most accurate definitions of the words within the resolution can these benefits be obtained. Although debaters often attempt to justify alternative topics on the basis of the ground or education that such propositions would provide, they cannot show that such benefits offset the loss of predictable ground or topic-specific education.

Second, logical barriers impede the evaluation of ground and education claims. Teams often assert that defining the resolution in a particular way will improve or provide access to preferable ground. However, it is impossible to confirm these claims within the context of the round. Debaters cannot hope to review all of the potential combinations of arguments that are available to each side. Likewise, the judge cannot possibly evaluate the value of distinctions in

ground between two different interpretations of a topic or assess whether potential increases in education would be more or less desirable than the topical education. Judges cannot predict whether the alternative education is unique, whether the competitors have already been exposed to it, or whether the discussion of such an issue would actually occur even if the topic was altered accordingly. Given the substantial uncertainty inherent to speculations about potential topic alterations, consequentialist arguments should not serve as the basis for rejecting topicality.<sup>24</sup>

Additionally, even if altering the topic within the debate could theoretically provide access to preferable ground or education, those benefits will not materialize in the current round. Allowing one team to redefine the topic without providing fair warning to the other side would sacrifice predictability, impede preparation, and reduce the quality of clash. The non-topical ground and education that one team seeks cannot be realized in the current debate because the issue of topicality has already subsumed the focus of the round. Finally, resolutions change from round to round and thus a precedent for redefinition of the topic in the advocated manner cannot be set for future rounds. The immediate and guaranteed abuse that occurs as a result of reinterpreting the topic vastly outweighs speculative benefits that are unlikely to materialize.

Third, even if ground and education claims could be reliably used to compare potential resolutions, the debaters are not appropriate agents for that process. As described above, the competitors do not have an incentive to rigorously analyze the resolution or to select a fair, balanced, and educational topic. Rather, they are biased in favor of resolutions and definitions that create preferential benefits for their side. In many forms of debate, the realm of possible definitions is at least constrained by evidence. However, in parliamentary debate teams often

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Murphy (1994).

offer their own “interpretations” of the words within the resolution. Thus, as soon as judges begin to tolerate consequentialist justifications for reinterpretation of the resolution all boundaries on the topic are instantly removed, as illustrated by the grapefruit example in the previous section.

Given the presence of competitive pressures, the goal of selecting topics should be left up to impartial topic-writing committees who enjoy significantly more resources than competitors have access to during prep time. Once the resolution has been released, its overall quality should be irrelevant to the debaters—the topic has been determined and cannot be changed. Even if they believe the topic is deeply flawed or could easily be improved with minor changes, the debaters are nevertheless generally compelled to debate the specific and unaltered resolution at hand as per its most accurate definition.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, as described in the previous section, over the long run the erosion of the topicality would do significant damage to the activity. The death of the activity becomes increasingly probable every time a judge chooses to disregard topicality. By allowing the affirmative to defend a non-topical plan, the judge chips away at the norm that affirmative plans must be topical. The consequences of that decision vastly outweigh the benefits that any individual team could obtain by avoiding the topic in a particular round.

### **Competing Interpretations and Reasonability**

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<sup>25</sup> This is particularly important in an event where the topic changes every round. Whereas in policy debate it is possible that over the course of the season arguments can be made that gradually alter teams’ understanding of the topic and push discussion in a particular direction, such evolution is impossible in parliamentary debate where there is no guarantee that a resolution will be repeated. Thus, the automatic abuse against the negative team that occurs when the affirmative team fails to comply with the topic in any particular round far outweighs the benefits of pushing an understanding of the resolution—and therefore subsequent discussion—in the direction of a more desirable topic because that discussion will never materialize.

When judges are asked how they evaluate topicality, many begin by referencing either “competing interpretations” or “reasonability.”<sup>26</sup> However, neither concept has a commonly agreed-upon definition or process of evaluation. Indeed, many of the same judges who acknowledge the ubiquity of the two phrases openly admit their uncertainty about what either argument entails. In this section, we show that both are widely misinterpreted by competitors and judges. We also show that in current practice, the arguments are rarely articulated or applied in a logically sound manner. However, all is not lost. Our second argument is that a coherent explanation for “competing interpretations” does exist and that this can serve as an important component of the rationale judges should use when evaluating topicality.

“Competing interpretations” should convey the idea that topicality is a process of selecting between distinct definitions. In effect, the definitions that are offered by the affirmative and negative are evaluated against one another, and the better of the two definitions is selected. In accordance with the preceding section, debaters should use accuracy-seeking standards to select the more accurate of two definitions. Once selected, that definition is used to interpret the resolution. However, in practice, competing interpretations is often implemented quite differently.

Rather than attempt to identify the most accurate definition, competitors and judges often use “competing interpretations” as a means by which they can select their desired definition on the basis of ground, education, or other impacts. Thus, a “competing interpretations” debate often sounds very similar to a debate about substantive issues: the debaters argue that selecting their definition will lead to particular impacts in the round. The judge then weighs the respective impacts associated with either definition and picks whichever one is more desirable. For

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<sup>26</sup> Of 93 judges who discussed topicality in the philosophies they submitted for the 2015 NPDA tournament, 36 discussed “competing interpretations.”

instance, it is not uncommon for judges to begin a decision with a statement along the lines of, ‘I begin with a lens of competing interpretations, and end up voting for the negative because their definition focuses the resolution in a way that would provide better ground.’ This type of “competing interpretations” rationale for evaluating topicality is incorrect: the goal of topicality is not to sculpt a resolution that would be desirable to debate—that, after all, is the role of the topic committee—but rather to understand what the resolution means when it is accurately defined and then to test whether the affirmative plan complies with that topic.

“Reasonability,” on the other hand, has two common variants. In the first form, which we label “absolute reasonability,” definitions are not evaluated relative to one another at all. Nearly all words can be defined in multiple ways. “Absolute reasonability” argues that the affirmative plan should be accepted as long as it complies with at least one definition of the words in the resolution. This form of reasonability was for many years the prevailing means of evaluating topicality within parliamentary debate, where judges either offered significant discretion to or even rewarded creative affirmative teams who defined words in unorthodox, irregular, and inaccurate ways. For example, if the resolution is “Chicago should submit a bid for the Olympics,” an absolute reasonability framework would permit an affirmative plan in which Chicago submitted a bid for the Olympic Mountains, which are colloquially referred to as the “Olympics.” No comparative evaluation of differing definitions is required; as long as the affirmative can demonstrate that “the Olympic Mountains” is a valid definition of “Olympics,” then the definition is acceptable and the judge should not reject the affirmative plan on the basis of topicality.

The second form of reasonability, which we label “bounded reasonability,” differs in that all definitions are not automatically accepted. Rather, definitions must meet some minimum—

and often arbitrary—threshold of coherence and accuracy. However, once the affirmative’s definition has crossed this threshold, then it ought to be accepted even if the negative team’s definition is slightly better. This argument is often invoked when debating particularly technical or nuanced terms. For example, imagine that the resolution is “The United Nations should increase environmental assistance to one or more countries in the Greater Horn of Africa.” Unfortunately, the United Nations does not utilize a consistent definition of the “Greater Horn.” Thus, the affirmative might argue that the Greater Horn, as defined by Switzerland, includes eight countries: Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Yemen. The negative, in contrast, might argue that the phrase “Greater Horn of Africa” was originally coined by the United States Agency for International Development and that their definition includes *eleven* countries: Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. Although the negative’s definition may be superior to the affirmative in terms of historic accuracy, under “bounded reasonability” the judge might determine that both definitions were sufficiently strong given that they were each endorsed by U.N. member states. As such, the judge would consider plans that fell within either definition to be topical.

Neither absolute reasonability nor bounded reasonability offers a logically coherent approach to topicality. In fact, both err significantly in that they disregard the importance of accuracy. By sidestepping a search for the most accurate definition of the words within the resolution and then interpreting the resolution in that context, both reasonability approaches forfeit predictable ground and topic specific education.

When they evaluate or debate topicality, judges and competitors should determine which of the definitions under contest is the most accurate definition. They do this by adopting a

competing interpretations framework in which they evaluate each of the contested definitions using accuracy-based standards. The definition that has the greatest degree of accuracy based on those standards is selected as the appropriate definition for the remainder of the debate. Then the judge should determine whether or not the affirmative plan is compliant with that definition. Finally, they vote affirmative or negative based on the plan's compliance.

### **Topicality and Framework**

Perhaps the most striking changes that transpired in debate over the past three decades were the rise of the critical affirmative advocacy, the introduction of performance and identity arguments, and the spread of social justice cases that wholly reject the notion of topicality. In the contemporary environment, it is now common for affirmative teams to forgo advocacies that are grounded in government action or that can be written into concrete texts. Likewise, debaters frequently dispute the long-held assumption that the affirmative side's preeminent burden is to present and defend a topical plan.

Against such arguments topicality initially appears to fall flat. How can the negative side leverage 'T' against an opponent who deliberately chooses not to present a plan, who happily acknowledges a topicality violation, and/or who challenges the inherent concept of topical restrictions? Although topicality serves as a useful mechanism for evaluating the relative accuracy of potential definitions and for testing the plan's compliance with the resolution, the argument—at least in current practice—seemingly provides no justification for its own importance. In modern topicality shells, the voting issues that we described in the previous section are rarely made explicit. More often than not, competitors merely rattle off a list of buzzwords about ground and education before turning the page to a new position.

Debaters' marginalization of the topicality voting issues has given rise to a perception that 'T' is an inadequate response to critical arguments. As a result, rather than challenge social justice cases using topicality, negative teams have turned to a new argument: framework. When they engage in framework, the negative side argues that the minimal burden for the affirmative should be the defense of a topical plan. They also argue that judges should reject arguments that do not directly relate to that plan.<sup>27</sup> Put another way, framework provides further support for the philosophy that underpins topicality: that the arguments in a debate round should reflect the resolution.

Unfortunately, the relationship between framework and topicality has blurred over time, and participants often struggle to properly distinguish the arguments. Two consequences have emerged from this confusion. First, topicality is increasingly viewed as either subordinate or incidental to framework, when in reality it is—at least when properly argued—itsself a sufficient response to many affirmative advocacies. Second, by blending topicality and framework, negative teams have neglected to develop and consolidate true framework arguments. In sum, the lack of a transparent boundary between the two arguments has simultaneously occasioned a reversal in the quality with which topicality is debated and also stymied the evolution of framework.

In this section, we attempt to resolve these issues by clarifying areas of contrast and convergence between the two arguments. We make two primary claims. First, topicality and framework significantly overlap. Many arguments that are commonly referred to as framework are little more than traditional topicality voters that have been rediscovered, regrouped, and

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<sup>27</sup> More broadly, framework arguments attempt to define the relationship between the teams, the judge, and the ballot. They answer the question, "On what basis should the judge award the ballot to either side? What argumentative forms and relationships provide valid or sufficient reason to vote?"

re-labeled. These arguments should be reintegrated into topicality proper and should no longer be identified as part of framework. However, neither should framework be entirely ignored. Our second point is that a separate set of framework arguments genuinely do stand apart from topicality, although they are complementary to it. Claims that the plan should serve as the focus of the debate and that alternative rationales for voting are potentially damaging to the activity should be recognized as true framework arguments and, as such, should be further distinguished from topicality. In the remainder of the section, we illustrate the differences between each set of arguments and the importance of clarifying their respective functions in relation to ‘T.’

### **Traditional Framework and Topicality Voters**

We refer to the first set of framework arguments as “traditional” framework. Such arguments are made by the negative side to combat affirmative teams who argue that the issue of topicality should be overlooked or even entirely dissolved. For example, the affirmative team may deliberately present a non-topical plan—or decline to present any plan at all—and then critique the concept of topicality on philosophical grounds. In response, the negative must demonstrate the importance of topicality and argue that its erosion as a preeminent voting issue would detrimentally affect the activity. In this case, the framework arguments made by the negative are nothing more than an expanded discussion of topicality’s importance as a voter.

In fact, it is only recently that such arguments have been labeled as framework. For many years, they were included as part of topicality. However, as emphasis shifted away from traditional topicality voters and toward consequentialist arguments such as ground and education, the original justification for topicality as a voting issue was displaced. Instead, the traditional topicality voter arguments were moved into an independent framework position. When debaters offer framework arguments about the loss of predictable ground or topic-specific education that

inevitably result when the affirmative plan sidesteps the resolution, they are, in reality, merely reciting the voting issues that they should include in every topicality shell.

Most importantly, these arguments can be successfully applied whenever a topicality violation exists. If the affirmative side fails to present a plan, then topicality is a valid rejoinder. In the absence of a topical plan, predictable ground is inherently skewed in favor of the affirmative and against the negative. Similarly, topic-specific education is reduced because a topical plan does not exist to provide a locus for discussion and debate. Finally, debate judges are trained to evaluate a concrete plan relative to other specified policies or advocacies. If the affirmative fails to provide a plan that falls within the bounds of the topic, then the judge lacks the jurisdiction to endorse the affirmative team. Although the affirmative side will likely critique the concept of topicality, a 'kritik' of topicality simply calls into question the importance of the topicality voting issues. If the negative team has established that a topicality violation exists, it need only leverage its own topicality voters against whatever justification the affirmative side offers for disregarding them.

By divorcing the traditional voting issue arguments from topicality and instead labeling them as framework, competitors have devalued topicality and ushered in the perception that the argument is unimportant. The reality is quite the opposite: topicality—when accompanied by its traditional voting issues—is a legitimate and powerful response against many critical affirmatives cases.

### **Generalized Framework, the Plan, and the Ballot**

Despite its importance, topicality is not always the answer. There are also scenarios in which the negative cannot hope to win by leveraging topicality alone. These situations can usefully be grouped into two categories. First, many affirmative teams pay lip-service to

topicality by presenting a topical plan but refusing to *defend* it. In these cases, the affirmative often argues that it is only endorsing the plan ‘as a starting point for discussion.’ Negative teams often respond to these arguments by claiming that the affirmative should defend the plan’s instrumental adoption. They frequently also include definitional support for this argument by referencing the presence of terms such as “Resolved:” or “should” in the resolution. As such, at face value this argument seems similar to topicality. However, we argue that it is actually quite distinct, and that the difference between the two arguments should be recognized.

These framework arguments differ from topicality in that the negative side has not attempted to define the topic accurately. Instead, they have used consequentialist arguments to justify their claim. Although they argue that the terms “Resolved:” and “should” imply that the affirmative should defend the resolution instrumentally, these are not accurate definitions of the words in question. The negative side may be correct on principle that a genuine defense of the affirmative plan is overwhelmingly good for debate—indeed, we personally endorse this position—but the support for the argument is not found in the resolution itself. No matter how accurately the negative side defines the words in the resolution, no definitions will explicitly command the affirmative to defend the plan instrumentally. The question under discussion in this scenario is not “What do the words in the topic mean and hence what resolution must the affirmative plan fall within?” but rather “Is it sufficient that the affirmative team merely present a plan, or should they also be required to defend it?” The issue of topicality can usefully inform the latter question, because if the plan becomes irrelevant in the debate then the round may proceed as if the affirmative violated topicality. Nevertheless, topicality on its own is not a sufficient answer. Instead, the debaters must make framework arguments about why a topical

plan should serve as the focus for the debate and what harms will result if this approach is violated.<sup>28</sup>

The second situation in which topicality is not a sufficient response against a critical advocacy is when the affirmative defends a topical plan but argues that the judge can also vote affirmative for reasons unrelated to the plan itself.<sup>29</sup> For example, the affirmative might argue that their method of presentation carries with it some intrinsic benefits that ought to be rewarded. This is often the case when teams incorporate personal narratives, poetry, or hip-hop into their performance, or when they argue that their ‘advocacy’ in the round is broader than the plan alone.

As in the previous scenario, topicality is not on its own a sufficient rebuttal against such an advocacy. The affirmative team has agreed to defend a topical plan and so no topicality violation is present. Instead of reading topicality, the negative team must respond by arguing in favor of plan-focused debate.<sup>30</sup> If the plan can be outweighed by alternative arguments or performative benefits, then the plan is once again rendered irrelevant in the context of the round. Thus, the debate may proceed as if the affirmative plan was not topical, and the impacts of topicality may occur. However, demonstrating that this is the case is the role of framework rather than topicality alone.

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<sup>28</sup> Put one way, the role of the judge is to vote for or against the affirmative *plan* rather than for or against either of the *teams*. The only exception to this rationale is when the judge is compelled to reject one of the sides in the interests of the activity. For example, if the affirmative team behaves in a manner that jeopardizes the welfare of the activity—by, for instance, violating the rules or harassing their opponents—then the judge may choose to vote against the team directly rather than reject the plan.

<sup>29</sup> If the affirmative chooses not to defend a topical plan at all, then ‘T’ is an acceptable response. The negative side can attempt to outweigh the affirmative’s advocacy—as well as the kritik of topicality, if one exists—by referencing the voting issues from topicality. However, the negative may also benefit by making framework arguments that demonstrate why the affirmative’s method is undesirable relative to plan-focused debate. In many ways, topicality and framework are mutually-reinforcing.

<sup>30</sup> We do not suggest that this is the negative’s only option. In some circumstances, it may also be strategic for the negative to operate within the affirmative’s proposed framework.

Finally, in both of the above cases the negative may argue that the affirmative side's method of advocacy is independently undesirable relative to plan-focused or traditional debate. Negative teams may claim, for example, that personal narratives foster divisions within the debate community, that audiences often misinterpret irony in harmful ways, that poetry is difficult for judges to fairly evaluate relative to line-by-line argumentation, or that discussing the relative merits of government policies is more educational than promoting social movements. These points and others like them are fundamentally distinct from topicality and so should be considered genuine framework arguments. When topicality and framework are merged, such arguments often receive too little attention from the affirmative and negative alike.

In summary, topicality and framework fulfill distinct—albeit complementary—roles. The purposes of topicality are threefold: the definition and standards allow debaters to accurately define the resolution, the violation determines whether the affirmative plan is compliant with the resolution, and the voters demonstrate why nonconforming plans ought not be endorsed by the judge. In contrast, framework arguments explain why it is essential that the affirmative defend their plan and why the judge should disregard arguments that do not directly relate to that plan. Put together, 'T' and framework jointly promote an approach in which debaters engage the resolution. Topicality argues that the plan should fit the resolution, while framework argues that the plan should serve as the focus for the debate as a whole. Combined, the two arguments endorse a format in which the resolution, filtered through the lens of the plan, is the focus of each round.

### **Potential Limitations**

Critics of an accuracy-seeking approach may complain that it provides no rationale for weighing between appropriate standards when they come into conflict. For example, consider a

situation in which the affirmative team argues that their preferred definition is the most accurate because it was historically utilized by the organization that coined the term, while the negative argues that the relevant literature has evolved over time and an updated definition is necessary in the context of contemporary analysis. In this case, selecting between the original definition and a more recent means of defining the term may be difficult.

Fortunately, arguments tend to evolve organically as necessity dictates, so a means of evaluating contrasting standards is likely to appear as a result of debates in which such arguments are required. Debaters will quickly design arguments that explain how certain standards are more likely to yield accurate definitions and therefore ought to be preferred over others.<sup>31</sup> For example, a reviewer for this article questioned whether the accuracy-seeking approach would reify “modernist, ethnocentric assumptions about language” and asked how accuracy-seeking arguments can “subvert hegemonic discursive systems”?<sup>32</sup> To these questions, we have two responses. First, these complaints are not unique to the accuracy-seeking approach. They can also be levied against consequentialism or any other paradigm for evaluating topicality. After all, a consequentialist process for evaluating topicality still requires participants to select a definition and exclude opponents on the basis of that linguistic choice.

Our second response to the reviewer’s question is that accuracy-seeking fares much better in addressing these problems than do other topicality paradigms. Within an accuracy-seeking paradigm, debaters can object to specific definitions precisely because modernist, ethnocentric

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<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the problem of selecting among different standards is not unique to an accuracy-seeking approach to topicality; the concern applies equally to the consequentialist framework. If the relative benefits of ground and education can be assessed, so too can genuine standards be weighed against one another based on the degree to which they contribute to accuracy.

<sup>32</sup> We object to the notion that debaters should be allowed to discard or reinterpret the topic to facilitate whatever discussion they desire. The previous sections of this paper illustrate why the attenuation of topicality as a voting issue would result in significant harms for debate as a pedagogical and sustainable activity. However, we acknowledge that some definitions are charged with historical content and that such definitions may be inaccurate in the modern context on such grounds.

definitions may not be accurate. For example, debaters can argue that the “dictionary definition” standard is flawed because such definitions reify hegemonic discursive systems; instead, we should prefer definitions that use commonly used by members of underrepresented populations. Similarly, teams can criticize the “historical precedent” standard as inaccurate because it excludes definitions that originated outside of the historical majority. As such, they can argue that a modern usage standard is superior. Accuracy-seeking focuses the topicality debate to a question of how individual words should most accurately be defined and what standards we should use to evaluate accuracy. Thus, it is the topicality paradigm that best facilitates discussions about our discursive assumptions and the cultural histories that are embedded in the terms we use.

Consequentialism, on the other hand, subverts the discussion of how individual terms should be defined. Rather than interrogate the assumptions underlying their definitions, consequentialism asks debaters to focus on how a particular interpretation of the resolution might benefit each debate team within the round itself. Within a consequentialist paradigm, the accuracy, history, and cultural significance of definitions are altogether displaced by their competitive utility. For example, a consequentialist approach would entertain the argument that “we should debate using western definitions because more literature has been written using those definitions and so there is more ground.” As such, a consequentialist approach can be more easily used as a tool of oppression and exclusion than an accuracy-seeking paradigm. Finally, although a framework for weighing between various accuracy-seeking standards may be the next frontier for topicality research, designing one remains beyond the scope of this article.

A second limitation on accuracy-seeking may be found in the parliamentary debate format. Limits on pre-round prep time may reduce NPDA debaters’ capacity to identify the

“most accurate” definitions of resolutional terms prior to competition. Competitors in policy debate and NFA-LD enjoy year-long topic stability and can therefore be expected to vigorously analyze the terms within the resolution; holding parliamentary debaters to the same standard is unrealistic.

However, the fact that debaters may struggle to identify the ideal set of definitions during prep time, they should at least strive toward this goal. Accuracy is the only common and reliable metric that teams can use to interpret the topic prior to a debate round. As such, it must serve as the litmus test for definitional selection. Moreover, the quest for accurate definitions need not become a race to the bottom. Negative teams will only be rewarded for devoting more time toward definitional research if by doing so they can discover increasingly accurate definitions that the affirmative plan does not meet. Fortunately, there is little reason to believe that esoteric definitions are “more accurate” than those that are readily available. Similarly, we are skeptical that arcane definitions are more likely to yield a topicality violation than those that are quickly identified with efficient searches. Finally, improvements in the topic-writing process may also inhibit a race to the bottom. Topic committees should attempt to craft resolutions precisely, using unambiguous terms that are easy to accurately and intuitively define. In so doing, they will give debaters minimal incentive to research arcane or archaic definitions.

### **Conclusion**

Topicality is now debated and evaluated in a fundamentally different way than was the case three decades ago. Conventional accuracy-seeking standards have been supplanted by consequentialist arguments. Traditional voting issues have fallen by the wayside in favor of ‘actualized abuse’ and the notion that topicality should be evaluated as a disadvantage. Finally, competitors doubt the capacity of topicality to serve as a valid and potent response to ‘critical’

advocacies and have abandoned the argument in favor of ‘framework.’ Combined, these changes have blurred participants’ understanding of and appreciation for ‘T’.

This article aims to resolve such confusion by clarifying the argument’s logical role and demonstrating that topicality is both powerful and straightforward. At its heart, topicality is a mechanism by which teams identify accurate definitions for the terms within the topic. Debaters then use the definitions that emerge from that process to interpret the resolution and evaluate whether the affirmative plan is fully compliant.

In the process of outlining the appropriate function and structure of topicality, we made three additional claims. First, we showed that the preeminent goal of topicality is to identify accurate definitions rather than desirable resolutions. Debaters often attempt to justify their preferred interpretation of the topic by pointing to the beneficial consequences that such an interpretation might provide. However, this approach is deeply flawed. Not only does the consequentialist approach inherently sidestep definitional accuracy, it also allows competitors to shift the meaning of the resolution in distortionary ways. Consequentialist arguments undermine topic focus, reduce predictable ground, and attenuate the overall quality of debate. These problems, while widespread in all debate formats, are particularly pertinent within parliamentary debate, where topic rotation, minimal pre-round preparation, and evidentiary restrictions collectively provide competitors with high incentives to sacrifice accuracy out of self-interest. However, such concerns are quickly resolved by reinstating accuracy as the metric by which appropriate definitions are selected.

Second, we reestablished the importance of traditional topicality voting issues. Predictable ground, topic-specific education, the jurisdiction of the judge, and even the sanctity of the rules are harmed whenever the affirmative plan falls beyond the boundaries of the

resolution. In order to safeguard these interests, judges should reject affirmative teams who violate topicality requirements. Regrettably, many critics do not realize that these harms *automatically* result from the topicality violation. As such, judges often demand that the negative side show ‘proof of abuse,’ ask that teams weigh topicality in relation to other arguments in the debate, or choose to interpret topicality through a lens of ‘reasonability.’ Barriers such as these undermine the preeminence of topicality, encourage teams to propose inaccurate definitions, and reduce the general quality of debate.

Third, we offered a new means of distinguishing between topicality voting issues and framework arguments. Topicality voting issues describe why the affirmative should be required to present a topicality plan. As such, topicality is a more powerful and appropriate response to affirmative criticisms than competitors often realize. Many arguments that are incorrectly labeled as ‘framework’ should in fact be interpreted as components of topicality. True ‘framework’ arguments, on the other hand, demonstrate why the plan should serve as the focus of the debate and why the judge should disregard arguments that do not directly relate to the plan. Although ‘T’ and framework complement one another, they are not perfectly congruent. The successful development of both arguments hinges on participants’ recognition of critical areas of overlap and key points of distinction.

By clarifying the logical role of topicality and its constituent arguments, this article should encourage debaters and judges to return the argument to its roots, assist competitors and researchers in identifying coherent arguments that are grounded in accuracy, and improve the quality and rigor with which topicality is analyzed by argumentation analysts as well as debate participants.

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