Resolving Topicality Standards

Topicality standards are very important because they the reasons we should prefer one idea of what should be debated about over another.

It is important to have standards for your violation – otherwise we don't know why it's important to set a limit on the topic and what priorities we should set for the way we debate the topic.

Both the negative and affirmative debate standards (and counter-standards for the affirmative) as reasons for their definition in a Topicality debate.

You'll hear various terms used as standards in Topicality debates:

- Limits – which team sets a better limit on the topic
- Ground – what strategies does the Negative have under the definition of the topic
- Predictability/research burden – how well can the Negative predict what the affirmative will say and how many affirmatives does it potentially have to research?
- Fairness – why is it unfair to the Negative
- Precision – why is the Negative's definition most precise in its meaning?
- Grammar – why is the Negative's definition more grammatically correct in the context of the resolution?
- Best context for definition/topic – why is the Negative's definition more contextual to other terms in the resolution or to the academic literature on the space topic?
- Education – what definition provides the best education?

All of these points in the list above are a way of talking about why one definition of a topic is more educational and better for debate than another. I have increasingly come to believe that the most important discussion for Topicality is a reason why what we'd debate under one definition (using examples of cases and negative strategies available) would be better than under another definition. This matters more than which label you choose to describe these reasons.

Arguments about why a definition is better can be a bit more specific – such as the "Better context" or grammar or precision arguments – and are thus slightly different, but ultimately get debated as reasons why this better quality of language produces more predictable debates that teach us better about what the topic is and should mean.

Bad, jargony Topicality debaters use a bunch of silly Disadvantage language to argue whether "X is the internal link to Y" among the terms listed above – this sort of analysis (along with other cliches like "race to the bottom") mean nothing to judges and don't help them to understand Topicality debates any better.

The one thing we can borrow from our knowledge of Disadvantages is that bad impact debates focus only on the one word that represents the terminal (ultimate) impact without any further description. Good impact debates don't just talk about the impact ("nuclear war" or "ground") but make that impact compelling in a specific context that incorporates the internal link – how do we know this impact comes about – and specific impact calculus – what exactly happens? For Topicality debates, why does the affirmative's definition deny the negative critical Disadvantage ground and what Disadvantages should the Negative be able to debate and why would they be educational and key to negative strategy on the topic?

As typically debated, Fairness is the weakest Topicality standard because it ends up sounding like whining about some abstract thing called "Fairness" that may or may not exist in debate to begin with, sometimes with discussion of why students will quit debating if debate is unfair. That's not that persuasive. What is more persuasive is analysis for why the Negative needs to be able to use research and strategy in order to learn from debates and compete and examples of what the Negative COULD learn under the Negative's definition that would be better.

Here's what can make Topicality debaters cleaner: argue a reason your definition creates a better vision for what gets debated. Use terms like "education" not just as one-word impacts but talk about WHY we learn better about the topic with specific examples of the arguments we'd debate under each team's definition. Make fairness debates as specific as possible to arguments you've identified as the most educational and strategic for each side, affirmative and negative.

Topicality is a great weapon for the Negative, but some judges hate the way Topicality gets debated. Debate it without relying upon jargon and use specific examples of what we discuss and learn about and your team will stand out for having thought a little harder about Topicality and find that judges will buy into it.