The Basics of Policy Debate

There are a lot of ways to think about debate. This document focuses on the traditional form, where we talk about whether the government should change what it is doing. The **AFFIRMATIVE (or AFF)** side of the debate says the government should make a particular change. The **NEGATIVE (or NEG)** explains why the Aff's change is not a good idea.

What does the Aff need to say?

The Aff starts the debate by discussing one or more things that are bad in the world right now. In policy debate, these things are called **HARMS**. It is important to show that there are harms, because if nothing is going wrong right now, there is no reason to do anything different.

Then the Aff talks about why these harms won't be solved if the government keeps doing what it is doing. This is called **INHERENCY**. It is important to show inherency, because if the government is already in the process of solving the problem, there is no reason to do anything different.

Next, the Aff describes a specific change that they want the government to make. This is called the **PLAN**. It is important to have a plan, because the Aff's whole job is to explain how the government should act differently.

Lastly, the Aff explains how their plan will fix the harms. This is called **SOLVENCY**. It is important to have solvency, because if the plan doesn't actually fix the harms, there is no reason to do it.

Harms, inherency, plan, and solvency make up the Aff's **CASE**. The Aff must make a complete case in their very first speech.

What can the Neg say?

The most obvious thing for the Neg to do is show why the Aff's harms, inherency, and solvency arguments are incorrect. Attacking the Aff like this is called going **ON-CASE**, because the Neg explains why the Aff's case is incorrect.

All the following arguments are called **OFF-CASE** because the Neg explains why the Aff's plan is a bad idea.

The Neg can argue that the plan will cause a problem. This is called a **DISADVANTAGE (or Disad or DA)**. A disad has three parts. The first part describes the way the world is now. This is called **UNIQUENESS.** The second part explains logically how the plan somehow disrupts the way things are right now. This is called the **LINK.** The last part explains why the disruption is bad. This is called the **IMPACT.** The uniqueness and link work together to show that only the plan (and not something else) cause the disruption. The impact is important because if the plan's disruption is not bad, then there's no reason to reject the plan.

The Neg can argue that instead of the plan, the government should make a different change. This is called a **COUNTERPLAN**. The Neg needs to show that their counterplan is better than the Aff's plan. That is called the **NET BENEFIT**, but that isn't enough by itself. They also need to show that the counterplan is **COMPETITIVE**. Competitive means the counterplan is a reason to reject the plan. If doing both the plan and the counterplan together is a good idea, then the counterplan isn't competitive.

Lastly, the Neg might question an assumption the Aff is making. This is called a **CRITIQUE (or KRITIK or K)**. Like a disad, a kritik has a link. A kritikal link shows how the Aff is making a particular assumption. Also like a disad, a kritik has an impact that explains why that assumption is bad. Instead of uniqueness, a kritik has an **ALTERNATIVE (or ALT).** The alt describes how we should think differently, in order to avoid making that harmful assumption.

So who wins the debate?

The Aff will say that the plan will do a lot of good. The Neg will say that the plan will not do much good, or won't do much good compared to a counterplan. The judge weighs the arguments and decides how much good the plan will do.

The Aff will also say that the plan will not cause problems. The Neg will say that the Aff will cause problems. The judge weighs these arguments and decides how much harm the plan will do.

If the judge decides the plan causes more problems than it solves, the Neg wins. But if the judge decides the plan solves more problems than it causes, the Aff wins.