

A Coach's Notes¹

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**Connecticut Debate Association
AITE and Pomperaug High School
October 24, 2009**

Resolved: The US should implement a “public option” as part of comprehensive health care reform.

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Introduction

This is the first edition of the 2000-10 CDA season. Past editions may be found on the CDA website, <http://ctdebate.org> .

I did not attend the tournaments this month, so there is no accompanying flowchart. I would like to thank the AITE team for providing me with a copy of their notes from the final round. They served as the basis for some of my examples below.

These Notes are intended for your benefit in coaching your teams and for the students to use directly. I hope that you will find them useful teaching tools. Please feel free to make copies and distribute them to your debaters.

I appreciate any feedback you have. The best comments and suggestions will find their way into subsequent issues. I would also consider publishing signed, reasoned comments or replies from coaches or students in subsequent issues. So if you would like to reply to my comments or sound off on some aspect of the debate topic or the CDA, I look forward to your email.

The Point of Contentions

I am coaching a very young team this year, and they came back from the tournament with one major question: How do we develop contentions? I've spent some time working with them on this issue, and I'd like to share my thoughts here.

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What Is a Contention?

Like the resolution itself, a contention is an assertion or claim by a debater that needs to be demonstrated to the judge, their opponents and the audience. As noted in a previous edition,² the basic elements of any argument are (1) a claim, (2) grounds or evidence supporting that claim, and (3) a warrant or reason explaining why the grounds support the claim.

Some claims, like the resolution, may be too “big” or complex to demonstrate directly. A contention is a means of building support for the resolution through a series of smaller claims that are easier to demonstrate, each of which supports the resolution either directly or indirectly through a series of claims. One case may have several contentions each of which directly support the resolution. Another case may be structured with a series of linked claims leading to the main conclusion.

And the hierarchy doesn’t stop there. Each contention may have a number of supporting items beneath it. These arguments or sub-points or sub-contentions will also be claims. At some point the structuring has to stop, and evidence and reasoning has to be used to start proving the claims and build support for the Affirmative or Negative case.

But the focus here is how to write good claims, whether they are contentions, sub-points, arguments, or even the resolution itself.

Good Contentions Start with Good English.

First and foremost, every contention should be a complete sentence. If you can’t state it clearly, the judge won’t hear it, or won’t remember it, and it won’t count in the decision. If it isn’t a complete sentence, it won’t make any sense. If it isn’t a complete sentence, you will keep restating it differently every time you get up to speak, and your case will drift off point. You may know what you are talking about, but the point of a debate is to convince someone else you know what you are talking about. That is done by presenting complete thoughts, and a complete thought is a complete sentence.

Consider the following for the Affirmative for this month’s resolution:

My first contention is increased competition.

I have actually heard debaters say things like this far too often. Increased competition among whom? Over what? Computer makers? Dogs over bones? The Patriots and the Jets? This could apply to almost anything. Obviously what they meant to say, or at least what I think they meant to say, was:

My first contention is that the public option will increase competition among health insurance providers.

This version makes it clear that competitors will be health insurance providers, and (implicitly) they will be competing as is customary in their business. One could be a bit more specific by saying:

My first contention is that the public option will increase price and service competition among health insurance providers.

² See *A Coach’s Notes*, March 7, 2009, “Making an Argument,” available on the CDA website.

Second, a contention should assert a single idea, fact or opinion. If you have two ideas to present, then you need two contentions. If you have an idea and a supporting argument, then you have a contention and either grounds, or a warrant, or a sub-contention. Keep them separate! Compare:

My first contention is that the public option will increase competition among health care providers leading to lower costs for health insurance.

to:

My first contention is that the public option will increase competition among health care providers. My second contention is that increased competition among health care providers will lead to lower costs for health insurance.

Both end up in the same place. But the first version requires you to mix up two types of supporting argument, one set on how the public option increases competition, and the other on how increased competition leads to lowers costs. Judges will get confused. In the second version the two ideas are distinct, and the sequence from one to the next is made clear.

Third, your contentions should be compact. If it is long and complicated, it will be hard to remember, both for the judge and for you. Why do politicians use sound bites? Because they are easy to remember, easy to say and easy to repeat. While your contentions shouldn't simply be sound bites, a good contention is a complete sentence wrapped around a good sound bite. Compare this version to those given above:

My first contention is that by setting up a government-sponsored insurance company to compete with private insurance companies there will be more competition in the market for health insurance, both between the government-sponsored insurance company and the private insurance companies, and among the private insurance companies.

If you ever had to repeat that in a rebuttal you would use up all your time before you could make an argument, assuming you could remember the whole thing. Keep it short and simple.

Fourth, your contentions should be strongly worded. Use the active voice, not the passive. Use short words rather than longer ones. Express the idea directly, not indirectly. The way you say something can be as important as what you say. Spend part of your preparation thinking about how your contentions are phrased. Again, compare the passive voice below to the active voice used above:

My first contention is that competition in the health insurance market will be increased by a public option.

I think the active voice emphasizes the impact of adopting the resolution, where in this version it's hidden at the end of the sentence.

Also, you shouldn't go overboard:

My first contention is that a public option will bludgeon greedy private health insurance monopolists into competing.

Fifth, you should always write out your contentions in two forms: the complete sentence that you intend to present formally in your first constructive speech, and the "tag" or short version that you will use to refer to it later in the debate to save time. For the contention above, the obvious tag is "increased competition." Even though the tag is a

sound bite, remember to use complete sentences. A tag is used in a complete sentence to refer concisely to the full contention in later argument. For example:

In responding to our claim of increased competition, my opponent said...

Remember we showed how a government entity will increase competition...

Let me summarize our case. First we showed the resolution would lead to increased competition by...

Finally, don't deviate from your official versions! Repetition helps to reinforce your case. If you paraphrase or re-state your contentions, you may change their meaning and begin to drift away from your planned case. Ask yourself whether the following makes the same argument as the original contention:

Our first contention was that there will be more health insurance providers in the market.

Just because there are more health insurance providers doesn't mean there will be more competition, so the argument has changed slightly, and a good opponent will take advantage of the shift.

Does the Contention Support Your Case?

Let's move from form to substance. In addition to being a well-formed English sentence, a contention should support your case. Either it directly supports or refutes the resolution, or it supports another contention (or a chain of contentions) that support or refute the resolution. Consider the contention we have been working with above:

My first contention is that the public option will increase competition among health insurance providers.

Does it really support the resolution? Would everyone agree that "increased competition among health insurance providers" is necessarily a good thing?

Well, that depends. A pure capitalist might agree that increased competition is always a good thing. Most of us would want to know what sort of competition would occur, or what the results of increased competition would be. If it made health insurance less expensive and more widely available that would generally be considered good. If it drove all the private health insurance companies out of business and left only a government monopoly that would generally be considered bad. If it led to severe cost cutting that damaged patient care, it would also be a bad thing. This contention is incomplete.

Consider a different contention:

My first contention is that a public option will lower the cost of health insurance to all Americans.

The major claim isn't more competition, but lower costs (note how I used the tags for each contention when discussing them). Increased competition isn't always a good thing, but lower costs almost always are. Lower costs directly support the resolution. Increased competition is one contention, or at least a couple of sub-points removed from supporting the resolution, because you still have to show a benefit.

All contentions need to be justified. The complete structure for the lower cost contention might be something like this:

My first contention is that a public option will lower the cost of health insurance to all Americans. I have a three part argument to support this. A public option will provide competition to private health insurance companies. That competition will provide an incentive for those private companies to be more efficient. Increased efficiency will lead to lower costs.

There are now four claims—the contention and three supporting arguments—that need to be demonstrated. If I demonstrate the supporting arguments, then the contention follows logically. Note that the sub-points have all the characteristics of contentions discussed above. The resolution, your contentions, supporting arguments, they are all claims and should heed the advice given above.

Of course, whether a contention supports your case depends on what your case is. The lower costs contention is better on a stand alone basis. But you might be presenting a series of contentions that are linked together. For example:

1. A public option will result in increased competition among all health insurance providers.
2. Increased competition will result in lower costs health insurance for all Americans.
3. Increased competition will result in better quality health care for all Americans.

Here the Affirmative uses increased competition as the link from the resolution to two separate advantages. In this case it makes sense to emphasize the first contention because it is the mechanism that makes the other two possible. It signals that increased competition will be a key point in the debate because the entire case depends on it.

Alternatively, a complete case might be:

1. A public option will result in lower cost health insurance for all Americans.
2. A public option will guarantee health care to all Americans.
3. A public option will preserve the existing private health care system.

Each contention stands on its own, and any one can win the debate for the Affirmative.

Count and Structure

There are no rules about how many contentions you should have or how they should be structured. In fact, you don't have to have any structure at all. From a practical standpoint, in a CDA six-minute constructive speech, three contentions is about right. You have about two minutes to develop each one and build a supporting structure. If you have fewer, you can spend more time developing them in depth. If you have more, you will have to say less about each one. Note that you can introduce additional contentions in the second constructive speeches, though that is uncommon in CDA.

How you structure your contentions will depend on what you are trying to say to the judge. Remember that every contention must either support or refute the resolution directly, or support another contention that supports or refutes the resolution directly. Obviously the chain of support can be as long as you choose.

In the section above, one case consists of three contentions, each of which supports the resolution directly. This is an example of a comparative advantages case, discussed in one of last year's editions.³

³ See *A Coach's Notes*, December 13, 2008, "Comparative Advantages Cases," available on the CDA website.

Another example above, the first contention serves as the link or mechanism to support two contentions that assert advantages to adopting the resolution. An Affirmative using this case has decided to emphasize competition among health insurance providers as an important part of the analysis, and then show how it leads to benefits.

Of course, if your contentions are linked together, your opponent only has to attack one of the links to win the debate. If you present a case where your contentions are linked, you should be prepared to defend each of them. If your opponent presents a case where the contentions are not linked, you should listen carefully to the supporting arguments and see if they have some item in common. Simply because your opponent does not explicitly link their contentions does not mean that there isn't an operative link that can be attacked to defeat the entire case.

The traditional policy debate analysis is a series of four linked contentions:

1. There is a problem in the status quo that needs causes significant harm. (Harm)
2. The status quo is incapable of fixing this problem. (Inherency)
3. Adopting the resolution will fix the problem. (Solvency)
4. There are additional benefits to adopting the resolution. (Advantages)

While this is not often seen in CDA debate in this classic form, the issues of harm, inherency, solvency and advantages are relevant questions to ask yourself when building a case or deciding how to attach an opponent's case. For example, if the contention argues the public option will lower costs, a Negative might say one or more of the following:

- Costs are already as low as they can be (no harm)
- Hospitals can and will reduce costs by better operating practices (no inherency)
- A public option will actually increase costs (no solvency)
- A public option will destroy the private health insurance companies (disadvantage)

They are called classic arguments for a reason, and it will help you to know and use them when you build your cases.

Summary

You cannot win a debate unless you convince the judge to support your side of the resolution. That process starts with your contentions. If at the end of the debate the judge remembers your contentions, you have won half the battle. If at the end of the debate the judge doesn't know what your contentions are, then you have lost. Make sure they are well formed and memorable.

Exercise

The following Affirmative and Negative cases were used in the final round at AITE.⁴ I have edited them slightly. Analyze them in light of the discussion above. What are their weaknesses? How can they be improved? What would you use as a “tag” for each contention? How do they compare to the contentions you used?

Affirmative Contentions

1. Private health companies do not provide for the uninsured
2. A “public option” would increase competition among health insurance providers
 - a. Government would lower prices
 - b. Private sector will subsequently lower prices in response
3. Public health care is a right
 - a. We already provide care to anyone in the emergency room

Plan: Implement a public option with government subsidies for the poor.

Negative Contentions

1. Public option will lead to single-payer system
 - a. Unfair advantage of government will kill private insurers
 - b. Everyone will go to public option
2. The single-payer system will lead to the socialization of medicine
 - a. Government would be accountable
 - b. Eventual decrease in quality of health care
 - c. Will affect everyone because it will be de facto single-payer
3. US is too large to for a public health care system
 - a. Will cost over \$1 trillion

Counterplan / Repairs: End private insurers’ exemption from anti-trust laws. Force private insurers to compete.

⁴ My thanks to AITE for their notes from the final round at AITE on October 24, 2009. These are my versions of their work, and I take all responsibility for any mis-statements.