A Coach's Notes[1]

Everett Rutan
Xavier High School
everett.rutan@moodys.com or ejrutan3@acm.org

Connecticut Debate Association
Darien High School and Glastonbury High School
March 7, 2009

Resolved: The U.S. should withdraw all regular combat forces from Afghanistan.

Contents

Introduction

This is the fifth edition of the 2008-09 CDA season. If you would like to receive the previous editions of these Notes, please email me and I will send them to you. Accompanying this document are my notes from the final round in two formats, transcript and flow chart. The packet from the tournament was distributed earlier.

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, good and bad. 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.

Getting the Flow

At the end of a round I judged earlier this year, by way of a critique, I asked the Second Affirmative and the Second Negative to tell me what they had said during their constructive speeches. When it became clear that neither could do so, I gave each a detailed outline of their speeches from my notes. The point was to emphasize the importance of listening. Good debate requires accurate, comprehensive note taking. One debater said it was the most useful critique he had ever gotten.

Good note taking is both a listening and an analytic skill. When flowing a round you should not be simply be recording what was said. You need to capture structure and meaning, not just words. What you hear has to be processed and organized in a form that is useful for the purpose at hand: as a judge to render a decision and critique, as a debater to respond with winning arguments. This skill will be useful in college and in your career. Good note taking is a much more effective aid to learning than annotating a copy of someone's PowerPoint slides while they stand there and read them to you

The Mechanics of Flow

The traditional debater's flowchart is a large piece of paper oriented landscape fashion and divided into as many columns as there are speeches in the debate. Some divide this in half across the middle, with the top for Affirmative arguments and the bottom for Negative. Some keep track of points made in cross-ex at the bottom, some in the next column so they use them in their next speech, some on a separate piece of paper.

I've always used an artists pad, 11"x14" or larger. The paper has good "tooth" or texture, so it takes ink easily from your pen. It has plenty of room for everything a fast talker might try to stuff into a six or eight minute speech. You can see the entire debate at a glance from start to finish, no fumbling with multiple pieces of paper. As you listen, you can place arguments where they belong, next to previous arguments on the same issue, rather than chronologically. And it acts as a platform you can speak from when there is no podium. The pad is large enough that it has room for the packet or additional notecards.

Others use regular letter or legal pads, or even loose copier paper. In this case, most debates will require more than one page. You should decide beforehand how to manage when you flow over to the second or third page. You could flow the debate as one continuous list, start to finish. You could flow each speech on a separate page, or flow the Affirmative on one set, the Negative on the other. Or you could devote one page to each line of argument. However you choose, you have to know when to switch pages while taking notes. You have to have an efficient means of relating points from one page to the next if necessary. And you have to have a way to manage those pages when you stand up to speak or to ask or answer questions. (You may begin to understand why I prefer one large piece of paper.)

Remember that you need to include your own speeches, yours and your partner's, on your flow. What you meant to say and what you actually said may turn out to be two different things. If you don't have an accurate record of what you actually said you may find yourself being misquoted towards the end of the debate—by yourself or your partner. Be sure to note anything in your outline of your speech that you skipped, didn't get to or added. If you can't do it while you talk, then do it as soon as you sit down.

Using the Flow

No matter how you take notes, you have three objectives:

1. Record all the important arguments that are made.
2. Relate each argument to its predecessors and successors in the debate—the flow..

3. Working with your partner, create rebuttal arguments that are based on what has been said up to that point in the debate—clash.

A verbatim record of a speech is useless in a debate. You need a fair and accurate summary of the arguments made by each side organized in a way that helps you to decide what to say next. The best measure of your notes is whether you could stand up and make the same arguments you just heard as well or better than the person who just spoke, but in your own words.

When you or your partner do stand up to speak it is not enough to know what your opponents just said in their last turn. To respond effectively you have to be able to trace each line of argument from its introduction through rebuttal and counterpoint. You need to evaluate how important it is to the debate. If it still falls in your favor you may only need to mention it briefly. If it is important and it is still in dispute, then you need to respond. Towards the end of the debate, especially the last rebuttals, you have to summarize the key issues of the debate across all of the individual arguments.

The traditional, large-format, multi-column flow chart, done properly, helps with this process. Speeches are recorded across the page with each contention arranged horizontally. You can track the course of the debate by literally following each "line of argument." By noting your planned responses in the next column, you create an outline of your next speech.

Flowing Poor Speakers

One way that I measure the quality of a speaker is how easy it is to flow their speeches. A well-organized speech is easy to flow. Each contention and supporting point is clearly labeled verbally by the speaker. Your note taking simply transfers that to the page.

It's much harder to flow a poor speaker because you have to provide the organization yourself. A poorly organized speaker risks being misunderstood, or having points lost as his listeners struggle to figure out what to write down.

In a way, when you organize a poor speech on your flow, you benefit the speaker. If you aren't careful you may find yourself completing arguments that were never really made. When you flow a poor speaker, you must note what is missing as well as record what is actually said. You should use these lapses in your cross-ex and rebuttal. But it is important that you try to organize a poorly made speech on your flow because you will need some structure in order to respond efficiently.

Practice

"The irony is that flowing is the easiest debate skill to improve with a little work.[2]"

Every time you watch a debate round and you are not taking notes you are wasting an opportunity to become a better debater. Even an experienced debater is being presumptuous at the end of the round voicing an opinion on which team won if he didn't

[2] Cheshier, David M., "25 Tips for Taking a Better Flowsheet", **Rostrum**, November 2000. **Rostrum** is the official magazine of the National Forensic League. You can find back issues at www.nflonline.org .

flow the debate. What do you think of a judge who doesn't take notes during one of your rounds? If you don't flow the final round, how are you any different?

As a student you have plenty of class room opportunities to practice taking notes. As a debater, you should flow any debate you observe. If you and your teammates flow the final round together, you have an opportunity to compare notes, see what you may have missed, and improve.

Handwriting

First the bad news. if you—and especially your partner—can't read your notes, they aren't going to be very useful. Those penmanship classes you hated back in grade school? You should have practiced more.

Now the good news: it's not too late to practice. I got D's in penmanship in grammar school. I can do a reasonably legible cursive if I have to, but I print when I take notes. I find printing is a bit faster, and my debate partner could read it. By the time I got to college, my class notes were in demand.

Making an Argument

Aristotle makes it all sound simple:

> *A speech has two parts. You must state your case and you must prove it.*[3]

The last part is a bit strong. The resolutions that we dispute aren't really subject to proof. "Demonstrate" is probably a better word. The question is, how should you do this?

All debates start with a claim or assertion: the first party to speak claims that something is true or should be done. The initial assertion is the resolution. In the CDA this is typically followed by contentions, which are also assertions. In too many debates these contentions are backed up with more assertions. There is just one problem with this: assertions are not arguments.

Components of an Argument

Philosophers have suggested a number of ways to decompose arguments into their proper parts. If you read more of Aristotle you will find the basis for formal logic—the proof stuff. It's good for designing computers and understanding errors in reasoning, but hard to apply in rebuttal. There is also more useful stuff, the basis for informal logic, with old fashioned Greek terms like "enthymeme."

A more modern approach was presented by Stephen Toulmin in 1958.[4] Like Aristotle, he starts with a claim or assertion—the conclusion you are trying to demonstrate. You justify this claim by giving "grounds" to accept it. Grounds consist of evidence or data that provide a foundation for your claim. The final piece is to give a reason explaining why your evidence supports your claim. Toulmin called this a "warrant" and put all three pieces together in a neat little diagram.

---

[3] Aristotle, Rhetoric, Book 3 Chapter 13, translation by W. Rhys Roberts.

[4] The Uses of Argument, Stephen E. Toulmin, Cambridge University Press, 1958. p. 89-100.

Toulmin's scheme has some additional parts, but these three will do for now. It's easy to remember, and it covers most of what you need to do: claim, grounds, warrant; or assertion, evidence, reasoning.

Using the Scheme

Let's look at the Affirmative's first contention in this month's final round at Glastonbury. What I have from my notes is:

A1: Military victory is unobtainable in Afghanistan
- i) The only one to ever conquer the country was Alexander the Great
- ii) The country is difficult to conquer because it lends itself to asymmetric warfare
- iii) There is no real central government, just tribal chiefs.

The contention is the claim. The first supporting point supplies grounds, evidence, in that Alexander the Great was the only one to ever conquer Afghanistan. But there is no warrant. Ask yourself, why does the fact that Alexander the Great was the only one to ever conquer Afghanistan[5] shows that military victory is unobtainable? The missing warrant is a hole that the Negative can exploit, either by asking the question I just posed, or by asking the obvious opposite question[6] in cross-ex.

The second and third supporting points are similar. Each advances grounds (the country lends itself to asymmetric warfare, there is no central government) but in each case there is no warrant. As the Affirmative, you need to provide those reasons. As the Negative you need to ask why these factors make victory unobtainable.

But doesn't it sound convincing? The fact is we make arguments like this all the time: present a claim and supporting evidence, without ever closing the loop with an explanation. The reason we accept arguments like this is that we provide the reasoning ourselves. It's an automatic reflex. We're thinking so fast that we fill in the blanks and buy the argument when we should be questioning every step. That may be fine in everyday discussion, but it's not good to complete your opponents' arguments for them in a debate.

Let's see what we can do with the contention above. I don't want to add any additional information. I just want to strengthen what was presented. I am going to rearrange the supporting points in what I think is a more logical order.

A1: Military victory is unobtainable in Afghanistan
- i) The country is difficult to conquer because it lends itself to asymmetric warfare
  - (1) This neutralizes the advantage of Western military technology against irregular fighters.
- ii) There is no real central government, just tribal chiefs.
  - (1) To conquer the country you have to subdue each tribe
  - (2) The central government doesn't command respect and cannot help with this process.
- iii) The only one to ever conquer the country was Alexander the Great
  - (1) That no one has been able to duplicate his feat in 2300 years proves the difficulty of the task

Each piece of evidence is now linked to the contention—the claim—with a warrant. Each fact has a reason to be there. The case doesn't require the judge to fill in the

[5] Assume for the moment this fact is true. Actually, Afghanistan is one of the more often conquered countries on earth, generally by people looking to get somewhere else—Persians, Macedonians, Parthians, Arabs, Gengis Khan, Tamurlane, Babur the Conqueror—it's quite a list.

[6] Which is: Doesn't the fact that Alexander conquered Afghanistan actually show victory is possible?

missing links. Even Alexander's success is explained to support the seemingly contradictory claim.

Qualifying the Argument

The claim above is absolute: victory is unobtainable. Not everything is so certain. Toulmin's scheme has a few more pieces to accommodate more sophisticated arguments. One is a "modality" or "qualifier" which states the degree of certainty or probability that can be attached to the argument.

It is difficult to be certain about anything that would make a good topic for a debate. It is hard to know precisely what the consequences of a particular policy will be. While absolute statements make better copy, they don't usually make good contentions.

Like the other parts of the scheme—claim, grounds, warrant—the qualifier matters because it helps you strengthen your argument. Consider how a Negative might attack the revised argument above in cross-ex:

> Neg: Alexander the Great did conquer Afghanistan, didn't he?
> Aff: Yes, but a long time ago. No one else has since.
> Neg: Did he have the help of a central government?
> Aff: No.
> Neg: Did he have to overcome asymmetric warfare? I mean, he had an army and he just faced a bunch of tribes, correct?
> Aff: Yes, I suppose.
> Neg: So he had to deal with the tribes one by one? He had to set up a central government?
> Aff: Yes. It took a long time and it was very expensive.
> Neg: And he needed an army to do that?
> Aff: Yes.
> Neg: So why can't the US do the same thing? We have an army. They are trained to deal with asymmetric warfare. We can deal with each tribe one at a time. We can use the army to protect the central government. Why can't we obtain victory?
> Aff: What you are talking about will take a long time and be very expensive in lives and money. The American people won't stand for it.
> Neg: So you admit your first contention is wrong? You agree we can win, only that it will be expensive? So the real argument is whether victory is worth the cost, an argument you haven't presented.

Now you may say that the Affirmative's first contention has all the pieces necessary to make the argument that victory in Afghanistan is likely to be very costly and take longer than we can politically maintain. But that isn't the argument they made. The Negative has basically gotten the Affirmative to concede its first contention, and will likely present an argument in the Negative constructive that victory is worth the cost. The Affirmative can come back, but they will have a long, long way to come.

A better statement of the Affirmative contention above might be: "It is highly unlikely that we can obtain a military victory in Afghanistan." None of the supporting points have to change. The previously unstated logic of the Affirmative is now clear and easier to defend. The Negative may make the same argument that victory is possible and worth the cost, but it will have to make it directly against the Affirmative contention. The Negative will have a more difficult time setting them back to the beginning.

No argument is perfect, and no set of rules will make it so. But a scheme like Toulmin's is useful. An argument that has all the necessary pieces will be stronger than one that is missing one or more of them.

Practice Making Strong Arguments

You can test your arguments against Toulmin's scheme by asking four questions:
What is my claim?
What is my evidence?
What is my reasoning?
How certain am I?

Every time you present an argument, you should have evidence and reasoning to support it. If you lack either of these, you leave a hole for your opponents to exploit. Your claim does not have to be absolute. If it is only the most likely result, then say so. It will be easier to defend and more believable to the judge if you are up front about how strong a claim you are making.

While you are taking notes on your opponent's speeches (see above) you should ask these same questions as a way of analyzing their case and preparing your cross-ex and rebuttal:
What was their claim?
Did they present any evidence, or is it an unsupported assertion?
Did they give a reason explaining why the evidence supports the claim? Was it a good reason? Does the claim follow from the evidence and the reasoning?
How likely is it that their claim is true? Is it always true? Under what circumstances would it be false? Is it true in the situation they describe?

You should get into the habit of conducting a review after every debate and every tournament. As part of that review you should go through every contention that you or your opponents use. Check each argument to see if it is well-formed. Each time you find a weakness you should do the following:

- explain the flaw,
- state the questions you would ask to exploit the weakness in cross-ex,
- state the counter-argument you would make in rebuttal, and
- restructure the argument to fix the flaw.

Debate is like any other activity. You will only improve if you review your performance, figure out what you are doing wrong (or right), and learn to correct it. Even if you never use the same arguments again, by reviewing them they can help you develop better technique. With practice, it will become automatic.