

Flexible Cases in Public Forum Debate

Card Debate

By Sean Bennett

Oftentimes, when we want to see what the future has in store for us, we need to look at where we have been. The concept for flexible cases in Public Forum Debate came to me after a long conversation with an older coach, Bruce Rogers. Bruce was reminiscing about his college years in debate and describing the system of “card debate”; back when evidence really existed on index cards. The cards would be carefully selected to meet the needs of the arguments in the round, read, applied to the opponent’s position, and then shuffled to the back of the deck.

The other part of the concept comes from Minh Luong’s “Flex Neg” Strategy in Lincoln Douglas Debate. In this strategy, the Negative builds a case that directly counters and refutes his/her opponent’s case in the round. Both concepts together seemed to be amazing strategy for our newest form of debate in the NFL, Public Forum. Since then, the concept of “Flex Cases” has been experimented with on my team and with students at the CDE National Debate Institute with amazing results. Almost 100% of all of the students who have employed this method at camp have qualified for the NFL National Tournament. Having given the background to the strategy, the concept is rather simple in nature but difficult to implement.

The basic concept behind the flexible cases in Public Forum is to create multiple cases positions for either side of the resolution and then build a case in the round that will directly counter the opponent’s case. Creating multiple case positions is labor intensive for a small squad, but it provides for a greater depth of knowledge on the topic and better argument selection in the round.

The first step is researching the topic thoroughly and cutting as many types of arguments as possible. The second step in the process is formatting and filing all of the arguments. The third step is writing the first speaker case. Finally, the Public Forum team should rehearse and practice “flexing out” case positions. The process is time consuming, but allows for better preparation and argument selection in the round.

A crucial debate skill is the ability to research the topic. The flex case strategy requires that the team or squad invest a great deal of time in research. Articles and articles could be written about all of the needed requirements for research, but there are a few that stand out above the rest. When researching, it is important that the team or squad look for a multitude of unique arguments and counterarguments. Each card should contain a tagline that effectively summarizes the argument, full source information written in an oratorical style, the evidence cut down to the bare minimum, and an analysis provided by the debater. The analysis portion of the card separates it from other types of debate cards. The team or squad should write a sentence or two that provides a link to the resolution and the impact the evidence has on the round. These cards can be thought of as “mini-contentions”. Each will provide the entire argument that will be read in the round. Multiple pieces of short evidence can be used together within one card, but entire card should not take more than one minute to read at a slow pace. Here is a sample of a card from the NFL National’s topic on the Kyoto Protocol:

THE KYOTO PROTOCOL SAVES MONEY IN THE LONG RUN

According to the White House Council of Economic Advisers under Bill Clinton, “with key developing countries participating in trading, and excluding both the benefits of mitigating climate change and the key additional factors just noted, estimates derived using Battelle’s Second Generation Model (SGM) suggest that the resource costs of attaining the Kyoto targets for emission reductions might amount to \$7-12 billion per year in 2008 to 2012, or just 0.1 percent of projected gross domestic product (GDP).” The council goes on to note that, “One noted economist, William Cline, has estimated that a doubling of pre-industrial concentrations of greenhouse gases would cost the U.S. economy about 1.1% of GDP annually—some \$89 billion a year in today’s terms.” It is easy to see that when we weigh the costs associated with the Kyoto Protocol the US economy will actually see a significant gain of around 1% of our GDP or between \$82 - \$77 billion per year.

There are several things to be noted about the card above: The card is written in an style that can be easily read within the round, the tagline is clearly noted, and the actual evidence is underlined for clear reference. The distinguishing factor (that separates this type of card from that of a policy debate round) is that the card is written in an oratorical fashion that lends itself to good delivery. These cards should not be read in isolation and require the debater to provide the transitions and analysis needed to make the case flow well.

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After the first round of research is completed, each team on the squad should sit down with the cards to construct a first-speaker pro and a first-speaker con case. Unless a team is planning on winning all of the coin tosses at the beginning of each round, each team should write a first-speaker version of their cases. After spending a considerable amount of time on researching the topic, the case construction should be fairly simple. Building a case simply requires piecing the best evidence together in an essay-style format with a good introduction, strong thesis, and clear transitions.

As debaters become more acclimated to this strategy, first-speaker cases can become more mutable, changing out the mini-contentions to reflect better argument selection between rounds. For example, if the first point in the case seems to be problematic for the team, that team may elect to remove the first point and replace it with a more effective argument. To begin with, it is important to create a static version of the case to allow for oratorical merit and effective refutation. A completely different approach should be taken when constructing the second-speaker case.

The second-speaker case, the case to be used when the team is the second speaker in the round, should be completely flexible and mutable. When the team has selected to go second in the round, this gives them the amazing ability to both present a clearly formatted case and directly

refute their opponent's positions. Each position in the round should be countered with an argument that both refutes the previous position and grants the team offensive ground. This is accomplished by selecting from the cache of previously created arguments the positions that are most effective in the round. Essentially, the team creates the case in round that most effectively counters their opponents' case. For example, when a team is presented with the card above as an argument in the round, there are several options for the second speaker. The most obvious of these options is to directly refute the evidence provided by providing a card that illustrates the economic hardship that the Kyoto Protocol will bring about. Even more effective would be to provide economic evidence that indicates that the economic model used by the pro did not take into account certain factors that your evidence provides. In this right, the judge sees direct clash within the round and an effective turn. As the team experiments with argument selection and application, they will grow stronger in their ability to implement the "flex case".

Using flexible cases in Public Forum Debate is a time consuming strategy that requires a large amount of practice, but there are many ways to speed up the process. The most effective method that can be employed to master the flex case is to practice argument selection and application with the vast amount of evidence that

was acquired through effective research. For example, one team randomly selects three cards from the collection of evidenced contentions and reads them aloud. The other team is given one minute to construct a case from their evidence and then has four minutes to provide that case. The constructed case is then critiqued by other members of the squad, and the team must regive the speech to correct the mistakes in the first attempt. This process continues as all of the members of the squad become effective in constructing a flex case and gain valuable knowledge about the resolution. As time goes by, the team will identify and use the best evidence in the round and know how to effectively refute the vast majority of case positions.

The flexible case strategy is both difficult and amazingly effective. If implemented correctly, using flex cases will grant a Public Forum team a superior tactic in argument selection and application.

(Sean Bennett is the Director of Forensics at Starr's Mill High School in Peachtree City, Georgia. In the last six years, Mr. Bennett has coached fifty-seven NFL national qualifiers, fourteen Georgia state Champions, and contestants at the Tournaments of Champions. Sean Bennett is also a fulltime instructor and the Curriculum Director for Public Forum Debate at the CDE National Debate Institute.)

District Tournament Results

Continue checking the NFL website at <http://www.nflonline.org/NationalTournament/Qualifying> for the lists of National Tournament Qualifiers. The lists will be updated as audit has been completed per district.

Thank you for your patience.

