Constructive Speeches in Public Forum Debate

Public Forum Debate begins with the case, the text of the four-minute constructive that initiates the debate round. The case is the only part of the debate that is entirely scripted; the rest of the debate is spent reacting to what the opposition has argued. Case construction provides the opportunity for speakers to contextualize their arguments on their own terms. The cases are also the first opportunity for the judge to determine which team may have the advantage. Accordingly, solid case construction is a fundamental element of successful debate.

Like most components of debate, the case does not have a required format, but convention and common understanding of best practices have led to the development of certain standards. This chapter will build on the understanding of argument construction established in Chapter 3 by explaining how best to organize your arguments into a Public Forum constructive.
Case Construction
Case construction is unique in that it heavily emphasizes writing skills. Just like an essay, a case should go through several drafts. Unlike an essay, however, a case construction will not be judged by a reader. The case will be read aloud to an audience, and so a judge has only one opportunity to listen. Consequently, speakers need to pay special attention to ensuring that the case is accessible and easy to understand. The structure of the case is extremely important. The content of a Public Forum case may be difficult to digest in four minutes, but with a good structure, the judge and the debaters are able to understand the case.

Structure
Every Public Forum case should have an introduction that frames and defines the resolution, then one or more contentions that argue for the team’s position, followed by a conclusion.

INTRODUCTION
Every speech needs an introduction or a simple opening to the case. The introduction will define the terms for the debate and establish the burdens for the round. A Public Forum introduction should be brief, between 30 and 45 seconds, but should persuasively accomplish the following:

• Frame the round. The first task is to invoke the major issues of the resolution and lay the groundwork for the debate to come. Many debaters utilize a quotation to help with such framing. The quotation should
come from a heavily qualified or easily recognizable source and should be primarily rhetorical as opposed to data-driven.

• **State the argument.** After the debater reads the quotation, he should establish his agreement with the quotation and clarify his side of the debate: affirmative or negative. This may be accomplished by simply saying “My partner and I agree with this quotation, so we affirm the resolution.” While this seems obvious, speakers should take every opportunity to reinforce their basic advocacy to the judge.

• **State the resolution.** The first speaking team should state the resolution. Many judges in Public Forum Debate will not have a formal connection to the debate community; they may not even be aware of what the resolution is before judging their first round. Unless the speaker restates the resolution, a judge may be completely confused. The second speaking team does not need to restate the resolution.

• **Define key terms in the resolution.** Debaters should offer definitions both for clarity and for strategy. A definition offered for clarity will detail, in very simple terms, the meaning of a key but potentially unclear term in the resolution. Given the resolution, “Resolved: The United States should encourage the implementation of a soft partition of Iraq,” a debater would define a “soft partition,” since the judge is unlikely to be familiar with the term. Sometimes a definition is offered to further a strategy. In these instances, the definition will give greater impact to the arguments that will follow it. For example, on the topic, “Resolved: Russia
has become a threat to U.S. interests,” how each side defines “threat” could have implications for the rest of the debate. Is the ability to harm U.S. interests enough to constitute a threat or must there also be intent to harm U.S. interests?

When defining terms for strategy, debaters should keep in mind that judges rarely enjoy lengthy discussions about the terms of the resolution. To ensure that the debate does not devolve into clash over definitions, debaters should make certain that their definitions allow a fair division of ground for both sides. “Division of ground” refers to the arguments that each side could make given the definitions of the resolution. On the previous Russian resolution, if the affirmative were to define “threat to U.S. interests” as having the ability to constrain U.S. behavior in international affairs, that definition would provide the negative with far less ground than if they were to define the phrase as taking actions that harm U.S. national security. During case construction, debaters must strike a balance between strategically defining terms in ways that benefit their case and maintaining a fair division of ground.

• **Impact definitions with observations about how definitions will change the debate.** Observations are arguments that establish the burdens each side must satisfy to prove their side of the resolution true. An observation makes explicit how a definition has changed the division of ground. For example, on the resolution, “Resolved: In a democracy, civil disobedience is an appropriate weapon in the fight for justice,” an affirmative team might define “appropriate” as proper in some circumstances. They would then impact
this definition in an observation, noting that the affirmative’s burden is not to prove the absolute benefit of civil disobedience, but that in some circumstances civil disobedience is one of the tools that could support the fight for justice. This observation would be strategic for the affirmative because it would reduce the burden needed to prove the resolution true.

In general, observations should be closely related to the definitions so they do not seem arbitrary. However, on certain resolutions, debaters can use scholarly research to establish the burdens for each side. For instance, on the resolution, “Resolved: When the values are in conflict, the United Nations should prioritize global poverty reduction over environmental protection,” a prudent debater might want to outline the goals of the United Nations. The debaters could then have an observation that the contentions made by either side should impact back to those goals; this would clearly establish standards for the round by drawing from the resolutonal wording.

CONTENTIONS
Following the observations, the debaters then make their chief arguments. These arguments, often referred to as “contentions,” are independent reasons why the resolution is true or false. After collecting research, analyzing the resolution, and thinking of arguments, debaters should collect the best arguments for each side and attempt to divide them into themes. Those themes will provide the basis for contentions. Arguments can be organized by impact, by chronology, by geography, or by importance; the exact system of organization is less important than the coherence of each contention.
The key to good contention writing is to ensure that all contentions are self-contained units. This makes the case more difficult to answer and gives the debaters more options when answering their opponents’ case. Typically, a case has two or three contentions. Having more than three makes it difficult for a judge to remember the independent ideas in a case; having only one limits the flexibility of a position. Case construction should never sacrifice quality or depth for breadth, however.

**Sub-points**
Contentions may have sub-points, arguments or examples that help to organize the contentions. For example, a contention may be something broad, such as “Affirming the resolution will improve the economy.” This contention could then have sub-points, such as “Affirming the resolution will create jobs” and “Affirming the resolution will spur investment.” Unlike a contention, a sub-point does not have to be an independent argument. Sub-points can reinforce or build on one another, or they can serve as independent reasons why the resolution is true. The number of sub-points a debater includes is determined by his research and arguments. Sub-points are often organized by letter (sub-point A, sub-point B, etc.), whereas contentions are organized by number.

Debaters should not include sub-points just for the sake of having them; speakers should use them to best organize contentions. The contentions and sub-points should include taglines and data. Taglines should be short and digestible; data should be plentiful, persuasively presented, and embedded in the debater’s own rhetoric. Many contentions have up to six to seven sources of data. While the contentions have copious structure and data, speakers
should remember that they also should be pleasant to listen to—do not sacrifice rhetorical appeal for data.

CONCLUSION
Public Forum cases should have very brief conclusions, typically lasting between 10 and 20 seconds. Debaters should summarize the main arguments of their cases and link back to the opening statement used in the introduction. Quotations can make powerful conclusions as well as introductions.

Strategic Case Construction
Case construction should be strategic: it should simultaneously prove one side of the resolution while also preparing the rebuttals to disprove the other team’s case. Debaters should focus primarily on proving their position, but should always be thinking about how their arguments will play out in rebuttals.

The optimal case construction may actually be unknown until a round has begun; as a result, many teams have started to write flex cases to create a hidden clash in their case construction. A flex case is a case that is not fully formed until the round has begun. For example, if a team is using a flex case, they might have prepared more contentions than they could read during their four-minute speech. If they are the team speaking second, they would wait to see what contentions their opponent presented and then choose the contentions that best clashed with the opposing side. A flex case requires additional research and organization and should only be developed by teams with significant experience.
Practice and Delivery

An entire case should be between 725 and 775 words, depending on the natural speaking rate of the first speaker. A case with 750 words can be delivered at 187.5 words per minute, which is somewhat faster than a conversational rate for most people. If the case is organized effectively, a slightly elevated rate of speech should not be a problem.

Debaters should spend much time practicing delivering their cases so that its presentation is more comprehensible and powerful in the round. Practice speeches should always be timed; if the speaker feels rushed when delivering the case, the number of words should be cut. Advanced tactics for delivery include bolding key words to be emphasized and italicizing the names of sources that do not need to be emphasized. The first few words of the case should be delivered very slowly. The first time a debater speaks, a judge will need time to adjust to the speaker’s individual voice.

Given the time constraints of the first constructive speech, every word must count. Teams must make difficult decisions about what to prioritize in a case: Should the case create clash? Prove a narrow point? Provide strategic options? The answer to each of these questions is, to some degree, “yes.” But each team must decide what style of case serves them best.

Additionally, the second-speaking team could opt to include or exclude observations or contentions based on the definitions and observations offered by the first-speaking team. The first-speaking team, though, must have a fully formed case with the greatest variety in contentions and observations, thus providing the most strategic division of ground.

Although debate rounds are rarely won during the constructive speeches, they can certainly be lost. To gain an
advantage over the competition, debaters must pay careful attention to both the form and substance of the case. Effective case writing will help keep the debate organized and make for an excellent round.

### KEY CONCEPTS

- A constructive speech in Public Forum Debate is four minutes long.
- Each constructive speech should begin with an introduction that presents and defines key terms in the resolution; it may also establish a framework for the round.
- The introduction should be followed by one or more contentions that support one side of the resolution.
- Contentions may have sub-points if they are used to clarify arguments for the judge.
- Ideally, constructive speeches should be between 725 and 775 words long.