

Case Construction, Step by Step:

1) Read and understand the resolution.

This is the most important step. A lot of people seem to skip it. Make sure that you know what the resolution is talking about not just what you think it could be talking about.

2) Identify key words in the resolution.

These are going to be the most important words. You can generally ignore words like 'of', 'should', 'Canada' etc. For example, the keywords in "Be it resolved that Canada should decriminalize the use of marijuana." are 'decriminalize' and 'use of marijuana' (note that phrases can be blocked together as keywords in debating). These are words that could be taken in a few different ways, depending on how you build your case. Don't worry about how you're going to take them just yet.

3) Discuss the resolution with your partner/team.

Brainstorm ideas. Don't worry about the case yet just throw around ways that you could take it. Think about possible arguments that you could use. Use the keywords that you identified as a guide. Take note of areas where your knowledge/information is lacking. Note those down as things that you'll need to research.

3.1) Do the research to fill in the holes in your knowledge.

4) Identify the underlying principles.

Most good debate topics can be understood in terms of a conflict between important principles. Often both sides of the topic will have a strong principle that supports them. For example, we think that freedom is important but we also think that safety is important. These two things often conflict with each other (should I be free to own a weapon even though it is probably true that a society with a lot of guns is less safe than one with no guns?). Sometimes your principle can change depending on how you take the keywords.

5) Pick a principle and make a case statement.

This is the second most important step. Pick a principle that is broad enough to have several arguments supporting it and important enough that you think you can defend it. Your case statement is a one-line summary of your entire case. It should make your principle crystal clear. It should be worded as a 'because' statement. For example, "We should decriminalize marijuana because the medical benefits outweigh the dangers to society." or "We should decriminalize marijuana because freedom of choice is important."

You are going to want to say this statement at some point early on in your team's first speech and you will use it as the foundation for all of your arguments and refutations.

6) Come up with arguments that support your case statement.

It is important to distinguish between arguments that support your side and arguments that support your case. For instance the argument that "If we regulated marijuana, there would be less crime" is in favour of decriminalizing marijuana but it does not support the case statement "We should decriminalize marijuana because the medical benefits outweigh the dangers to society."

Make sure that you have arguments not just examples. Arguments are reasons to believe something. You should be able to word your arguments as 'because' statements that show why your principle is sound.

Depending on the length of the speeches, you want your first speaker to have 2-4 and your second speaker to have 1-2 arguments. Don't hoard your arguments. Debating is a team sport. You want the order of your arguments to fit well together. This may mean that you give your teammate some of 'your' arguments or vice-versa.

6.1) Research for facts and examples that back up your arguments.

Don't go overboard on this. It is more important that you get the arguments out. It may be that you never use any of the facts and examples that you find but it is good to know them so that if the other team says "that'll never work" you can say "yes it can, here is an example where it did."

7) Define your key terms according to your principles and arguments.

If you have chosen to take the case in a certain direction, it is important that your definition reflect that. Definitions are not dictionary definitions; they are definitions that set the parameters of debate. What, precisely, do you mean by "decriminalize"? Does it mean "make it completely legal"? Does it mean "make it a controlled substance, like alcohol and tobacco"? Does it mean "reduce it from a felony offence to a fineable offence"? These are all valid definitions of the word 'decriminalize' for the purposes of a debate.

As the affirmative team, you have some leeway in defining the terms. Don't throw this opportunity away. But make sure the terms leave enough room for the opposition to argue against you. You won't win the case on your definitions.

7.1) Run a practice round.

This will give you a chance to test out the case and find out where things have gone wrong or where you need a better explanation. Running a practice round is a good idea at any step in the process, actually. It is often helpful to run a very, very bad round at the beginning to help focus on the topic. It gives you a context to work from.

Note: Impromptu case construction is pretty much the same as this but you don't get to research or practice and you have to do it very quickly.