



11.1 Dictionary Search

This activity introduces topicality. It also develops understanding of topicality. In it, students must find multiple definitions of words in the resolution. It is a short homework assignment that gets students ready for a practice debate on topicality.

Time Allotment

The homework assignment will take approximately 25 minutes. The first phase (small group discussions) will take approximately 15-25 minutes. The mini-debates will take approximately 15-30 minutes.

Objectives

By the end of this activity, students will:

- advance their understanding of topicality.
- be introduced to evaluating the implications of arguments.

Materials and Preparation

Students will need access to a few different dictionaries and/or access to the Internet. You will need a list of affirmative cases on this year's resolution that the students understand. It may make sense to have a one-page sheet with the name and plans from several cases to distribute to groups.

Method

Select a few key words in this year's resolution and assign one to each student. One suggestion is to select words (or phrases) that have commonly debated in topicality on this year's resolution. Words with many possible interpretations work best.

Before assigning the homework, introduce students to the idea that words can have multiple meanings. For instance:

- Blue is a color and a feeling.
- A case is either a box or a position.
- A watch is either a timepiece or a guard shift or a verb.
- A dish is either a platter or a cuisine.
- A walk is either a pathway or a gait.
- Something that is bright is either intelligent or luminescent.
- The weather is cool and so are you.

However you want to explain that words have multiple meanings, make sure to communicate the relevance of this concept to debate resolutions. Resolutions are sentences comprised of words, each of which has multiple meanings, that when taken as a whole frame every debate. The resolution determines what the affirmative team can advocate for and what is off-limits.



Assigning students the homework, ask them to find as many definitions of their word as possible. Encourage them to find at least three. They can use dictionaries from the library or on the Internet after school.

The next day in class, arrange students in small groups according to the word they were assigned. Give students the example of a few affirmative cases with which they are familiar. Explain to students that the way one interprets the words in the resolution will determine whether a particular case is topical. Have students discuss the following questions about the definitions they collected:

- Did the students come up with the same definitions of the terms? Is there overlap in the definitions student's came up with? Where are there differences?
- Which definitions are most appropriate and relevant to the resolution? Why? How many of the definitions are actually plausible for this resolution?
- Which definitions might include the cases on the one-page hand out of cases on this year's resolution and which might exclude them?
- If you are an affirmative debater running a particular plan (you chose), what is the most advantageous definition to use? If you are a negative debater against a particular plan, what is the most advantageous definition to use?

If you are planning to have mini-debates, it may make sense to assign the small group a particular case and tell them in advance that they are preparing for mini-debates as they answer the questions.

After this small group discussion, you may want to have mini-debates. If so, select representatives from each group to participate in short topicality mini-debates. In pairs, one student will represent a particular affirmative case and the other will argue that the case does not meet the resolution because of a particular word. These mini-debates will stem organically from the small group discussions. In other words, these mini-debates will use arguments generated in the small group discussions, rather than pre-written topicality shells. The two students can debate the meaning of the word, each arguing that their definition is more accurate and useful for debate.

After the debate, students can comment on what they thought was effective in the debate and what was ineffective. As a follow up to this activity, you can use this as an opportunity to explain the typical model for a topicality violation, emphasizing the way that standards for good debate help determine which definition is best.