When a particular debate topic, usually called a motion, is announced, debaters need to consider several questions in preparation for debating the topic. Debaters are given a certain amount of time, usually between 15 and 30 minutes, to prepare to debate. During this time, debaters engage in a process called analyzing the topic.

Although analysis of a motion is something that all debaters, regardless of the side they are supporting, need to think about, it is most important for the team assigned to support the motion. That team is called the “First Government Team.” The name of the team assigned to support the motion varies depending on the format of educational debate in which the debaters are preparing to participate. Although some formats use the name “affirmative” to designate the team supporting the motion, the format on which this text will focus, Worlds Style Debate, uses the name “government.” In Worlds Style Debate, two teams support the motion and two oppose it. The teams supporting the motion are called “First Government” and “Second Government.” The teams opposing the motion are called “First Opposition” and “Second Opposition.” The First Government Team speaks first and establishes the direction for the debate. Thus, analysis of the motion is most important for the First Government. However, all teams need to analyze the topic with the aim of determining which arguments they and their opponents might introduce into the debate.

The next sections describe a few ways in which debaters, especially the team initially supporting the motion, should begin their analysis. Analysis of a motion includes considerations of the topic background, type of motion being debated, possible ways that the motion might be defined and interpreted, and potential issues that might arise during the course of the debate.
Analyzing Topic Background

Debate topics do not exist in a vacuum. They arise out of social or historical contexts. Debaters who understand the background of the topic are better able to focus on the issues that are most likely to arise during the debate. For instance, debaters are better able to debate a topic about population control if they understand the historical and social background of that topic. How has population growth affected other social concerns such as food, water, conflict, economics, environment, etc.? What methods of population growth do individuals use now and in the past? What methods of population control have governments enforced on their citizens? Considering those and other questions about the general topic of population control will assist debaters in other important areas of their analysis of this topic.

Analyzing Topic Type

After analyzing the background of the topic, debaters then need to consider the specific motion in order to determine what type of motion they are dealing with and how the topic influences the kinds of arguments that will be debated. The last chapter introduced four kinds of claims: descriptive, definitional, associational, and evaluative. Motions are usually stated as a claim—usually an evaluative claim. For instance, a motion might be that “Population control is a violation of human freedom.” Another might be that “The nations of the world should institute stricter policies on control of population.” These two examples represent common kinds of motions that might be debated. Although both are evaluative motions, they are subtly different from one another. The first motion attributes some value to an object. In this case, the value is “human freedom” and the object is “population control.” That is what is called a “value motion.” The second motion advocates some action or policy. That kind of motion is called a “policy motion.” Policy motions usually advocate that some actor perform some action. In this second case, the actor is “the nations of the world” and the action is “institute stricter policies on control of population.”

The table below gives some examples of different value and policy motions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value Motion</th>
<th>Policy Motion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Smoking in public is immoral.</td>
<td>The city of Beijing should place greater restrictions on smoking in public.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China’s Hukou policy is too restrictive.</td>
<td>The PRC should significantly revise its Hukou policy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The rich-poor gap in the USA is excessive.</td>
<td>The U.S. should take actions to reduce the income gap between the rich and the poor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The current generation in China has become too Westernized.</td>
<td>The Chinese education system should do more to teach the values of living in a communal society.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the examples listed above, the topics are similar, yet the wording of the motions makes them different. The value motions all attach some value (immoral, restrictive, excessive, or
Analyzing a Debate Topic

Westernized) to some object (smoking, hukou, rich-poor gap, current generation). If a person believed that those values are appropriately attached to the objects, that person might begin to think about what actions ought to be taken. But, the motion is about the relationship between the value and the object, not about any action that should or should not be taken. The next set of motions, policy motions, makes the contemplated actions specific.

One thing that a perceptive person will notice about the list of policy motions is that they contain two elements: an actor and an action. The actors named in the motions listed above include: “The city of Beijing,” “The PRC,” “The U.S.,” and the “Chinese education system.” The actions include: “place greater restrictions on smoking,” “revise its Hukou policy,” “reduce the gap between the rich and the poor,” and “teach the values of a communal society.”

Value motions and policy motions are similar in that each of them evaluates something. They are different in that only the policy motion advocates an action or a policy. In some ways, this is a subtle difference, but, as will be seen later, this difference will suggest different kinds of issues that will become a part of the debate.

A perceptive debater will note that the kind of topic to be debated may lead to different interpretations. The kind of topic and its interpretation also will affect the different issues that may be debated.

**Analyzing the Definition and Interpretation of the Topic**

Most topics can be defined and interpreted in more than one way. Some topics are very specific and thus have fewer legitimate definitions and interpretations. Some are more abstract, having more potential interpretations. In order to have a productive debate, all of the debaters need to operate on similar definitions and interpretations of the topic. If they do not, then one debater may talk about one thing while another may talk about something entirely different. To ensure that the debaters share a common understanding of the motion, one team is given the right and responsibility to define and interpret the motion. By convention, this right and responsibility is given to the first debater to speak. In Worlds-Style Debate, the right and responsibility to define and interpret the motion is given to the first speaker of the First Government Team. This debater (who in Worlds-Style Debate is called the “Prime Minister”) has the right to define and interpret the motion, and the responsibility to do so in a reasonable manner.

Defining and interpreting are similar yet subtly different acts. When a debater “defines,” he or she clarifies any ambiguous or unclear terms in the motion. For example, in the topics illustrated above, some terms that might need to be defined so that the audience and adjudicators will have a clear understanding of them include “hukou,” and “communal society.” For some cultures, these terms may be perfectly clear and need no definition; for others, clarification by definition is needed. Other terms like “rich” and “poor” are so abstract that they might need to be defined more clearly. For instance, the debater might provide a
specific definition of the income levels that define “rich” and “poor” in China. Doing so would help to make the debate clearer.

While definition has to do with abstract terms in the motion, interpretation has to do with narrowing and focusing the motion to help ensure a good debate. For instance, a debater might interpret “greater restrictions on smoking in public” as passing legislation to forbid smoking in all businesses that are used by the general public. “Significantly revising its Hukou policy” might be interpreted as allowing farm workers to move to major cities for access to better education for their children and better medical care for their families. “Reducing the gap between the rich and the poor” might be interpreted as introducing a taxation policy that significantly increases taxes on the wealthiest Americans while reducing taxes on the very poor. Finally, “teaching the values of living in a communal society” might be interpreted as requiring classes in secondary schools on the philosophy and practice of Chinese Communism. In each of these cases, the interpretation narrows and focuses the motion to make a more clear and productive debate. Thus, analysis of the topic needs to include defining abstract terms in the motion as well as interpreting the motion in a way that will focus and narrow the motion for debate.

The purpose behind the convention that gives the first speaker the right to interpret the motion is grounded in the idea that a clear and focused debate is better than a vague and general debate. A clear and focused debate is better for everyone involved in the debate--all the debaters, the audience, and the judges. That convention was not established to give the first speaker the opportunity to focus the debate so narrowly that he or she would have a better chance of “winning” the debate. Thus, the responsibility to define and interpret the debate in a reasonable manner involves doing so for the purpose of creating a good debate, not for the self-serving purpose of giving oneself an opportunity to win the debate. As noted in the chapter about ethics, to interpret a topic for the sole purpose of making it easier to “win” the debate does not show proper respect to the other participants in the debate. Such an interpretation treats the other debaters as objects to be overcome rather than as equal participants in the debate. Assuming that the definitions and interpretations are reasonable, the rest of the debaters are then obliged to accept and follow them.

Knowing something about the background of the topic is one way that debaters can separate reasonable from unreasonable definitions and interpretations. For instance, if debaters analyze the background of the population control topic and come to a clear understanding of the current controversy, they will realize that that controversy is about how human population affects other issues of the human environment as well as the environment of all other living things. Given this realization, the first speaker would recognize that to define “population control” as controlling the population of feral dogs is not a reasonable interpretation of the motion given the current controversy about population. Debaters should ask themselves the question “would most ordinary people accept this interpretation as legitimately connected to the controversy out of which the topic arose?” If so, then the interpretation is reasonable and ought to be accepted as such by the rest of the debaters and judges.
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What happens when one or more debaters believe that the interpretation is unreasonable? As this text urges the first debater to interpret the motion in a manner that creates a better debate, it also urges the debaters to view the interpretation charitably, remembering that many different, reasonable interpretations may exist. If the first speaker’s interpretation is one of those, it ought to be accepted. However, if other debaters view the interpretation as unreasonable, they must decide whether their objection to the interpretation will create a better or a worse debate. Most often, arguing about the interpretation will lead to a worse debate. If debaters are able to accept and follow the interpretations for the remainder of the debate, they will be contributing to the overall objective of creating a better debate. Creating a better debate for all certainly is the most ethical stance the debater can take. So, the advice offered here is that the interpretation ought to be accepted, except in the most egregious of circumstances, realizing that to do otherwise may lead to a poor debate and may, in all likelihood, be seen as self-serving.

Analyzing Potential Issues

After considering the background of the topic, the type of motion being debated, and the particular definition and interpretation, the debaters then turn to an analysis of the potential issues that might be introduced in the debate. Although issues of definition and interpretation involve the first team in the debate (First Government in Worlds-Style Debate), analyzing the motion to determine potential issues is something in which all debaters need to engage.

One systematic method of analyzing potential issues that might arise in a debate is called “stock issues analysis.” Stock issues analysis is an approach to thinking about arguments that centers on very common (stock) issues. These are issues that arise over and over again. By reflecting on these issues when constructing their cases, debaters are able to formulate a set of arguments that they may use during the debate. Stock issues differ depending on whether the debate is about a value motion or a policy motion.

Stock Issues For a Value Motion

Stock issues for a value motion center around two questions: (1) what criteria should be used to determine whether a certain value is appropriately assigned to a certain object, and (2) does the assignment of the value to the object follow those criteria? This text will refer to those stock issues as criteria and application, respectively.

The first stock issue (criteria) for a proposition of value asks the question, “What criteria should be used to judge whether or not the value can be assigned to the object?” A criterion is a standard or a measure that a person can use to evaluate something. For example, the Gross Domestic Product is a criterion (a measure) of the health of a country’s economy. In a value motion, debaters need to identify the criteria that will be used to measure the object of evaluation. For instance, by what criteria can “immoral” be measured? What is the criterion by which something becomes “too restrictive?” Under what criteria would a rich-poor gap be too “excessive?” How would a society determine that something is “too westernized?”
The second stock issue (application) then asks how the particular object of evaluation meets or does not meet the criteria? Does smoking in public meet the standard of morality? Does the Hukou policy meet the criteria of “too restrictive?” Does the rich-poor gap meet the benchmark of “excessive?” Does the current Chinese generation meet the conditions for being “too westernized?”

The table below illustrates some of the questions that arise from a stock issues analysis of a value motion. Those questions then can be used to help debaters identify some of the issues that the debate might engage. Also, by considering those two questions, debaters facing a value motion are able to construct their own arguments as well as prepare to respond to arguments that their opponents might introduce.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motion</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Application</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Smoking in public is immoral.</td>
<td>By what standards ought something be judged as “immoral?”</td>
<td>By those standards, is smoking in public immoral?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China’s Hukou policy is too restrictive.</td>
<td>According to what criteria should a policy be determined to be “too restrictive?”</td>
<td>By those criteria, is China’s Hukou policy “too restrictive?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The rich-poor gap in the USA is too excessive.</td>
<td>What are the benchmarks that determine if something is “too excessive?”</td>
<td>According to those benchmarks, is the rich-poor gap “too excessive?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The current generation in China has become too Westernized.</td>
<td>By what standard is something determined to be “too Westernized?”</td>
<td>By those standards, is the current generation “too Westernized?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In their analysis of the motion, a consideration of those questions will assist debaters in determining what issues might become important in the debate. They can use this analysis to determine which issues they want to introduce in the debate as well as which issues their opponents might introduce.

Stock issues for a policy motion are considered next. Because policy motions are more common in educational debate, this text will provide a more in-depth treatment of stock issues for policy.

Stock Issues For a Policy Motion

The set of stock issues for a policy motion that will be used in this text is one formulated by George W. Zigelmueller and Jack Kay. Using a medical analogy, they argue that most cases for a change in policy can be conceptualized by identifying four issues: ill, blame, cure, and cost. When a physician is deciding what kind of treatment to give a patient, the physician

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1 Zigelmueller and Kay also include a 5th stock issue of jurisdiction which has been omitted as not relevant to Worlds-Style Debate.
Analyzing a Debate Topic

first needs to determine the sickness that the patient is facing (ill). To determine the ill, the physician might ask about the symptoms that the patient is experiencing. For example, perhaps the patient is experiencing pain in the lower right abdomen. Next, the physician needs to determine the cause of the sickness (blame). By placing pressure on the lower right abdomen, the physician can see if the pain intensifies and, if so, can begin to assess the cause or blame as appendicitis. The physician may also conduct other tests to identify the cause of the illness. After the cause has been determined, the physician then determines the proper treatment (cure). Ordinarily, the treatment for appendicitis is a procedure called an appendectomy or removal of the appendix. Before settling on the procedure that will be used to cure the patient, the physician will consider possible side effects (costs) of the procedure. If the physician and the patient decide that the effects of the illness, in this case appendicitis, are worse than the risks of the appendectomy, then they may decide to go ahead with the procedure.

That analogy can easily be used for discovering potential arguments about a policy motion. First, considering the status quo (the present policy), the debater asks about the ill or the problems that exist in the present action. Is the present way of doing things associated with particular harms? Are those harms significant in terms of their negative effects? Do the harms affect a substantial number of people? Second, the debater then considers blame or the cause of the problems. Are the problems in the status quo caused by the present system, or are they caused by factors unassociated with the present system? If the debater can determine that the problem is caused by some part of the present system, then he or she can create a plan or a proposal to cure the harms. The easiest way to assess whether or not the proposal will cure the harms in the status quo is to determine if something about the status quo is causing those harms, then to determine how that cause can be eliminated or modified to reduce or eliminate the harms. Finally, the debaters, particularly those debaters who prepare to oppose the proposal, will want to consider the costs of change. The concept of cost is not limited to monetary cost. The debaters will want to consider what negatively valued effects the proposed change will have. Thus, by considering those four stock issues, debaters can begin to think about the kinds of arguments that can be used to support or oppose a change in policy.

The next two sections focus on how the Government and Opposition Teams can use the stock issues approach to formulate a set of arguments.

**Government Approach to Stock Issues**

When determining what kinds of arguments to construct, Government Teams ordinarily will focus their immediate thinking on the first three stock issues: ill, blame, and cure. Of course, as will be discussed later, they need to think about the issue of cost, but their thinking about that issue will ordinarily be determined by the response of the Opposition Team. Below is a list of questions that the Government speakers might consider when trying to determine important issues they may want to include in the debate:
# Stock Issues From the Government Viewpoint

|  | • What problems exist in the present system?  
|  | • How significant are those problems?  
|  | • Are the problems particularly harmful?  
|  | • Do those problems and harms affect a significant number of people?  
| Ill | • What is the cause of the problem?  
|  | • Can the cause of the problem be located to a particular feature of the present system?  
|  | • Is a particular feature of the present system a barrier to solving the problem?  
| Blame | • What proposal can the Government Team envision that can overcome the barrier that exists in the present system?  
|  | • What actions other than simply eliminating the barrier to solving the problem does the Government Team need to include in their proposal? Funding? Enforcement? Etc?  
|  | • In other words, what positive consequences will the Government Proposal produce?  
| Cure |  

The above questions are about consequences because they seek to determine the effects that actions have on people. In other words, the questions seek to determine if an action has positive or negative consequences on people. Ultimately, the Government Teams will attempt to support the idea that their proposal will have positive consequences. Perhaps a simple example about smoking in public places will help to clarify the use of stock issues for a policy motion:
Analyzing a Debate Topic

Stock Issues Applied to Smoking in Public Places
Government Viewpoint

| Ill       | • One significant problem with smoking in public places involves second-hand smoke.  
|           | • Second-hand smoke involves many nonsmokers who are using public places such as restaurants.  
|           | • Second-hand smoke can cause cancer and other problems for many nonsmokers.  
| Blame     | • The present system generally allows smoking in public places.  
|           | • Even where smoking is not allowed, enforcement is generally lax.  
|           | • The problem of second-hand smoke cannot be solved as long as the present system allows smoking in most public places and as long as the laws that do exist are not enforced.  
| Cure      | • The Government Team proposes to outlaw smoking in restaurants and other indoor places that are used by the public. The Government Team further proposes to enforce this law by having the police issue fines to businesses and individuals found in violation of this law.  
|           | • By outlawing smoking in public places and by instituting enforcement procedures, the Government proposal will reduce the problem of second-hand smoke.  

By considering the stock issues of ill, blame, and cure, the Government Team can create a list of issues that they may want to introduce in the debate. Those issues can be used to convince the audience of the wisdom of the policy they are advocating. Similarly, the Opposition Team may ask the same questions, but may come up with different answers.

As stated earlier, the Government Teams will focus on the first three of the stock issues. The forth issue, cost, is one that may or may not be raised by the Opposition Teams. If the Opposition Teams decide to raise issues related to cost, the Government Teams need to be prepared to respond to those issues.

**Opposition Approach to Stock Issues**

To help them determine what issues are important for them to introduce in the debate, the Opposition Team also will consider the four questions in the categories of ill, blame, cure, and cost. They almost certainly will have different answers to those questions; answers that will help them construct their own arguments as well as anticipate arguments that the Government Team may make. The table below lists the stock issues along with questions that the Opposition Team might want to ask as a part of their analysis.
Stock Issues from the Viewpoint of the Opposition

| Ill   | • What problems exist in the present system?  
|      | • Are the problems less significant than the Government Team argued? 
|      | • Are the problems less harmful than the Government Team suggested? 
|      | • Do those problems and harms affect only a small number of people? |
| Blame | • What is the cause of the problem?  
|      | • Can the cause of the problem be located in something unrelated to the present system? 
|      | • Can the present system overcome barriers to solving the problem? |
| Cure  | • Does the Government proposal fail to overcome the cause of the problem? 
|      | • Are there other reasons that the Government proposal will fail to solve the problem? |
| Cost  | • Will the Government proposal create problems that are more significant than those in the present system? 
|      | • Will the problems created by the Government proposal affect more people than those problems created by the present system? |

The questions above can be used by the Opposition Teams to help them reply to arguments introduced by the Government Team. They also can be used by the Opposition Team to create arguments of their own. The next table illustrates how those stock issues might be used in analyzing potential arguments about the motion regarding smoking in public places.
### Stock Issues Applied to Smoking in Public Places
#### Opposition Viewpoint

| Ill | - Public places do not contribute significantly to the issue of second-hand smoke.
|     | - Evidence that second-hand smoke can cause cancer and other problems for many nonsmokers is not linked to smoking in public places. |
| Blame | - The present system is moving toward providing non-smoking sections in public places such as restaurants.
|     | - Most second-hand smoke occurs in homes, not in public places.
|     | - When laws are not enforced, the blame lies not with the present system, but with law enforcement officers. |
| Cure | - If law enforcement officers do not enforce the current laws, they will not enforce new laws instituted by the Government proposal.
|     | - By outlawing smoking in public places and by instituting enforcement procedures, the Government proposal will do little to reduce second-hand smoke, the majority of which occurs in homes. |
| Cost | - By banning smoking in public places, the Government proposal harms the rights of smokers.
|     | - By banning smoking in restaurants, the Government proposal hurts restaurant owners.
|     | - By banning smoking in public places, the Government proposal severely harms the economy. |

Thus, the table above shows how debaters might use the stock issues for a policy motion to create a list of arguments to introduce in the debate. Some of those issues will be used to respond to arguments introduced by the Government Team, and others will be used as independent arguments introduced by the Opposition Team.

### Summary

This chapter has introduced the idea of analyzing the motion for debate. Analysis of a motion is divided into analysis of the background of the motion, analysis of the type of topic, analysis regarding definition and interpretation of the motion, and analysis of potential issues. Analysis of issues is focused on stock issues for propositions of value and policy.

Although all debaters are aided by clear and careful analysis of the motion, some debaters will focus on certain elements of analysis while others will focus on other elements. For instance, the first speaker supporting the motion will focus on defining and interpreting the
motion while the other speakers will focus less on that element. The Government speakers will focus on the stock issues of ill, blame, and cure while the Opposition speakers will focus more on the stock issue of cost.

After analyzing the topic to identify potential issues, the debaters are then free to begin to use those issues to construct their speeches for and against the motion. The system used for analysis is not necessarily the system that will be used to construct their arguments, but the identification of those arguments is important to construction of what later will be called a “case” for and against the motion.
Terms and Concepts From Chapter 4

Check your memory and comprehension by describing or defining these key terms and concepts:

- Stock issues
- Stock issues for a value motion
- Criteria
- Stock issues for a policy motion

Discussion Questions For Chapter 4

- What is the difference between defining ambiguous terms and interpreting a motion for debate?

- What is the basic difference between a value motion and a policy motion?

- What is the basic standard for what constitutes a “reasonable” interpretation of a motion?

Exercise

- Divide debaters into groups of two and give them three to five general topic areas (economy, environment, public safety, etc.). Ask the debaters to phrase two motions for each topic area, one value motion, and one policy motion.

- Divide debaters into groups of two and ask them to analyze one of the value motions and one of the policy motions created in the previous exercise. Debaters should analyze the background, type, definition and interpretation, and potential issues of each motion.