

3-1949

## And Now to Define the Terms...

Roy C. Nelson  
*Colorado A & M College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/gavel>



Part of the [Speech and Rhetorical Studies Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Nelson, R. C. (1949). And now to define the terms... The Gavel of Delta Sigma Rho, 31(3), 48-49, 51.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Gavel of Delta Sigma Rho by an authorized editor of Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato.

## And Now To Define The Terms . . .

ROY C. NELSON  
Colorado A & M College

The quality of any debate depends to a large extent on a concise, accurate, and honest appraisal of the main terms in a resolution. Although almost all textbooks on argumentation carry chapters on definitions of terms and principles to be followed, yet many high school and college debaters are perfunctory in analyzing the questions they debate. In listening to hundreds of debates over a period of years, I have observed many recurring deficiencies in the interpretation of the resolution. Among the most common faults have been:

1. Strained and limited definitions for purpose of strategy.
2. Quibbling over terms when no issue is at stake.
3. Failure to contend definitions when they are issues.
4. Failure of affirmative plan to correspond to the terms as defined.
5. Reliance on dictionary definitions.
6. Inefficiency in the use of language.
7. Confusion over the meaning of the word "should".

### STRAINED DEFINITIONS

In any debate it is good argumentation to find areas of agreement so that the real areas of disagreement can be located and discussed. The meaning of the proposition should be one of these areas of agreement, and this agreement should be reached as early as possible in the debate. Often standing in the way of reaching agreement is a timidity on the part of the affirmative to accept the burden of advocating a far-reaching change. Frequently a question of policy is a statement calling for a bold solution, and the first of the faults mentioned above results when the affirmative shrinks from its responsibility by torturing the proposition to mean something less than it really does. If debate is merely an intellectual sport with a favorable decision from a judge as its major goal, then the affirmative is right in assuming as little burden of proof as possible by obscuring the real issues with fuzzy definitions. But if debate consists of informative and persuasive speaking, which seeks to clarify the thinking of an audience on an important problem, the affirmative should thoroughly analyze the proposition so that the discussion which follows will be significant.

In listening to a debate before the war on the proposition, "Resolved: That the United States should form an alliance with Great Britain," I heard an affirmative define "alliance" as a mere trade treaty. True, this affirmative presented an air-tight case for a trade treaty; but in so doing, it missed an opportunity to enlighten the audience on a possible military course of action for our nation in those critical days.

### QUIBBLING

Many negative teams accept the principle that definitions of the affirmative must in every case be challenged. Some negatives attack affirmative definitions ostensibly to take up time

so as to prevent the affirmative from developing its case. These practices cannot be defended as good strategy; certainly they are not good debate. The writer remembers what might have been an excellent debate on the proposition, "Resolved: That the federal government should provide a system of complete medical care available to all citizens at public expense," marred by the negative's insistence in its four speeches that "complete" meant total in an absolute sense. From the audience's viewpoint, such quibbling is tedious and dull. If the affirmative has interpreted the question fairly, the negative can do no better than to accept that interpretation, compromising on minor differences, if necessary.

### FAILURE TO CONTENT DEFINITIONS

Because of the nature of the wording of some propositions of policy, there may be an honest disagreement over the meaning of a term or of a term or of the entire resolution. In such case the meaning of the term becomes a bone of contention. When this occurs, the issue is primary. Agreement must be reached before going on to other arguments. There can be no real debate when each team is, in fact, debating a different proposition. In the proposition, "Resolved: That labor should be given a direct share in the management of industry," disagreement over the meaning of "direct share" was frequent. Once the author heard an affirmative team define "direct share" by advocating a plan of labor-management advisory committees, similar to those adopted by industry during the war. Without challenging this definition, the negative presented the same idea in a counterplan as a solution to the need which it had admitted. Of course there was no debate. This negative could have saved the time of everyone concerned with an announcement that it was in complete agreement with the affirmative solution, and then sat down. Here was a case in which a term should have been the main issue.

### PLAN NOT CORRESPONDING TO TERMS

If the affirmative argues a specific plan, it is traditionally presented in the second affirmative constructive speech. Intervening between the definition of terms and the plan are nearly all of the first constructive speech of the affirmative and all of the first constructive speech of the negative. The affirmative plan must meet the terms of the proposition, but sometimes the affirmative is remiss in that it ignores its own definitions and presents a plan which does not fulfill the requirements it has previously set up. This error could be overcome by the first affirmative speaker's sketching the affirmative plan immediately following the definition of terms and at that time showing how the plan meets the obligations of the affirmative under the proposition. By using this method of explication, the affirmative plan could also be the means of defining the proposition, for there is no better way of making meaning clear than by specific example. Wishing to

keep the negatives from attacking their plans as long as possible, affirmative teams may object to this procedure for reasons of strategy. But if an affirmative has a good plan, there can be no point in keeping the negative from debating it. When need is admitted by the negative, as it sometimes is, the main issue of the debate centers on the affirmative plan. There can be no logic in allowing two constructive speeches to be wasted before the real issue is presented to the audience.

#### RELIANCE ON DICTIONARY

Many college and high school debaters do not always realize the limitations of a dictionary as an authority for obtaining the meaning of terms in a debate proposition. Too often *Webster's International Dictionary* is the only source quoted. Semantics has demonstrated that words do not have absolute meanings; that some words have many meanings; and that words are modified by context. It is quite obvious that "federal", "world", and "government" standing by themselves mean something different from "federal world government" phrased as one term. The proposition must be interpreted as a whole; and to do that, the aid of specialized authorities in the fields of government, education, law, or to whatever field the proposition may apply must be drawn upon.

#### ECONOMY OF LANGUAGE

Perhaps one of the most frequent errors in defining terms is inexact verbiage. To define terms so that they may be comprehended with the least possible mental effort by the listeners and at the same time to make the meaning unmistakably clear is the goal toward which both teams should strive. A word cannot adequately be defined by a mere synonym. Neither can a term be made clear by explaining it in more technical language than the original. Nor should it be necessary to use up the major portion of the first constructive speech to explain the meaning of the proposition. Purely personal judgments and loaded labels add little to debating and certainly need to be avoided in defining terms. Economy of language results from a careful choice of specific, concrete, and objective symbols. To achieve this result, definitions cannot flow from the inspiration of the moment but must be thoughtfully prepared beforehand.

#### MEANING OF "SHOULD"

As the word "should" appears in almost every question of policy, its meaning ought, therefore, to offer no problem to the experienced debater. However, anyone who listened to the debates on "Federal World Government" last year knows that this auxiliary verb caused considerable perplexity. Even in some of the debates at the West Point National Tournament, quibbles arose over the meaning of "should". To avoid confusion over the interpretation of "should" may perhaps be one of the reasons the N.U.E.A. Committee eliminated it entirely from the current national high school question: "Resolved: That the United Nations now be revised into a federal world government." Nevertheless, "should" is implied even in this proposition.

Then what does "should" mean in a question of policy? Does it mean the policy *would* be

adopted? Does it mean the policy *could* be adopted? Does it merely mean that morally and ethically the proposal *ought* to be adopted? To answer these questions, the author believes that the affirmative is under no obligation to show that its plan would be accepted and written into law; however, the affirmative must demonstrate that the proposal is feasible, practicable, and possible, or that it could be adopted. Legality and constitutionality must be waived by both sides. The affirmative may argue that its proposal ought to be adopted for ethical and moral reasons, but it must do more; the affirmative must show that its plan is attainable and the necessary instruments can be created to put it into operation. In support of the proposition, "Resolved: That the federal government should adopt a policy of equalizing educational opportunity in the tax supported schools by annual grants," the affirmative may advocate equality of educational opportunity as a desirable democratic goal, but the practical means of achieving this ideal must be demonstrated.

With the prevalence of various public opinion polls, negative teams have frequently used these polls as evidence. They argue that a particular proposal *should* not be adopted because a majority of the people are opposed to it. To accept this argument would be to make debating *per se* ridiculous. Carrying this argument to its logical conclusion would result in replacing a discussion of the merits of a policy by a sampling of public opinion by Dr. Gallup. It should be remembered that many federal and state statutes were once bitterly opposed by an overwhelming majority. One of the purposes of debate is, of course, to convince that majority of the wisdom of the proposed course of action. Public opinion, continually responding to argument in our press, radio, and legislative halls, is seldom static. That is as it should be. Public opinion becomes a "should" factor only when widespread acceptance is necessary to insure the practicability of the plan. Prohibition of manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages illustrates a case where such an argument is valid.

An article well worth the attention of every coach and debater is one by F. W. Lambertson, entitled, "The Meaning of the World 'Should' in a Question of Policy," appearing in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* for December, 1942. After examining the viewpoints of many authorities in argumentation, Professor Lambertson concludes: "A plan 'should' be adopted if it is wise, good, desirable and practicable; if, of all the alternate courses of action, it will most adequately remedy the existing or threatened evils."

#### AGREEMENT THROUGH PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION

In seeking to remedy these troublesome areas in determining the meaning of a resolution, various forensic tournaments have experimented with a short conference preceding the debate. With the critic or judge acting as moderator, the two sides discuss the proposition to iron out any differences in interpretation. This method is effective in helping the participants reach agreement before the formal speeches begin,

(Continued on Page 51)



### And Now to Define the Terms . . .

and it is successful in eliminating many of the deficiencies which grow out of defining terms. When this procedure is used, it should be remembered that for the debate to be intelligible to the audience, the audience must possess the same understanding of the meaning of the resolution as the two teams. Any preliminary discussion of terms should, then, be conducted so as to benefit the listeners as much as the participants.

### GOOD DEFINITIONS MAKE FOR GOOD DEBATING

Proceeding with a sound philosophy of debate and knowledge of the principles of the use of language, the debater need have no difficulty in defining the proposition. If in any debate the state of the controversy is sharply delineated so that the real dispute of the matter can be attacked, then good work in grasping the meaning of the resolution has been accomplished. When this is true, proponents and opponents of the proposition, critics, and audience will enjoy stimulating argument.