

UTILIZING DEFINITIONS IN TOPIC REPORTS

By Greg Myrberg

It is quite likely, for a number of reasons, that during the year the topic will be affected by both the discovery and interpretation of key words in the resolution not fully understood or predicted during the drafting process. This is natural, but the authors of the topic reports and the drafters of the resolutions should attempt to minimize the drastic reinterpretation of the resolution through neglect, haste, or oversight. The following guidelines are meant as suggestions based on experience and not as an ultimate checklist. Knowing and utilizing a wide variety of terms in a particular area greatly aids the topic drafting process. It is not unusual for resolutions to be dramatically altered during the three-day discussion period or to have their permanent value determined by the meaning of a single word.

Include all key terms. The definitions for frequently used words are available from the NFHS and a variety of dictionaries. Consider drafting some resolutions based on similar past resolutions. This may diminish the “surprise” factor. Do not underestimate the need for definitions. Often, the definitions of simple words such as “water” or “government” or “education” prove to be critical in the decision-making process. Include terms which may not be in your top choices for topics. Include definitions which help in understanding other definitions or issues in the topic.

Choose the word in its correct grammatical form. This is simple but important. Substantially is not substantial even though they are often closely related. This also applies to the manner in which the word is used in the resolution. Words can have different interpretations based on the context of the other words around them. “To improve” roads may have a different meaning from “to improve” education.

Provide a variety of definitions from a diversity of sources. Policy resolutions are sometimes complex and debaters are very thorough researchers. Use sources outside of the usual dictionaries available in the library reference area. Specialized dictionaries and other reference sources appropriate to the topic area are almost always available. Use Internet search engines. Utilize the specialized reference resources available at your school or in your community. Be sure to employ a few search services such as Lexis/Nexis, MAS, Thomas, or Electric Library which allow searches by phrases and/or proximity of words to each other.

Consider the debate implications of the definitions provided. If a particular definition has a significant impact on the resolution, the topic report can be a means to reflect that. For instance, there may be a definition which appears reasonable but also seems potentially to under-limit or over-limit the debates on the topic. For example, a definition which indicates that retirement security is based on money might restrict the notion of retirement security intended by the drafters, who are perhaps interested in having debates on the provision of medical care as well. It is useful to know the strengths and weaknesses of various definitions and to incorporate them into the report. Try to demonstrate that definitions enhance the predictability and educational value of the debates by using examples of affirmative and negative approaches based on the definitions included.

Provide definitions of the words in as much context as possible. There are two concerns here. First, it may be better where possible to provide field-contextual phrases as opposed to the definitions of single words. Resolutions which do not have a significant number of words in contextual phrases are likely to be underlimited. Resolutions which have too few definitions or narrow interpretations are likely not to produce much educational growth during the year. Words found within phrases with fairly broad interpretations seem to have the best chance to be successfully used in resolutions. Include relatively long illustrations, if valuable. Second, whenever possible, it is useful to include definitions in the context of use by professionals within the field defined by the topic. Again, a variety of professional uses are helpful to the wording process.

Recognize the limitations of typical sources. Legal dictionaries are often discussing the words in the context of law cases, especially those where the word's meaning was important to the eventual court decision. Sources are sometimes using the rhetorical meaning of a term such as "we are waging war on disease." Some field-contextual definitions may be too technical or too limiting.

Utilize two types of definitions. Definitions can be broadly categorized in two ways: meaning and example. The first type of definition is usually found in dictionaries. The second type is usually found in field-contextual articles and discussions.

The following definition of foreign policy is typical of those found in dictionaries:

Jack Plano and Roy Olton, *The International Relations Dictionary*, 1982. p. 7

A strategy or planned course of action developed by the decision makers of state vis a vis other states or international entities, aimed at achieving specific goals defined in terms of national interest.

It is easy to understand this definition but it is somewhat more problematic to see how those terms are used in the world of policy making. The following contextual illustration is a good example of many of the principles identified above and it demonstrates the actual use of the term. The topic was Resolved: That the United States should substantially change its foreign policy toward Russia. Note that many of the words in the resolution are used in the first sentence.

James Collins, U.S. Ambassador to Russia, *Federal News Service*, March 12, 1997. Online. Lexis/Nexis

Our *policy toward Russia* (italics added), as toward the other Newly Independent States, rests on five enduring American interests. First, we seek to limit and reduce the Cold War nuclear arsenal and other weapons of mass destruction, and to ensure proper control of their constituent components; this is the most urgent national security task of the post Cold-War era and the task most immediately tied to the safety of every American citizen; Second, we are encouraging and helping Russia and the other eleven countries to democratize and develop market

economies. This is in fact the prerequisite to the integration and further prosperity of Russia and the other Newly Independent States; Third, we seek to encourage the integration of these countries into international political and economic institutions, and to construct a durable security structure for Europe; Fourth, we are promoting the development of stable, cooperative relations among the a Newly Independent States based on the principle of equality, independence, and security, and the development of comprehensive ties with the international community. The collapse of centralized imperial rule from Moscow has opened the opportunity for these young states to achieve a future of democracy and freedom. But regional peace and the political settlement of conflicts are a vital U.S. objective if we are to prevent flareups to regional or global stability, from this area. Finally, we seek to advance the interests of American business, investment and trade throughout the Newly Independent States.