

**Connecticut Middle School Debate League
Greenwich Eastern Middle School, April 22, 2017
This House would colonize Mars.**

Reviewing a Round

By Everett Rutan

ejrutan3@ctmsdebate.org

A Coach asked me to provide a more detailed analysis of a round I judged at the April 22 tournament. In what follows I'm addressing the Prop team in the round. If you find it's useful, feel free to make it available to your debaters. If you have questions, please email me.

The Review

Your Coach asked me to write an analysis of the round I judged on April 22 when you debated the team from Torrington. She will tell you that I can be bit blunt—I'm used to critiquing older students—so please don't be offended by anything I say.

On balance it was a good debate. Your and your opponents' cases were well prepared and well presented. Everyone spoke well. I do recall that the three of you made sure to introduce yourselves to the other team and offer to shake hands with everyone both before and after the debate. Many debaters don't pay attention to that last bit. Debate is a competition: you want to win. But the result is not entirely objective. There are a lot of influences on the result. It doesn't hurt to be friends with everyone.

Notes

The only reason we can have this discussion is that I take an excellent flow during a debate, even if I do say so myself. I present a shortened version of the flow below that we will use to discuss the round. I've also included a photo of my handwritten notes from the round. You may not be able to read all of it; some of the handwriting is sloppy and I abbreviate. But it should give you an idea of what is possible.

One of your goals as a debater should be to take notes during every debate you are in or observe. You should flow every speech, even if you speak first. You may spot something your partners miss that lets you help them during the prep time before their speeches.

Like any skill, note-taking requires practice. I was in my first debate in 1967. Laptops, iPads, cellphones and even cheap copiers didn't exist. Everyone had to take notes through high school and college. The practice I got through debate really helped.

Taking notes improves your ability to win debates. When you take notes you are using three senses: hearing, sight and touch. Some research says this improves cognition. You better understand and remember what is being said. Since you win debates more by using what you hear your opponents say than by what you bring into the round, that's important.

Taking notes is also the only way you can review your performance after the tournament and figure out what you need to do to improve. I'm what is known as a friendly judge. Your Coach knows me and can ask me to spend some time writing this analysis. But after most debates, the only record you will have are the notes you take yourself. The judge may write something useful on the ballot, but I'm sure you've seen enough ballots to know that these are hit and miss. The only way you can explain what happened to your coach and get advice is if you have a good flow to refer to. (Your second goal, after learning how to take good notes, is to learn to use those notes to critique yourself!)

What Happened?

I've attached a brief flow at the end: one column for each of the six speeches, with Prop-related arguments in the top half and Opp-related arguments in the bottom half. I abbreviate the Prop contentions as "P1", "P2", etc., and the Opp contentions as "O1", "O2", etc. When I transcribe my flow for comments, I include the details of each argument that I recorded during the debate. You will have to look at the photo for that, though I will mention some things later. Here I will just indicate when a contention was discussed and the key idea presented.

The first thing I look at are the blank spaces. The MGC doesn't cover Opp (well, he does attack the Opp plan, but only starts on the contentions at the 5-minute mark, when the speech should be over). The MOC doesn't cover Prop. But the LOC covers P1 and P3, and the LOR covers P1, P2 and P3. The PMR is a laundry list covering a lot of arguments, but never mentions any of the contentions specifically.

Failure to cover your opponents' contentions is almost always fatal. It should always be done by naming them explicitly. In fact, if you had to pick one rule to follow in every debate without exception it would be: "Every debater should specifically refute or support every contention that has been presented in the debate prior to their speech." In other words:

- PMC: present the Prop contentions
- LOR: present the Opp contentions **and** reply to the Prop contentions
- MGC: reply to all the Opp contentions and to all the Opp replies to the Prop contentions
- MOC: reply to all Opp and all Prop contentions
- LOR: reply to all the Opp and Prop contentions
- PMR: reply to all the Opp and Prop contentions

Note that it is better for the LOR and the PMR to summarize the debate around the most important voting issues, but the summary should clearly refer to all of the contentions from both sides. However, that can be a bit tricky for a beginning debater. "Cover all the contentions" is a simple rule, it's easy to follow, and it can win most debates.

Note also the MOC/LOR are both Opposition speeches and one immediately follows the other. It is better if the two speakers divide up the contentions and only mention each one once. But if they repeat themselves it's no great harm.

The primary reason Prop lost this round is because Prop never covered the Opp contentions, while Opp covered the Prop contentions.

But, you say, Prop answered all of the objections Opp presented to the Prop contentions! I'll talk about who might have won specific arguments later on. But even if Prop won all of their contentions, the entire Opp case went unopposed, and that's usually very bad for Prop.

But, you say, Prop did cover all the ideas in the Opp contentions in the PMR! Perhaps, but those are technically new arguments in rebuttal. They are also presented for the first time at a point in the debate when Opp has no chance to reply, which is unfair. Finally, they don't specifically mention the Opp contentions. The last may seem like a fine point, but I think that it's important for debaters to show me that they are actually responding to the other team.

But, you say, Opp only answered P2 for the first time in the LOR, so that's a new argument in rebuttal! Technically that is true. I'll admit I'm not entirely strict or consistent enforcing the rule about no new arguments in rebuttal, especially among less experienced debaters. But Prop did have a chance to reply in the PMR, so Opp committed a lesser sin.

Weighing the Arguments

As a first cut, then, let's say Prop wins all their contentions and Opp wins all their contentions. No one really weighs the two sides in this debate, so by default Prop and Opp leave that to me as the judge.

The Prop contentions:

1. Colonizing Mars will advance knowledge;
2. Colonizing Mars will ensure survival of the human race;
3. Colonizing Mars will fulfill mankind's desire to expand and explore;

all assume that we can successfully colonize Mars. If we can't colonize Mars, none of these things happen.

Some contentions are more important than others. The second Opp contention is that Mars will damage human health so the colony will fail. Winning that contention defeats the entire Prop case. And O1 is that the costs of trying to colonize Mars will speed up the death of the Earth, which goes a long way to defeating P2. So, uncontested, the Opp contentions beat the Prop contentions.

When I debated (back when dinosaurs still roamed the earth, we had to watch out for the pterodactyls while chipping notes into our stone tablets) everyone used something called a "stock issues case" which has five parts:

- A **harm** exists that should be alleviated;
- The status quo cannot fix this harm (**inherency**);
- A **plan**, which implements the resolution or motion;
- The plan solves the problem by eliminating the harm (**solvency**);
- The plan has additional **advantages** if adopted.

No one presents cases like this any more—though you will find the stock issues case explained in most debate textbooks—but it is a useful tool for thinking about Prop cases. If Prop hasn't considered all of these items, the missing piece could be a hole in the case that Opp can exploit. The problem with the Prop case in this debate is that it assumes solvency, but never demonstrates it. Prop assumes Mars can be successfully colonized. Unfortunately for Prop, the Opp case argues that Prop will not solve the problem because Mars can't be colonized. I doubt that Opp realized this was what they were arguing, but it's the right way for a judge to weigh the two cases.

But, you say, we modeled the debate as, “given that it is possible to colonize Mars, we should go.” Prop reminds me of this in the LOR. I’m not sure I know what “modeling” the debate is supposed to mean, but this argument is like the old joke about an engineer, a physicist and a mathematician starving in a lifeboat with a can of beans. The engineer says they should use one of the oars to smash it open. The physicist points out that the angle of impact is likely to cause most of the beans to splatter into the ocean. The mathematician solves the problem, as mathematicians are wont to do, by first assuming they have a can opener.

Prop has the right to assume certain things when presenting their case. This is called “fiat power.” In particular Prop can assume that the motion will be adopted. But Prop cannot assume away all of the contingent problems. Going to Mars is likely to be expensive, dangerous, take a long time, and may not be technologically possible. If Prop can ignore these, then there wouldn’t be much of a debate.

To see this clearly, consider the following. If Prop can assume it’s possible to colonize Mars, why stop there? Why can’t Prop assume Mars has been terraformed and has a perfect climate? Why can’t Prop assume everyone can’t simply transport themselves to Mars instantaneously, at no cost? Why can’t Prop assume that all humans will instantly adopt to the lower gravity with no ill health effects? Why can’t...I think you’ve got the idea.

But, you say, proving we can colonize Mars is really hard. How can a Prop team ever win support for this motion? First, debate isn’t about proving things, it’s about persuading a judge. Opp says colonizing Mars will cause health problems and cost a lot. Respond to those arguments. Many diseases have been cured, we can learn to deal with no or low gravity. And the research may help with other medical conditions. Yes, it will cost a lot to colonize Mars. But it doesn’t all have to be spent at once, and compared to the cost of a meteor hitting the Earth it’s cheap. Opp may have answers to these, and more objections. They reply, you reply, back and forth. Last argument standing may win!

Another Way of Thinking about the Motion

I thought this was a particularly difficult resolution for Prop, and was surprised that they won as many as 45% of the debates. Colonizing Mars in terms of a self-sustaining community, is probably beyond our existing technology. Maybe in 100 year or so, but even landing a person there by 2030 as some have suggested is a bit of a stretch.

There is a better way to argue this motion, but I’m not sure most middle school student will find it. Consider this case:

- *Motion: This House would colonize Mars.*
- *Prop plan/interpretation: The US, alone or with other nations, should establish a long-term project to colonize Mars, and spend substantial and increasing sums to that end.*
- *We believe our plan will have substantial benefits for the US and the world, **whether or not a colony can be successfully established in the near future.** We express no opinion on whether a colony on Mars is currently technologically feasible or when such a colony will be successfully established. We believe most of the benefits arise from the project itself, and not the colony.*
- *P1: The Mars Project will lead to significant advances in science and technology.*

- P2: *The Mars Project will give us knowledge we need to protect Earth and the human race from existential threats.*
- P3: *Like the Moon Race in the 1960's, the Mars Project will inspire mankind, especially youth, to greater achievement both scientifically, politically and economically.*

But, you say, that's our case! You stole it! Yes, I did steal it. That's what debaters do. But it has one subtle and very critical difference from your case. Your case depends on colonizing Mars to work. My case only depends on **trying** to colonize Mars. And that's all the difference in two worlds!

Nits

I notice a lot of little things that debater do. They aren't really important to the result or to my decision, but they are ways you can do just a little bit better. Most judges probably won't notice them, so you might say, "who cares?" But doing little things well contributes to the overall impression that you are the better debater. In a competition, you want every advantage you can get.

1. At the end of the PMC, regarding P3, the contention that colonizing Mars will fulfill man's desire to expand and explore, Prop points to the benefits of the Moon Landing and concludes, "who says it won't happen again". Notice I bracketed this on the handwritten flow.

This is a terrible argument. It's like trying to tell your Mom, after she caught you playing in traffic, "What's the problem, no one got hurt."

Always try to make positive, factual arguments:

The Moon Race inspired the US and the world. Children had new heroes who showed them we could accomplish great things. European colonization of the Americas led to new crops and room for new societies and the great US democracy to grow. This is exactly what going to Mars will do for the next generation!

2. Prop begins a POI addressed to the LOC with the phrase, "Don't you agree..." specifically, "Don't you agree that colonization will focus on solving health problems on Mars." Note I have "DYA" circled on the handwritten flow.

The other team gets paid extra for not agreeing with you. Even if it's a good question, starting it this way makes it sound weak. Since you only get a few POIs accepted in any debate, you want them to be strong, aggressive, attacking. For instance, here:

"Didn't we say that curing disease and countering health problems was one of the benefits of going to Mars?"

This question makes an argument and counters the Opp contention.

There are cases where "Don't you agree..." is an appropriate lead in to a question. That is when you want to confirm that you and your opponent are in agreement on a fact as a lead in to an attack. The purpose is to pin the speaker down. But this requires a follow up question. It works in debate formats with cross-ex, but not as well in Parli where POIs are few and without follow up. For example in cross-ex:

*Do you agree the Apollo astronauts suffered from weightlessness and space sickness?
Didn't we learn how to alleviate or cure these through the space program?*

They'll say yes to the first question because it supports their argument about health risks. The next one makes your argument that they can be remedied.

To Do's

The most important thing you need to do to improve is to learn to listen more carefully. You demonstrate that you are a good listener by taking good notes and responding directly to the contentions presented by your opponents. Your replies don't even always have to be great replies: sometimes simply making sure you say something against each contention is enough to win the round. Many of the arguments presented in the PMR would have been good answers to the Opp contentions if they had appeared in the MGC. Of course, then Opp might have answered these, but then you would have had to answer them and so on. That's what debate is about.

The second thing you need to do is much harder. Even most high school debaters don't understand how to construct (or deconstruct) a good arguments or case. There are a lot of useful concepts like the stock issues case that you can learn about in textbooks. The problem is that every motion is a bit different. It can be difficult to understand how to apply these theoretical tools to practical situations, or to recognize them in the middle of a debate, especially when you are busy taking notes, trying to think up a POI, and worried about what you are going to say when it's your turn to speak in 3 minutes.

The best time to learn debate theory, and how to apply it, is when you're not debating. After the tournament, when you have your notes, and the ballot, and plenty of time, you can review each round with your partners and your coach and explore ways to improve.

Abbreviated Flow

PMC	LOC	MGC	MOC	LOR	PMR
<p>Intro TH = PPP w/NASA Colony—working settlement Theme—progress Modeling—given ability, go P1: Advance Knowledge P2: Ensure survival of the Human Race P3: Fulfill desire to expand and explore</p>	<p>Intro P1: Rovers can do it P3: If colonists die, won't feel so good</p>	<p>P1: CAT scan from moon project Rovers not same as people P2: no Opp reply Many risks P3: Moon landing popular POI: Really if '000s die? Outweighs cost POI: Disease on Mars? Find cures</p>		<p>Prop then Opp P1: Rovers P2: Same things that ruined Earth will ruin Mars. Mars gets hit by asteroids too P3: no pride if colonists all die</p>	<p>"Mars tugs... Intro Earth problems? Easier to start over than fix Harm Mars? We've learned from our mistakes Health? "given ability", so problems solved Terraforming will make Mars Earth-like Mars risk? Likely one—Earth or Mars—will survive Opp world: US no longer leading nation; no backup for survival Prop world: Gain knowledge, inspiration Which side better advances the human race?</p>
	<p>Plan: invest in protecting/fixing Earth O1: Mars project will speed up death of Earth POI: Need safe alternative? Yes, Earth O2: Mars has bad health effects POI: Colony can fix? Caused by UV. Need to fix Earth first O3: Most prefer to fix Earth before going to Mars</p>	<p>Plan: not feasible; too expensive; can't control many events [At 5:00 began to discuss O1, O2, O3.]</p>	<p>O1: Colonies have failed before, Vikings POI: some succeeded? Yes High cost. POI: PPP? Still gov't funded O2: Radiation, gravity, disease O3: Pollution here; don't need Mars</p>	<p>O1, O2, O3 Fix Earth is the ethical thing to do.</p>	