

Introduction to Debating Course Module 5

Handout: Motions

Motions

Introduction to Motions

In a parliamentary-style debate, we are pretending to be in a “house” of parliament and the teams are compelling the members of this house (adjudicators) to vote yes or no to the motion.

Simply put, a motion is an idea put forward by the government (supporters) that they discuss with the opposition (the opps™). After everyone has had their turn to speak, the adjudicators tell both teams what an ordinary intelligent voter from this house would have voted on.

The “*Need*”

Every debate has a “*need*” or “*purpose*.¹” This is a compelling reason to come to the table to argue the debate. To identify a need, one must simply ask the question:

What is the reason an average intelligent person would consider this motion worth discussing?

For example, for the motion:

This house supports giving the WHO power to temporarily confiscate facilities and intellectual property related to the production and research of COVID-19 vaccines.

This motion gives us the opportunity to explore several candidate needs:

- Unequal access to vaccines, particularly in low and middle income countries
- Slow research and development of vaccines
- Use of IP to restrict vaccines

A few observations can be made using these needs:

- A need is typically framed as an *issue*, that the motion promises to solve
- The need is *atomic*, ie. a single issue, however, a motion may have multiple needs
- The need is *specific*, ie. focused on a particular idea, rather than trying to cover all the issues of the debate

For British Parliamentary debate, the team roles and responsibilities around the need is as follows:

OG	Identify the need <i>If rejected, defend</i> the need	OO	Accept the need <i>and Provide “alternate”</i> <i>or</i> Reject the need <i>and Attack</i> the need
CG	<i>If rejected, defend</i> the need	CO	

¹ An alternate is an alternative solution to the problem. This does not have to be a specific policy, but it needs to be a way to improve upon the problem set forth by the need.

For a 1v1 team format such as Asians or WSDC, the team roles and responsibilities around the need is as follows:

Prop/Gov	Identify the need <i>If rejected, defend</i> the need	Opp	Accept the need <i>and Provide “alternate”</i> <i>or</i> Reject the need <i>and Attack</i> the need
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Deconstructing a Motion

A **typical**² motion can be divided into the following parts, in addition to the need – which is rarely explicitly mentioned.

Assuming the technology exists, this house supports transferring the consciousness of the smartest living beings

Spec. (1)

Prompt

Subject (1)

Spec. (2)

after their death into artificial intelligence systems.

Spec. (3)

Subject (2)

Specification

A specification provides further context or explanation on the motion. It may be complimenting a subject or object, or it may be complimenting the motion as a whole. For example, in the motion provided above, spec. (1) is providing further context on the entire motion, clarifying that the motion gives the government *fiat* (Explained later). Spec. (2) is explaining what is being transferred and spec. (3) is specifying when.

Prompt

Prompts are general phrases explaining what the motion is doing. You may encounter phrases like “this house would,” “this house believes that,” “this house supports,” “this house regrets.” While these terms generally hint what is expected of the motion (a THW motion would typically expect you to argue a policy) it is dangerous to use the prompt *alone* when trying to understand what the motion is about. ALWAYS consider the info-slide, specifications, and generally what an average intelligent person would think the motion is about.

² I cannot stress this enough, there are **NO formulas** in debating. Even if you have a guideline, there will **ALWAYS** be exceptions to the rule.

Subject

This is not the subject the verb is acting on, rather it is the subject that the prompt is acting on. For example, for the motion:

THR the glamorisation of hookup culture

The subject is surprisingly **not** hookup culture, ie. the motion is not about whether hookup culture is good or bad, but instead, the subject is *glamorisation*, whereas hookup culture is a *specification*.

Why this is important is because a strong case for this motion will focus on how glamorisation of hookup culture affects society, rather than arguing whether hookup culture is a plus or a minus.

Motion Types

Note: While these types help discuss general characteristics of motions, note that this is purely descriptive and does *not* necessarily apply to every single motion and there may be exceptions to every single characteristic given about a motion type. In the end, your common sense and judgment trumps any rule or guideline that can be given about a motion.

Open, Closed, and Semi-Closed

These categorisation focuses on the scope of valid interpretations of the motion, with each giving a different level of freedom to teams to make cases. Note here that you need to look at both the info-slide and motion when looking for these categories, for example, if you get the motion:

THW do it.

It appears to be an *open* motion, however, depending on what info-slide you are given, it may have significantly different implications. Eg:

- **Open:** You are offered a red pill by Morpheous. He explains that taking it will reveal the harsh reality of the world you live in, with no choice to turn back.
- **Semi-Closed:** There is a switch that will select one child at random to be selected as the subject. Upon pressing this switch, all pain and suffering from the rest of the world will be transferred to that one child permanently. Everyone will live a life of joy and happiness, and any pain they can and will face will be now faced by this randomly selected child for the rest of their life. You have been given the choice to press this switch.
- **Closed:** As the president of the United States, you are given the ability to ban tobacco using an executive order.

Open

An open motion is a broad and *open-ended* motion, which allows for a wide range of interpretations. These motions typically require teams to focus strongly on world-building and characterisations. An example of an open motion is:

This house believes that equality is good.

Closed

A closed motion is the opposite, having a very specific set of interpretations and expectations. These motions typically require teams to focus on grounding and real-world analysis such as with the motion:

This house regrets the 2004 enlargement of the European Union

INFO-SLIDE: The 2004 enlargement was the largest expansion of the European Union in which the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia joined as member states.

Semi-Closed

Most motions live here, where they neither limit you to a very specific set of interpretations but there is a clear scope of the debate and where you can and cannot go. Examples include:

This house believes that developing country should not host international sporting events.

This house would mandate periodical marriage status renewal.

Familiar and Unfamiliar

This is a characterisation of how well you know the motion, subjective to the members of the team. Within familiar and unfamiliar motions, there are subcategories so, in total, we have:

- Familiar, as expected
- Familiar, against expectations
- Unfamiliar, as expected
- Unfamiliar, against expectations

Familiar, as expected

This is a motion that is familiar to the average intelligent person and to the members of the team. For example, a motion about elections should be something people have prior knowledge about, and it is reasonable to have prior knowledge about. In this case, you can make the assumption that the adjudicator will have some prior knowledge on the topic and run your case using that.

Familiar, against expectations

This is a motion that is unfamiliar to the average intelligent person but familiar to the members of the team. For example, if the motion is about the Anglo-Spanish war and you are a world history student, you are expected not to assume that your specialised knowledge is known by the adjudicators, even if you know for a fact it is. You are either expected to explain it in detail³ or not to use this knowledge.

Unfamiliar, as expected

This is a motion that is unfamiliar to the average intelligent person and to the members of the team. For example, a motion like:

This house would abolish the social security service.

You are not expected to know the particulars of social security checks, the number, and how to register. What you may be concerned about is pensions systems in general and taxpayer responsibilities etc.

³ Although this may not always be a good strategic decision

Unfamiliar, against expectations

These motions are assumed to be common knowledge by others, but may not be familiar to the members of the team. For example, at a Chinese tournament, you may encounter a motion about WeChat, while not being familiar with its functioning and integration within Chinese society. Another common issue is encountering a motion about sports while not watching sports at all, where you find yourselves shocked learning there's a winter olympics and F1 kills people.

Here, unfortunately, you will be at a disadvantage but your best bet is to make broader arguments, less focused on grounding and more focused on the analysis and argumentative portions of the debate that you can offer.

Predictive, Floating and Retrospective Motions

These categories explore what time the events pertaining to the motion happened.

Predictive

A predictive motion is making a judgment about what will happen in the future, for example in the motion:

This house supports the EU firmly committing to opening trade relations with China

A prediction has to be made about the ramifications of trade relations opening with China. Here, it is wise to focus on process analysis and tempering expectations. While it can be easy to *say* that this will be the solution to every economic issue that the EU is facing, it is simply more realistic and less burdening to argue that it is a need of the EU in the coming years and that it is aligned with their economic policies.

Floating

A floating motion is not particularly concerned with the time frame, although typically they are set in the present, there is little to no need from discussing when the motion occurs. For example,

This house believes that leaders of police forces should be elected by the local communities they serve

Here, it is a waste of time to discuss whether these are police forces of the 60s or today or the future, it is more fruitful to use aspects of all three and consider that the time frame is “floating.”

Retrospective

A retrospective debate is one commenting on the past. Usually, they are regretting something that has already happened, although this is NOT always the case, for example:

This house regrets art that normalizes reconciliatory narratives between oppressors and victims
In this motion, the art already exists and we are discussing whether or not it is regrettable or not.

Policy, Value, and Fact Motions

This is a common distinction made between motions, and helps us understand the general approach taken to win the debate. Although debaters tend to argue every debate like a policy debate, it is

useful to understand and appreciate that parliamentary debates can be varied in its topic selection and a good debater will adapt to this effectively.

Policy Motions

A policy debate is about the better approach. Which considers more stakeholders, offers more benefits and mitigates more harms. These are the debates where comparatives are king and everyone will make you sick of the terms “best case”, “worst case.” An example of a policy motion is:

This house would add 'regular citizens' to parole hearings

Value Motions

A value motion is concerned with evaluating the inherent morality of a thing. For example in the motion:

This house prefers the death of people over the death of culture

Arguments like “this will kill a lot of people” will not be valued as much. Rather, both teams are expected to explain the inherent value of our culture and whether it has the capacity of being more valuable than humans. While teams can do this using various approaches like humans’ value coming from their culture, permanence of human culture, or culture having no meaning without it being able to be interpreted by humans, but generally, this motion is less concerned with policies and decision making and more about making a value judgment.

Fact Motions

While these are usually rare, fact motions try to comment on whether something is true or not. For example, a fact motion could be:

This house believes that development aid does more harm than good

We are trying to argue whether the subject (development aid) is relatively more harmful or beneficial. Here, there is just a debate about whether the motion statement is true or false.