The Subject: Proposition

What is a proposition?

Etymology: From the Latin, "to set forth”

* As stated in a variety of forms in existing texts, the primary object of a debate proposition is **to focus the discussion** upon a **definite topic**, **to state precisely** and **clearly the subject** in dispute. "Only by means of the proposition can the exact point in controversy be determined" it "clears the ground of discussion" and holds "efforts to a single point."
* In an argument or debate, a proposition is a statement that affirms or denies something.

How do we develop/come up with a proposition?

With this apparently simple objective to be achieved, it is astonishing that such an aggregation of rules could develop around the business of obtaining a suitable proposition for debate. An examination of the leading texts in the field reveals some twenty-eight cautions to be heeded in this matter. In general, these tests arrange themselves in two categories: (1) Those having to do with the selection of a subject, and (2) Those having to do with phrasing that subject into a resolution for debate. Merely enumerating these various tests is surprisingly difficult, since many overlap, since the same rule is often stated in varying language with diverse illustrations making its identification not always certain, and since they are classified under sundry schemes by the authors. For example, according to

Professor Foster *Argumentation and Debating*, (Second rev. ed., 1932)

* in ruling that a proposition must be debatable, holds: It must not be obviously true or false; it must be capable of being proved approximately true or false; and, incidentally, it must not employ question-begging terms.

A. Craig Baird, *Public Discussion and Debate,* (Boston, 1928), 47.

* He discusses the question of debatability under the heading of whether the subject is profitable or not.

J. M. O'Neill and J. H. McBurney *The Working Principles of Argument*, (1932), 22-27.

* did not discuss debatability at all, except for a rule avoiding question-begging terms.

**The rules governing the selection of a proper subject for debate may be compiled as follows:**

* The proposition should not be obviously true or false. (There should be two distinct and reasonably balanced sides).
* It should be capable of being proved approximately true or false.
* It should not be a question of fact, which could be better determined by investigation, such as the weight of a horse or the capacity of a room.
* It should have ample information upon it available.
* It should be interesting.
* It should be timely.
* It should cover familiar ground for first practice.
* It should be worthwhile discussing.
* It should be adapted (familiar) to the speakers.
* It should be one where a comparatively thorough survey of all the evidence is possible.
* It should be selected for general suitability.

Phrasing the Proposition

When we set up a proposition for debate, we must take care in phrasing it so that we can maximize the educational benefits of academic debate. Some of the advice will follow:

1. It should not employ ambiguous words. (Be capable of but one interpretation).
2. It should embody one central idea. (Should not be double-headed, i.e., include two distinct subjects for debate. The proposition must be focused on one single idea.)

* A bad example may be "*Resolved: That Japan should abandon nuclear power plants and promote solar power generation."* (The two actions in the proposition are not necessarily paired together in discussing energy resources.).

1. It should not be too broad.
2. It should be broad enough to make possible several different lines of argument. (Not too narrow).
3. It should give to the affirmative the burden of proof.
4. It should be stated affirmatively. (The proposition must be expressed in an affirmative sentence so that the affirmative and the negative positions may not be confused.)
5. It should avoid negative terms.
6. It should not contain question-begging terms.
7. It should be brief, exact, concise, simple.
8. It should be stated preferably as a proposition of policy.
9. It should be concrete, specific.
10. It should exclude what is admitted, express the exact issue as understood by the debaters. (The proposition must be suitable for participants in terms of interest and difficulty.)
11. It should be stated as an assertion, not an interrogatory.
12. It should be stated as a resolution.
13. It should avoid dependent clauses.
14. It should be worded so that the advantages and disadvantages are equal. (The proposition must be neutrally worded. The proposition like "Resolved: That Japan should abolish inhumane death penalty" is biased in favor of the affirmative side.)
15. It should be sufficiently analyzed to furnish an arguable question.

In meditating upon this phalanx of warnings given by such a formidable aggregation of authority, a novice might be pardoned for supposing that the proposition would achieve its primary object with a few rules to spare.

TYPES OF PROPOSITION

**Proposition of Fact**

* A debate that is defined as a proposition of fact is a debate that is focused on whether something is true or not.
* Propositions of fact are concerned with factual question about events in the past, in the present, or predictions about future events. For example, a debate may address the following proposition of fact:

*Resolved: human activity is contributing to global warming.*

*Resolved: That the Hawks will win the Pacific League championship next year.*

The affirmative side would argue that humans are contributing to global warming while the negative side would argue that humans are not contributing to global warming. The main concern is the truthfulness of the proposition. There is no focus on the ethics of the proposition as this is when we come to a proposition of value.

**Proposition of Value**

A proposition of value looks at your beliefs about what is right or wrong and or good and bad. This type of proposition is focused on ethics and or aesthetics. An example of a proposition of value would be the following:

*Resolved: That television is a waste of time*

This type of proposition is trying to judge the acceptability of something and or make an ethical claim. Value propositions can also have these other more nuanced characteristics. Instead, affirming the good or bad of a proposition, a proposition of value can also make a case of one idea being better than another such as:

*Resolved: That exercise is a better use of time than watching television*

Now, the debate is focused not on good vs bad but rather on better vs worst. It is s slightly different way of looking at the argument. Another variation on the proposition of value is when the affirmative argues to reject a value such as in the following.

*Resolved: That encouraging the watching of television is harmful to young people*

The wording is slightly different from previous examples but the primary goal of the affirmative is to argue why television watching should not be valued or at least valued less.

One final variation of the proposition of value is the quasi-policy proposition of value. A quasi-policy value proposition is used to express a value judgment about a policy. An example would be

*Resolved: That mandatory vaccinations would be beneficial to school-age children*

Here the affirmative is not only judging vaccinations but simultaneously the potential policy of making vaccinations mandatory.

**Proposition of Policy**

Propositions of policy call for change. This type of proposition is pushing strongly against the status quo. They are often actions of the central and local governments. It is phrased as "X (agent) should do Y (action)" or sometimes "Y (action) should be done." Propositions of this type are most often used in academic debates. Some examples are given here.

*Resolved: That the cafeteria should adopt a vegetarian diet*

*Resolved: That Japan should abolish death penalty.*

*Resolved: That the American bases should be removed out of Okinawa.*

*Resolved: That the Japanese government should require manufactures to use significantly more recycled materials.*

*Resolved: That the Japanese government should ban all genetically modified foods.*

The examples above is used for a clear change. However, notice how there is no judgment on the current state affairs in the first example. In other words, there is no judgment that the non-vegetarian diet is good or bad or that a vegetarian diet is good or bad. This is one reason why this is not a proposition of value.

In the case of a proposition of policy, the affirmative supports the change while the negative supports the status quo.

JUDGMENT AND THE PROPOSITION

If we look at a flower and it appears to us red, we form a conclusion in our minds to that effect. This conclusion, this mental concept as it exists in our mind (or the act of forming it), is a judgment. Now if we attempt to convey this judgment to others, we generally do so by reducing it to words, that is, phrasing it in a proposition: "The flower is red." Thus, in ordinary language, judgment is the conclusion as it exists in the mind, while proposition is the expression of it in words

Conclusion

Debate propositions shape the entire direction and preparation for the debate itself. Therefore, it is important for debaters to understand what type of proposition they are dealing with. In addition, for teachers who are creating debates, they need to know exactly what they want the students to do in a debt when they create propositions.

*Reference:*

Nichols, A. (1935). *Debate propositions and contexts.* Quarterly Journal of Speech, 21:3, 355-370, DOI: 10.1080/00335633509380118