

Motion interpretation

A. Goal of the lesson

This lesson should assist students in grasping with the basic concepts of motion interpretation. This lesson discusses some general classification of motions and indications in a motion that provide some general guidance on how to best locate and understand the core clash of the motion set.

B. Activities

Lecture (20 min)

As this is the first step when engaging in a debate, debaters should be made aware of the interconnection of motion interpretation with other aspects in a debate such as definitions, burdens and deciding on a general strategy, in particular the expectations from opening teams in setting a proper “battle ground” for the debate.

Be aware that it is nearly impossible for this lecture to be understood in one class. In there is a time constrain, just go through the basics and give additional advices through feedback on exercise debates.

For the lecture, you can use some of the following materials:

[Quinn Simon, Debating, Chapter 1: Preparation, pg. 8-33.](#)

Essential reading that discusses how one should “find where the battleground should be (identifying the issue) and setting the battle at that location“, how should definitions be approached and sets a very useful distinction of various “triggers” that signalize that a particular approach in interpretation is preferable.

[Sonnerich Tim, Training Guide for University Debating: Tips, Tactics and First Principles, Chapter 1: Definitions, pg. 4-6.](#)

Although the chapter does not explicitly addresses motion interpretation, it introduces the “context test” and the “spirit of the motion test” when deciding on definitions, which in essence represent a set of questions that revolve around locating the core clash in a debate as a precondition to provide suitable definitions to a motion.

The author also discusses the “concept of first principles” (ch. 4, pg.14) which among the rest, depend on “a good understanding of the key concepts that form the fundamental ‘clash’ in the debate”. For an exercise on first principles, see Appendix 1.

For a more detailed discussion on first principles read **Sonnerich Tim, *There is No Spoon: Beginner, Intermediate and Advanced First Principles Debating*, in Monash Debating Review vol. 8, 2010, pg. 7-17. Available from:**

https://debate.uvm.edu/dcpdf/mdr_edition8.pdf

[Johnson Steven, Winning Debates, Chapter 4: Basic Strategy and Skills, focus on Prospective Framing, p.93-94.](#)

It discussed the issue of framing on several levels, including the “Prospective Framing“, which represents the “contest over the territory of debate“. Also see, pg.105-106 on the role of the PM in providing prospective framing.

Squirrell Tim, *An introduction to Framing*. Available from:
<https://www.timsquirrell.com/blog/2017/2/5/an-introduction-to-framing>

Discussing framing through a variety of examples.

[Chiang Vincent, *Blind Gazelles And All Of Their Friends: Hypothetical Motions In Debating*, in *Monash Debating Review* vol.13, 2015.](#)

Looks into hypothetical motions, as a particular type of motions which have gained prominence in recent years.

[Toronto Intermediate Debate Guide, *Framing the debate*, pg.2-3.](#)

Discusses the issue of framing through the example of the “trolley problem”.

[Snider Alfred, *Types of topics*](#)

A basic typology of motions.

[Stockley Andrew, *Defining Motions & Constructing Cases: Guidelines for Competitors and Adjudicators*, pg. 1-9.](#)

General guidelines on motion interpretation.

Exercise (40 min)

You can use one of the following exercises. They are put in order due to level of debaters (from easiest to hardest).

Exercise 1

Each student gets one or more motions, and is required to define the type of motion: value, fact, policy. Links to motions:

- <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/wkwqc8mthl1tyfs/AADeWyB5sTPNYjmLGoa23pqOa/Motions?dl=0>
- <https://idebate.org/deatabase>

Exercise 2

Go through some of the motions from every main type of motions and let students to explain what they would do to hold a good motion interpretation.

Note before: Please feel free to add more motions; these are just illustrations to clarify the exercises.

“Should” motions: Give one moral and one practical argument why should the following propositions be done.

THBT the UN should recognize a Palestinian state.

THBT suicide should be a criminal offence.

This House believes that religious beliefs should override government laws

“Too much/too little” motions: For each motion, come up with 3 arguments, each of them to prove one of the following: 1. That there is an abundance (in the case of ‘too much’) or a scarcity (in the case of ‘too little’) 2. That the harm outweighs the benefits 3. That the abundance or scarcity causes the harm.

This House believes we are too late in the fight against climate change.
This house believes there are too much money in sports.
This House believes that it is worse to eat too much than to eat too little.

“Has failed” motions: For each motion, come up with 2 different criteria against which you would prove a state of failure.

THBT capitalism has failed.
THBT UN has failed.

This House believes the EU has failed to properly respond to the refugee crises.

“General truth” motion: For each motion, define a minority (a specific group of people, situations, etc.) that even if proven they cannot or should not fall under the proposition in the motion, will still allow you to win the debate. Explain why.

THBT voting should be compulsory.
THBT every one of us is a feminist.
THBT it is better to be safe than sorry.

“Is justified” motions: For each motion, define a minority (a specific group of people, situations, etc.) that if proven they can or should fall under the proposition in the motion, will pave the way for you to win the debate. Explain why.

THB terrorism is justified.
THB capital punishment is justified.
THB launching a military coup against a democratic government can be justified.

“We” motions: For each motion, come up with at least 2 different actors to define who “we” are in the set motion.

THB we are the lost generation.
THB we should set a Space force.
THB we should strive for immortality.

Exercise 3: NOTE: Please feel free to add more motions; these are just illustrations to clarify the exercises.

For each motion, define two clashing ideologies, philosophies, values or concepts.

This House would require the ICC to allow a defence of “cultural relativism” to the crime of recruiting and using child soldiers.

[for ex. cultural relativism vs. rights of the child]

This House Would Make Vaccination Compulsory

[for ex. protection of public safety vs the right to choose]

This House Would Kill One to Save Many

[for ex. utilitarianism vs deontology]

C. Preparation

Materials

You can also search through the materials and videos below. Although, if you want to keep it simple, Simon Quinn's and Tim Soonreich's material is the best introduction to the concept of motion interpretation.

BONUS: THE DEBATE ON THE USAGE OF INFO SLIDES

[Llano Stephen, *The Disinformation Slide*](#), in Monash Debating Review vol.11, 2013.

Arguments against the usage of info slides

[Li Shengwu, *Sometimes the Facts Matter: A Case for Information Slides in British Parliamentary Debating*](#), in Monash Debating Review vol.11, 2013 (in response to Llano's text)

Arguments in favour of the usage of info slides

A list of videos:

[Peejay Garcia: World Schools Debate 5- Interpreting the Motion \[1:03:13\]](#)

[Monash Association of Debaters: Training session 2018 – Framing \[42:41\]](#)

[Toronto Debating Society: How to define the resolution in a debate \[10:07\]](#)

[Martin Devenney: How to debate awful motions? \[1:50:43\]](#)

[Will Jones: On First Proposition Part 1 \[14:40\]](#)

[Gina Iberri Shea: Motion Analysis - Debate Lecture - BWDA 2014 \[35:52\]](#)

[Gina Iberri-Shea: WUDC - Motion Analysis \(Beginner\) - IDAS 2012 \[53:25\]](#)

[Joseph Zompetti & Shanna Carlson: Session1. Motion Analysis and Framing Debates \[1:18:53\]](#)

[Geetha Creffield: Motion Analysis](#)

[Alfred Snider: Motion Analysis for Beginners](#)

[Patricia Johnson Castle: Motion Analysis for Different Motion Types](#)

[Stephen Boyle: Motion Analysis Methods](#)

Exercises

Think about some of the motions that are easy to interpret with minimum knowledge of the topic. For example:

- This House would limit media coverage of mass shootings.
- This House believes that women should not wear high heels.
- This House regrets the widespread belief that motherhood is a rewarding experience

- This House would require professional sports teams to be owned by their local communities instead of individuals or corporations
- This House believes that rehabilitation should be the only consideration in criminal sentencing.

Read the reading materials, especially Simon Quinn, Tim Sonnreich, and Steven Johnson.

Prepare a list of motions you can use as an example. You can use the following:

- This house believes that the state should fund the creation of, and access to, realistic androids that simulate romantic relationships.
- This House believes that South Korea should abandon the goal of, and all policies which aim at, Korean reunification.
- This House Believes That Artists should not participate in the ongoing interpretation of their art
- This House supports first generation immigrants to Western Europe encouraging their children to fully assimilate and identify with the local culture
- This house believes that the WTO should allow developing countries to impose policies aimed at protecting domestic industries, even at the expense of harming international trade.
- This house believes that states should significantly fund female-only tech companies

D. Hints

A combination of individual and group work is advisable. Each student should be encouraged to do some individual thinking, then discuss/present his or hers thoughts with the rest of the group.

Try to assess the level of knowledge of the group you teach. Adjust the content accordingly.

E. Verification

Require feedback at the end of the lesson, asking which motions students have found hardest to interpret and why.

It is recommendable that this session is revised later on in the year, for example after development of argumentation or role of speakers/ preparation of team strategy. Assuming this session is held in the beginning of the school year, many of the concepts would be difficult to grasp (depending on the experience of the group) as they will be individually addressed in the curriculum to follow. So interpretation of the motion or framing the debate would be done in much more effective way once the debaters are aware of the entire “game design“.