

Finding an Affirmative

The 1AC (first affirmative constructive) is typically the only written speech in the round. It is also the most important. The 1AC sets the ground for debate. While the resolution decides the overall statement to be debated, the 1AC generally chooses one specific way to support that statement. It is the 1AC that decides which type of reform, or change, will be debated for the duration of the round.

Before a student can compete, they will need to write a 1AC. Students often have trouble deciding what policy change they want to choose. This is not an uncommon problem and you shouldn't be discouraged if you or your student is having difficulty finding an idea.

Build categories

Team policy resolutions are designed to be broad. Students often spend the first few hours of research simply attempting to comprehend the new topic (What is immigration? What is illegal immigration? What are visas? etc). This, of course, is the right place to start! Gaining a general understanding of the topic is the first step to finding an Affirmative.

Although students are reading many articles on the topic, they may not be successful in discerning what evidence applies and what does not. I always encourage my students to keep a couple lists handy while researching: a "harms" list, and a "plans" list. As debaters read

over each article, they should be categorizing the new information into these lists. Perhaps you are reading an article that references a problem. That goes on the harms list. What if an article suggests that the government take a certain course of action? Plan list. Granted, not everything written on these lists will be used in a debate round. However, keeping track of every possible harm and plan will help debaters to keep their 1AC options open.

Pick a "case"

Once a comprehensive list has been compiled, you can start researching specifics. Debaters have two options: start with a case idea, or start with a plan idea. Very rarely will a student find an article that has harms, a plan, and advantages clearly laid out in a neat, ready-to-use manner. Instead, debaters need to pull ideas from multiple sources in order to create a solid Affirmative position. Generally, picking one starting place will help.

Students might find a specific harm, or advantage, that appeals to them. Perhaps they've been reading about immigrants waiting in lines to find a better life in America. Perhaps they sympathize with the Americans who lose jobs to illegal immigrants. Maybe they've discovered that lives are being lost. Once you've chosen a problem, you research that particular area more thoroughly. As you research, you look for different ideas being proposed as the solution. Any given problem can have multiple solutions—one of these will very likely become your corresponding plan.

This option is helpful for students who, while researching, discover that they want to fix a problem they see in the system. Researching options that will solve the problem helps students stay focused and find a plan that works.

Or, pick a "plan"

Alternately, a debater might find a policy change that appeals to them, or seems strategically solid. This could be anything from passing a new law to abolishing an old one. In this situation, starting with the plan is more effective. Narrowly research the proposed policy itself. As you research, you'll discover what advantages come with this specific action—what harms it might solve. It may even solve harms that fall outside the given resolution.

Again, the same method is used here. Find one area of interest, and build a case off that one idea. Whether it be a harm, advantage, or plan, your research will be much more effective when you are focused on one aspect of the topic. Of course, this process may need to be repeated a few times. You might discover, for example, that there is no viable solution to the harm you chose. Or, that the plan has no great advantages. Then it's back to the list to pick a different option.

Organize evidence

At this point, a debater should have a fairly nice compilation of evidence on the subject. Now is the time to organize the research they have collected. Creating piles, or documents, of similar evidence will help them create an outline for a new 1AC. You'll have a different pile for each different harm (death, lost jobs, debt). You'll also need a separate pile for evidence that demonstrates solvency. Evidence about history or background will go in yet another pile.

Once the research is neatly categorized, you can decide which evidence is the strongest. You might have collected five potential harms, but only two are significant. In this case you will probably just use the two significant harms and toss the other three. On the other hand,

all your harm evidence may be weak, but the evidence for all the advantages is compelling. In this instance, you may choose to write a comparative-advantage 1AC (plan with advantages, no harms). Once you have decided which arguments have the strongest research, your outline is practically made. Now, you just add the filler words and type it up!

“But there are arguments against it!”

The most common problem that holds a student back from choosing a 1AC is the fact that there are arguments against it. Because debate is very competitive, many will try to find the 1AC that no one has arguments against. But there are arguments against everything. Just because there are disadvantages to a particular plan, doesn't mean the plan isn't worth enacting. In addition, for every Negative argument, there are Affirmative responses. This is what makes debate so challenging and exciting. Students must learn to defend their case and plan against any and every argument. The measure of a good debater is not in creating the perfect 1AC (there is no such thing, by the way). Rather, the measure of a good debater is in how well they can defend and support an imperfect position. A good debater will be successful with almost any 1AC, because they have learned the art of persuasion and argumentation.

Conclusion

Developing a 1AC that is ready for competition takes time. Students will need to invest time in the research process, and organizing what is found. Once a debater has accumulated this research, however, the 1AC will almost build itself. Starting with a particular case or plan will help the new debater develop a strong 1AC that is well-supported and ready for the first tournament.