

# A Coach's Notes<sup>1</sup>

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## Connecticut Debate Association

### Holiday Edition

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#### Contents

- Introduction
- Evidence

## Introduction

This is the third edition of the 2007-08 CDA season. If you would like to receive the previous editions of these Notes, please email me and I will send them to you. As there was no December tournament, there is no packet or transcript of my notes from the final round.

These notes are intended for your benefit in coaching your teams and for the students to use directly. I hope that you will find them useful teaching tools. Please feel free to make copies and distribute them to your debaters.

I appreciate any feedback you have, good and bad. The best comments and suggestions will find their way into subsequent issues. I would also consider publishing signed, reasoned comments or replies from coaches or students in subsequent issues. So if you'd like to sound off on some aspect of the debate topic or the CDA, send me an email.

## Evidence

CDA rules<sup>2</sup> leave debaters with few factual resources other than the packet materials accompanying the resolution and the debaters' own knowledge of the world. The lack of time and information to prepare occasionally leads to some fascinating exchanges during debates—there may be a “bloopers” edition of Coach's Notes at some point in the future.

I have also heard a number of interesting claims about evidence over the years:

- *“Debaters can only introduce facts included in the packet”*
- *“The CDA would not provide a source that could not be trusted”*
- *“My opponents never presented a source for that evidence”*

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<sup>2</sup> CDA currently provides no prior notice of the topic area, bans the use of all electronic devices, including laptop computers, PDAs and cell phones, and permits only three reference items (dictionary, almanac and US Constitution). All of these rules are of recent origin, and were implemented as temporary measures to be revisited at a later time. To date, no substantive review of the effect of these policies has occurred.

So it seems that a discussion of evidence—what is it, where does it come from, how should it be used, how should it be challenged—is in order. We should have a reasonable approach to the use of evidence in CDA debate. The piece concludes with a discussion of how I look at evidence when judging CDA rounds.

## **What Is Evidence?**

Evidence is information that shows the existence of a fact, either directly or indirectly. Evidence comes in a variety of forms. Some facts are so well known that we accept them without question, as clear as night and day as the saying goes. In other cases we rely on written records, either of a public or private nature. We also accept the testimony of witnesses, formally in court, and informally in daily life. And finally, we accept what we see with our own eyes, whether accidentally or in a prepared demonstration.

The limited time span and venue of academic debate make it impossible to call on witnesses or present prepared demonstrations. Most evidence used in academic debate is written, either from public records produced by government bodies or from private writings like newspapers, magazines, books, and, increasingly, the Internet.

One advantage of written evidence is that it can be verified more easily than other types of evidence in the context of a debate. Most national debate organizations have strict rules of evidence that require enough identifying information be provided with any citation so that one's opponents or a judge can look it up and determine if it really exists and has been properly used. Misuse of evidence is considered a serious offense and can result in a directed decision against a debater, or even expulsion from the tournament or future competition.

## **How Do You Evaluate Evidence?**

One cannot stop a debate to go off and check evidence. In CDA extemporaneous debate, there is little possibility of researching a topic ahead of time. Generally CDA debaters will not be aware of the range of information, viewpoints and authorities on the Resolution when they receive the tournament packet.

Debate resolutions are chosen precisely because they are controversial and a significant body of opinion and fact exists in favor of each side. There would be little point in debating a topic where everyone agreed on one side. Anyone who researches a debate topic will quickly find acceptable evidence supporting both sides of the issue, often quite contradictory. During the course of the debate, you know that both teams will introduce evidence. You need to defend your own and attack that of your opponent.

First, we know that not all evidence is equal. We tend to put more trust in primary evidence than in secondary evidence: FAA statistics about airlines from an FAA publication are better than an article about those FAA statistics in the New York Times. We also more readily accept a statement from an expert than a layman: a researcher's study on the causes of flight delays over the complaints of a frequent flyer about his flights over the last year, and both of those over an anecdote about a once-a-year family vacation trip. Facts are generally considered superior to opinion: airline reports of on-time arrivals over a poll of passengers on their flight experience.

Second, even evidence from a good source is subject to question. Any source may have a bias, or be reliable in some ways but not in others. The information may be ambiguous as to its meaning. It may be inconsistent, either within itself or with other evidence. Statistics may have a plethora of problems, ranging from how they are gathered and compiled, to how they are presented and interpreted. Evidence may become stale and misleading as it is superseded by new information.

All evidence may be questioned from one or more perspectives. A good debater will explain why his own evidence can be relied upon and will try to cast doubt on the evidence introduced by his opponents. In some cases, a debater may even find ways to use his opponents' evidence against them. But for any topic that is debatable, there will be evidence of reasonable quality supporting both sides of the issue. Ultimately a debater will have to try to weigh and compare the evidence presented by both sides and show that the preponderance of the evidence supports his side of the resolution.

## **How Should You Use Evidence?**

It's important to remember that facts, opinions and evidence don't win debates, arguments win debates. Evidence is introduced to support arguments. The same data may support more than one argument, possible contradictory arguments. You may find the evidence you introduce used against you, so choose carefully!

When introducing evidence you need to understand the argument you are making. November's packet provides a great example. Let's start with the Affirmative argument of harm, that aircraft are a significant source of pollution. The introduction in the packet provides two simple supporting facts: (1) aircraft are currently responsible for 3% of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, but this is increasing rapidly to an expected 15% by 2050; and (2) aircraft emissions of gases other than CO<sub>2</sub> are especially harmful, particularly at the height at which they are released. These facts are clear and straightforward and support the argument directly.

Now consider the discussion of the Airbus A380 in the Economist article. It's basically a digression on how much air pollution is caused by a single flight. This seems particularly juicy: one engine equals 3500 cars, times four engines per A380, times 1500 planes, and we're up to the equivalent of five million cars! It would appear to be a particularly expressive set of facts to bolster the harm.

Yet, as the Economist article also states, the engines on the A380 are as efficient as any in the air. The A380 is also one of the newest aircraft in the world, just being introduced into service, and presumably incorporates all the latest technology. If the purpose of the tax in the resolution is to encourage fuel efficiency, which aircraft are the airlines going to buy? Given it can take years to design, test and build new aircraft models and improve engines, and years beyond that to economically introduce them into the airlines' fleets, the higher efficiency aircraft that the airlines can buy today is—the Airbus A380! The A380 emissions data is a two-edged sword for any Affirmative team that chooses to use it against a Negative team that understands the argument the Affirmative needs to make.

## What Evidence Should We Accept?

CDA debaters often try to dismiss evidence that did not come from the packet. I generally accept evidence that comes from a debater's own knowledge, even if it isn't confirmed by the packet. The reason is that while the two sources—packet and personal knowledge—may differ in degree, each has weaknesses, and neither can be dismissed out of hand.

Evidence from the packet has the advantage of being written evidence, with the source publication properly cited. Debaters can rely on the CDA to have reproduced those articles accurately, and could check them after the debate. Because the articles cited are generally media sources—newspapers, news magazines, internet news outlets—they are secondary sources, but generally of high quality. This means a competent writer is excerpting and interpreting information from other primary or secondary sources.

Evidence introduced from a debater's own knowledge is oral rather than written. Unless the debater is testifying from personal experience, the information is clearly secondary, usually something the debater read in the news media, from books, from classes or from discussions with others. The debater may or may not recall the source, and may or may not recall other details about the information. While there is no citation that can be easily checked, the information may still be checked after the debate with a bit of work.

The nature of CDA extemporaneous debate does not permit evidence to be checked in any way, whether from the packet or a debater's knowledge, during the tournament. In other forms of debate, a debater will research the topic, reach beyond secondary sources to the primary sources, and make sure the information presented is accurate. Research would also be conducted to verify that the topic was fully explored. For a topic that is used in more than one tournament, debaters will do follow-up research on new evidence and ideas they encountered in one tournament before going to the next. CDA topics change from one tournament to the next, so follow-up research is rarely done. Other forms of debate, with extensive prior research, can support strict rules of evidence. Both the CDA packet and evidence from a debater's own knowledge would not meet the standards of some of these leagues.

CDA resolutions and the packet accompanying them are thoughtfully developed. But they are not the product of extensive or thorough research. The articles in the packet likely do not reflect the full scope of the disagreements behind a resolution or the available information supporting the opposing sides.

The packet material may, therefore, be incomplete, inaccurate or biased, and debaters should challenge it on those grounds as appropriate. Like any information brought to a debate, it may suffer from these and other defects that we may not be able to resolve during the debate. The fact that evidence is not perfect does not mean that it cannot be useful and informative. All evidence and its potential value need to be examined and argued as part of the debate.

Information introduced from a debater's personal knowledge raises the same issues as information introduced in the packet. Personal information suffers from the further defects that it is not in written form and that it may not have a proper citation. But this doesn't automatically disqualify it. Evidence introduced from personal knowledge can,

like evidence from the packet, be examined and argued as part of the debate. Evidence from a debater's personal knowledge may be legitimately introduced and used in a debate, and should be subject to the same give and take that debaters apply to information from the packet.

## **Everett's Approach to Weighing Evidence**

I've titled this section "Everett's Approach to Weighing Evidence" because I want to emphasize that the practices I am about describe are the way I approach evidence introduced by debaters in CDA Extemporaneous Debate, whether from the packet or from their personal knowledge. Many CDA coaches and judges may agree with me, either in principle or in practice, though I am sure that not all do. In particular, the CDA has no official policy on evidence other than that debaters be truthful and honest in debate. A debater who knowingly introduced false information to win a debate would likely be subject to sanction if this were discovered.

When a debater introduces evidence from any source I consider the following questions:

1. *Is it something that I know to be true?*
2. *Is it consistent with other things that I know to be true?*
3. *Does it sound reasonable?*

I think most people consider these questions whenever they evaluate information presented to them, whether they are conscious of it or not. If we know something to be true we accept it without further question. If it is consistent with other things we know, we may review it, but we are likely to accept it. If it sounds reasonable, we will be a bit more skeptical compared to evidence that meets the two prior criteria. But if someone tells you something that you know to be false, that contradicts other things you know, or that sounds unreasonable, you aren't likely to put much faith in it.

Now you may say, "The Judge isn't supposed to impose his own knowledge or biases on the debate!" and that is true. But the Judge isn't supposed to believe everything the debaters tell him either. The purpose of the Judge is "to judge" which means weighing the arguments and evidence in a reasonable fashion. A Judge with no personal knowledge or experience is would be unable to do this. A Judge isn't supposed to forget everything he knows when judging, but he should channel his use of it in prescribed ways.

The first point is that I, or any Judge, may simply be wrong about the facts. Evidence that contradicts what I know or think to be reasonable may simply demonstrate my ignorance. In using my personal knowledge when judging a debate I have to be open to new facts: the evidence the debater has just introduced may still be correct, even if I answered all three of my questions above in the negative.

The second point is that as a Judge, I should not make arguments for either side. As I stated above, evidence doesn't win debates, arguments do. A Judge should not decide a debate on the basis of evidence that he has concluded is right or wrong. It is the job of the debaters, when their opponents present evidence in a debate, to bring arguments against it in the course of upholding their side of the resolution.

A debater can consider the argument the evidence has been introduced to support. Is it an argument that supports that team's side of the resolution? Evidence that supports an argument that doesn't matter is simply irrelevant.

Does the evidence really support the argument? Facts are just facts. They may support an argument, be neutral, or stand against it. They may do all three depending on interpretation. Just because a team uses evidence to support an argument doesn't mean that it does so—consider the Airbus A380 example above. There is nothing so effective in a debate as taking a debater's own argument or evidence and turning it against him.

Debaters should also be asking the three questions above when the other team presents evidence: does it agree with what they know or know to be reasonable? If not, then those other facts or considerations should be raised in rebuttal. If the Affirmative says it is possible to reduce aircraft emissions by 20% in the next five years, the Negative ought to ask how, considering that statistics in the packet indicate that efficiency has been improving by less than 2% per year for the last 40 years.

The final point is that while I will accept evidence both from the packet and from a debater's own knowledge, that does not mean I consider the two to be equal. Evidence from the packet has a listed source is more likely to be properly cited. A debater's memory may be less certain. I find the argument, "My opponent could not provide a source for that information" to be of little value, but this argument can be improved upon.

Ask if your opponent recalls the source for the information. Is that source likely to be biased? Is the information fact or opinion? If fact, who collected it, how and for what purpose? The FAA collects facts, the airlines collect facts, the plane and engine manufacturers collect facts, Greenpeace collects facts. They all have their own agendas that may affect those facts or their interpretations. If the information is an opinion, whose opinion it is matters. Does the argument support your opponent's case? Does the evidence support the argument? Can the evidence be interpreted or used differently? Suggesting these and other weaknesses in the evidence is a much stronger argument against it than simply saying no source was cited. And these can be used against evidence from any source.

## **Conclusion**

As a Judge I have to weigh the arguments presented by both sides. Evidence gives heft to arguments, pushing the balance in favor of one side or the other. Evidence is itself subject to argument, as to its quality. Evidence from a debater's own knowledge may be of different quality than evidence from the packet, but that does not disqualify it. Evidence that comes from a published source is not automatically conclusive. A debater should learn to question all evidence, regardless of its source.

CDA extemporaneous debate, with its limits on research and information sources, requires a reasonable approach to evidence. We cannot require the strict citation rules that are present in some other formats. Debaters should feel free to introduce evidence from their own knowledge, so long as they are prepared to justify and defend it as they would evidence from any other source.