PF Debate - Your First Case

**Introduction**

This is the last place you should be looking for how to write a case.  Since you are a competitive academic debater, you are on a team and most teams have coaches and your coach is your first and most important resource.  If there is no coach, or the coach is very busy, you have team-mates and there is a good chance they have experience writing cases already.  If you are the only team or one of several novice teams, this article is a last resort.  You are advised to seek help first-hand.  Having said that I will move ahead with caution.  
  
The kind of case I will focus is one that is typical in the region where our team competes.  There are regional differences.  Perhaps in your district Pro always speaks first or perhaps different kinds of styles and arguments are expected.  These factors may change how one should write their cases and if so, I have no way to assist you.  I will tell you, the style I present seems compatible with the last few years of NFL National Tournament finals, so it should work for you.  
Finally, please take note, that your case is more than a four minute speech.  It will continue through two constructive speeches, two summary speeches, several different cross-fires and a final speech.  So you must have enough total material to keep you going throughout the round, including the speaking you must do directly from your notes, which can not be prepared in advance.

**An Approach to Case Writing**

Since PF debate teams are two-person, it makes sense to divide the work.  On our team one member writes the Pro, the other writes Con.  They decide who will take which side.  Occasionally I decide for them.  If I think one member is weak in a particular position, I may have that member write the weak side so as to gain strength through doing research.  Each member would write a four minute constructive speech and then a two minute constructive speech.  The four minute speech will be read by whomever is the first speaker, the two minute speech can be used by whomever is the second speaker.  In addition, each person writing a case, should find at least three pieces of independent supporting evidence for each claim and keep those in the case file.

**Do the Analysis**

It is very important as each new resolution is introduced throughout the year, to get together and brainstorm the topic.  Breakdown each word and define it, get to understand the issues behind the topic, find out what is currently happening in the world which is related to the resolution, and try to understand what kind of positions may be taken by the Pro or Con sides.  If you are a novice, do a Pro and Con list.  Literally, write down all of the reasons to support the resolution on a sheet of paper labeled Pro, and all the reasons to reject it on a sheet of paper labeled Con.  Each member should compare their Pro and Con lists and discuss their impressions of each item on the lists.  From this list, three or four items should be identified which seem like strong reasons to support or reject.

**Research, Research, Research,   
Read, Read, Read  
Learn, Learn, Learn**

At this point, because you have selected some presumably good, Pro and Con points from your Pro/Con lists, you can start to research these points and see what kind of evidence you can find to support the points.  Make sure you select good sources, from reputable websites, books or magazines.  Avoid authors that may be very biased.  Copy the exact text of the sources you find, including author, publication, date, and the web address if applicable.  You should have enough info that anyone in the future can easily find the same source.  If the original source is a PDF file, or Word document, keep a copy of the entire document.  Make a copy of the portion you think is relevant to support the item from your Pro/Con list and keep it in a separate "evidence" file along with the information about the source.  Find and read as many sources as you can which support your points and save the best ones.  During the course of this research you may find, what you thought was a good point is actually a terrible point because you can not find evidence.  If this happens, consider taking another point from your list and research that point.  All of this research and reading will help you enormously to understand the issues in an even deeper way and this is essential to giving you confidence to understand and answer questions about the topic.

**Outline the Case**

After you have collected your research and learned the main issues, you can begin to outline the cases.  The basic outline will look something like this:  
  
I. Introduction  
  A. Attention grabbing remark  
  B. Resolution  
  C. Definitions  
  D. Interpretation (optional)  
  
II. Observations (optional)  
  A. First observation  
  B. Second observation  
  
III. Contentions  
  A. First contention  
  B. Second contention  
  C. (optional additional contentions)  
  
IV. Conclusion  
  A. summary  
  
**The Introduction**  
The Introduction portion of the speech often begins with an attention grabbing remark. Although it may be omitted, it is often used in most kinds of persuasive speaking so it not a bad practice.  Many PF debaters will select some quotation from a relatively well-known person, that serves as a lead-in to the issue being addressed in the case and usually this is followed by a statement of affirmation or negation of the resolution.  For example, looking to the Pro case we could start something like this:  
  
"'We cannot command Nature except by obeying her.', Francis Bacon.  Because my partner and I agree with Francis Bacon, we stand in support of the resolution, Resolved:....".  
  
Having made that very brief opening remark and then repeating the resolution for the sake of the judge, it is a very good idea to define the key words of the resolution.  "We offer the following definitions.  According to Merriam-Webster, ... is defined as ... and ... is defined as ...  The Oxford Legal Dictionary defines ... as ... the U.N. defines ... as ...".  The example shows how sometimes, one source may be better than another when giving the definitions.  You want to choose definitions from authoritative sources that support your case.  There is no need to define every word.  Only define those which you think are important not only to what you are trying to prove but also to what you think may be important in helping you defeat the opponent's position.    
  
Once you have repeated the resolution and defined the key words, it is helpful, though not required, to very briefly give your interpretation of the resolution as a way to justify your team position.  For example, you may say, "Therefore my partner and I believe the resolution is saying..." or "the resolution is asking us to examine...".  Overall keep your introductory remarks brief, perhaps no more than 30-40 seconds total.  
  
**The Observations**  
This part of the speech is entirely optional.  Leaving it out allows more time for the intro or the contentions.  But by putting in, while it takes time, it allows you to set up more justification and explanation about your approach to your position.  Quite often a team may include burdens for themselves and the opponents.  They will make some statement such as "In order to win this debate Pro must show..." or "Con must prove..."  These statements are signals to the judge that you will expect the two sides to meet the burdens you place on them.  This approach can have limited effect.  Some judges will accept your burdens, some will reject them because they don't like being told what standards they should use to determine the winner or loser. If you think it is important to establish burdens, try to be little more subtle by saying something like, "we believe the resolution requires us to prove..." or "we believe the resolution requires or opponents to show...".  Its a subtle difference in which you urge the judge to think the burden is being required by the resolution itself and not because you think it helps your position.  
  
Observations are also useful for establishing what is often called the framework which again is simply a statement which justifies your approach and gives the judge some way of evaluating the round.  For example, you may make an observation such as, "the resolution speaks of a moral obligation.  We believe a moral obligation is simply a duty to do something because it is right or good. Helping the less-fortunate is a good thing.  Therefore a case which promotes helping the less-fortunate fulfills a moral duty and should be preferred."  This kind of observation signals the judge that any case which promotes helping the less-fortunate should be seen as fulfilling the requirements of the resolution.  Bear in mind, if you choose to have an observation, I highly recommend, you back it up with evidence.  For example, you can say, "According to Philosopher, Immanual Kant, the principle of morality is based upon the categorical imperative, which says one should 'Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.'  We claim, helping the less-fortunate is a desirable, universal law so we observe that by helping the less-fortunate, our case promotes Kant's view of morality and is preferable to a position which fails to ..."  
  
**The Contentions**  
Next comes the contentions and this is where you prove your position with respect to the resolution.  It is now time, to pull out your points taken from the Pro list which you researched so diligently and declare each point as a major contention.  For example, in keeping with the theme that helping the less-fortunate promotes good and moral principles, let's assume the two strongest points you had on your Pro list state, 1. Unless we act, millions of acres of crops will be destroyed and 2. Unless we act, waves of refugees will over-run borders.  Your contentions will state:  
  
"Contention 1 - Millions of acres of crop land will be destroyed  
Joe Anybody in an article for National Geomorphic states that currently 100 million acres of rich crop land will be lost in the next five to seven years due to...  if current trends continue, Richard Someone of Yule Academy of Science believes an additional billion acres will disappear... Unless steps are taken or plans put in place now to alleviate the effects of these losses, the humanitarian costs will be enormous"  
  
"Contention 2 - Displaced Refugees will Swamp the Borders of Neighboring States.  
As conditions worsen, millions of people will flee their lands seeking better conditions.  This will create tides of refugees who will burden the resources of their neighboring states.  Dr. Santo Gromingo of Hazard University has stated 'the crush of humanity into refugee centers will spread disease and suffering which will decimate the populations...it would be irresponsible to ignore this coming disaster..."  
  
When the contentions, are written, you basically take the key points you have researched, refer to your evidence, and construct a narrative which supports your claims in a very "judge friendly, people friendly" kind of way without sounding too elementary or under-researched.  The number of contentions you ultimately have will depend on how much time it takes you to read your entire constructive speech.  Novice debaters should have 2 or 3 good contentions.  
  
Sometimes a team will combine some of their  contentions which are closely related in order to put in other contentions.  For example, contention 1 and 2 in the example above are closely related, so it may be possible to combine them in such a way, the team can present even more arguments.  For example, in outline form, it would read:  
  
Contention 1 - Crop land will be destroyed.  
  Subpoint A - Crop failure will result in mass starvation (reasons, evidence)  
  Subpoint B - Lack of food will trigger movement of refugees (reasons, evidence)  
  
Contention 2 - Proposed Plans can prevent disaster  
  Subpoint A - Several nations have proposed solutions (evidence, explain)  
  Subpoint B - Leading nations have failed to act (evidence, explain)  
  
That covers the basics of how to build the contentions.  I will have more to say about them later when I discuss the development of the second constructive speech.  
  
**The Speech Conclusion**  
Up to this point, your written case should take about 3-1/2 minutes to present.  This will leave about thirty seconds in which to wrap it up.  It is appropriate to make a statement which connects everything back to the observations and interpretation of the resolution made at the very beginning.  This reminds the judge of the basis in which you started the case and brings it full-circle back to the resolution.  There are lots of different ways this can be stated and will depend a lot on the points you want the judge to remember the most.  Example:  
"As seen by our contentions, we are on the brink of an overwhelming humanitarian disaster, resulting from loss of crops, waves or refugees, starvation, disease and stress on neighboring countries.  We also see how researchers and policy makers have devised possible solutions to alleviate the coming problems if steps are taken to act immediately.  Nevertheless, several influential nations have been reluctant to act.  We view this as a failure to do that which can be universally accepted as good and is therefore a violation of moral the obligation to help the less fortunate.  My partner and I urge the nations to fulfill their moral duty."  
  
Finally, and this is more a kind of tradition to reserve your right to extend your case, debaters will typically say "For all these reasons and more we urge a Pro ballot.".  
Let me conclude this part of the article by stating, that even though the examples given, focus on the Pro, the exact same style and procedures are employed to write the Con case.

**Preparing the Second Speech**

As I said previously, we typically have one team member write the Pro and other writes the Con.  This is only done as a way to share the work.  As part of that effort, we ask each member to write a second speech which is no more than two minutes long and will form the basis of the second constructive speech which is given by the other team member.  The second speech is a little more difficult to prepare because it will be read after the opponents have had a chance to present their case.  Because you may be the first speaking team or you may be the second speaking team (depending on the choices made after the coin flip), you may want to use different strategies for this second speech which I will discuss later.  
  
The second speech can take two forms.  
  
The first common form is a reinforcement of the points already made in the first speech.  This form the speech will be a very abbreviated version of the first speech and will typically be a revisit of the contentions given in the first speech but this time it is best to use new evidence and a slightly different narrative in order to strengthen the original contentions.  I would consider it poor form to repeat what was already said using the same evidence.  It is good form to reinforce what was said in a fresh way with new evidence and there is no prohibition on giving new evidence to support existing ideas at any time through out the round.  It is a very powerful tactic which shows the depth of your research and adds to your credibility. It will not appear as if your team ran out of things to say and so are repeating yourselves and serves to beef-up your own credibility by making a statement later in the round or cross-fire such as "we presented four independent pieces of evidence which supports our claim" or "both the Hazard University and the Dr. Lupe paper support our position".  
  
The second form is to extend the first speech.  Sometimes you have a lot of important things to bring out and four minutes is not enough time.  It some cases, it is common for the second speaker to continue where the first left off in order to finalize all of the required points.  In this kind of speech your team will continue to introduce new arguments and claims which is allowed in either of  the Constructive speeches.  If you plan to do this, it is good form to "road map" or "signpost" your intention very early in the first speech and let the judge know your intentions, something like this in the observations portion of the speech, "We will present three contentions to support our case.  I will read the first two and if time permits, my partner will read the third." At the end of the first speech, remind the judge one final time, "if time permits, my partner will present the third contention in our next speech". It should seem obvious, when writing this form of the second speech, it is simply a continuation of the first speech and so it will be the speech that presents the final contentions and then gives the summary as illustrated above.

**The Second Speech Strategies**

The second speech is intentionally short and this is where it gets difficult for novices.  A good portion of the second speech, half or more, must be more or less spontaneously delivered in the form of attacks against the opponents case because, no matter if your team is first to speak or second to speak, by the time the second speech on your side is given, you will have heard the opponent's case and you will need to attack it.  I suggest a review of earlier articles I have written for refutation and rebuttals (see the references at the bottom of this article.) For now I only want to do a quick review of the some of the strategies you can take.  
  
**Strategies for Second Speech Type 1 - reinforcing the first speech**  
  
If your team is first speaker -  
You give your first constructive, the opponents give their constructive.  It is now time for your team to give their second speech.  Under this scenario, a reasonable strategy is not to read the second speech (save the evidence and claims for the summary speech) and attack the opponents case for four minutes.  If you run out of attacks, then fall back on the contents of the second speech.  
  
If your team is first speaker -  
You give your first constructive and the opponents use part of their first speech to attack yours.  First, attack their speech for two minutes then use the second speech to reinforce your case using the remaining time.  
  
If your team is second speaker -  
Your opponent speaks, then your team gives their first speech.  Your opponent gives the second speech which consists of one to four minutes of attack against your case.  Attack their case for two minutes then read your second speech.  
  
If your team is first speaker -  
There is a very unlikely scenario that by the time you stand to give your second speech, the opponent has made no attacks.  In this case, spend all four minutes attacking their case and fall back on your speech if run out of things to say.  
  
**Strategies for Second Speech Type 2 - extending the first speech**  
  
If your team is first or second speaker but the opponent has not attacked your case -  
Finish your case in the second speech as quickly as possible and attack for the remaining time.  
  
If your team is first or second speaker and you have been attacked -  
Attack their case first, then as time remains complete your case.

**Beyond the First Two Speeches**

In my opinion, one of the best strategies to carry your team forward until the end of the debate, is have a sufficient number of prewritten bits of evidence and warrants which can be used to reinforce your case and attack your opponent.  This reduces the amount to "ad lib" time you will need which is often a struggle for very beginning novice teams.  It is very common to simply run out of things to say and so you have two choices, either end your speech with the obligatory "..for all these reasons and more we urge a ... ballot" and sit down, or pull out some canned warrants, you had prewritten, and just start reading them until you run out of time.  Neither strategy is great, but using the entire speech time, even if not so effectively seems better in the mind of many judges, than just ending early and sitting down.  
  
Typically, by the time all four opening speeches are made and the opening cross-fires are complete, the summary speeches will mark a phase where you want to begin to narrow the debate to a few key issues.  These are the issues you think you are winning and you need to make real certain, the issues you are focused upon are still on target with the general principle of your position as either the Pro or Con.  Be careful of being pulled off track and down the rabbit hole of irrelevant arguments that don't really support your case.  This is a VERY common problem for novice debaters.  I think a good approach for the summary speeches is divide your time between why your team position is right and the opponent position is wrong and at this point in the round, focusing on minutia starts to become a problem.  The more the round progresses, the shorter the speeches so the broader your focus should be become until at the final focus your final arguments are basically bullet points.