SUGGESTED GUIDELINES FOR CONTRO-VERSIAL AREA PAPERS

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Introduction to Topic Paper Writing

Writing a topic paper can appear daunting, but is manageable if approached in several steps. The first part of the process takes place when someone decides that there is an issue that might make a valuable intercollegiate debate topic. The topic selection committee commissions a number of areas each year that might be valuable options, but these are designed to only ensure that some options exist. Each topic selection is improved by the addition of areas identified by the community.

In the last few years the writing process has been divided into two distinct papers: a controversy paper at the conclusion of the competition season and wording papers written after the first community ballot. This process has helped lower the entry barrier for community development of papers and has reduced the burden on any single author. At the same time, the topic selection committee has also worked to produce wording options consistent with the topic area selected by community vote.

As much as these trends have improved the topic writing process, we are occasionally left with the problem of an area paper that is very conceptually broad, perhaps too broad to produce a range of expectations surrounding the upcoming topic. This may, in part, be due to the very nature of writing an 'area' paper. The general procedure has encouraged writing on a subject,

such as a nation (like China) or a branch of government (the Supreme Court). In the interests of helping develop a process that is both accessible and predictable, beginning with the 2007-2008 process the chair of the topic selection committee would like to ask that the concept of 'area' papers be slightly adjusted toward individual controversies or controversial areas.

Each year the specific dates are adjusted to reflect the end of the competition season and the dates of the summer topic meetings. The 2012 schedule is:

- ☐ Controversy Papers must be submitted by Monday, April 23rd, 2012.

- ☐ The topic selection committee will review these papers and submit a ballot to the community. The ballot will be open for a minimum of 14 days. Our current target is a release of the ballot on Saturday April 28th and an a voting period that extends through Saturday, May 12th.

- ☐ A community vote will determine the winning controversy paper. Any member of the community is then invited to submit wording papers. All wording papers must be submitted by Monday, May 28th, 2012.

- ☐ The topic meetings run from Saturday June 2nd through Monday (morning) June 4th and are open to the public. We will also make efforts to provide regular information to the community not joining us in Lexington.

- ☐ The wording ballot will be released after the meetings and be open for a minimum of 14 days. As per the CEDA Constitution, the winning wording will be announced on the 3rd Friday in July (Friday July 20th).

Why select controversies?

There is a tremendous amount of information discussion about the 'best' topics. It may be impossible to develop a consensus on such criteria, but it is not uncommon for some of the discussion about better topics to describe their coherence and the presence of a rich body of literature. It may be understood that some of the 'better' topics possess a vibrant dispute among interested parties. These 'controversies' may be understood as the specific theme of a topic. Anyone who has explained the topic to someone from outside the debate community may also recognize these themes as those brief summaries of the debate topic.

Asking for a central controversy in each 'area' paper can allow the community to vote on each area with a greater confidence. The last two topics, which featured extensive work by individual authors, provide some clear examples. Instead of listing the 'China' topic on the area ballot, we might have instead listed the controversy of trying to produce economic policy changes by the Chinese government. Alternately, the 'court' topic could have been listed as 'reverse major Supreme Court cases.' In both cases the precision of the specific wording is not a necessity. The next stage of the process will be tasked with that specific responsibility. The primary challenge for each author of a controversial area paper is to identify that policy concern.

This also keeps our process consistent with the mandate of the CEDA constitution (Article 2), which describes the goals of debate including to "promote the value of argumentative discourse as a means of producing reasoned, measured, cooperative solutions to contemporary problems of social and political significance."

The Elements of a Controversial Area Paper

A fully developed paper should include:

Mainstream options for policy change - The central task of these papers is to identify the most mainstream or central proposals for change within a given controversial area. This is often understood as identifying the few "middle of the road" affirmatives with evidence and cites for solvency advocates. These are the central issues at work in the larger controversy. The identification and citation of important authors can help guide the development of the topic wording and allow a common subject of community debate. The paper may also identify the central literature based arguments available to the negative, i.e., what are the major argumentative assets for opponents of change? For both sides, authors should consider traditional policy and critical literature that is relevant to this controversy. Solid work in this element is essential to ensuring that later wording options reflect the central argumentative controversies.

Unique educational opportunities - There are obviously argumentative strategies for both sides common to most topics, these papers should be primarily concerned with the unique opportunities provided by this controversy. The job of the topic selection process is not to produce a single type of arguments, but rather to help provide the playing field for arguments developed by each squad and team. These considerations may include the last time such areas were debated and how earlier topics overlapped (if at all) with these areas.

Papers should also consider the potential public benefits of potential topics. Does your controversy provide a way to access significant public policy debates? Are there ways that your paper could involve local communities? Remember that the winning controversy will govern how 100 universities and almost 3000

students research for an entire season. You may identify specific events that will help draw attention to this topic (such as debating the Arab Spring topic during the democratic revolutions or the Nuclear Posture Review during the 2009-10 season) that help to explain why this controversy is specifically valuable to debate during this specific season.

Potential directions for wording papers – These controversial area papers are not required to include specific wording recommendations, although authors may include these as suggestions. It is very important that authors provide suggestions for approaching the next phase of the process. The greatest value that authors can provide is preliminary analysis of the specific elements of this controversy. Is there a debate about the best level of governmental response? Is there a general direction that new policies should follow? Are there certain agencies or interested parties that define the terms in specific and meaningful ways?

Keep in mind that the controversy paper is a starting point for the next phase of committee work. You may suggest a range of approaches or even a specific strategy for how to divide your proposal into 3-4 working groups to advance your work into a series of wording options. Author should not feel compelled to only provide one approach or one mechanism in their proposal. The best controversy paper identifies the general task that the committee and community will explore, not one that defines only a singular wording.

Recommendation of the author – It is of tremendous importance that each author treats their task as part of a due diligence on behalf of the larger community. It is important that interested parties work on these papers, but each author should also consider that there may be specific historical moments where some topics are better

or worse suited for the intercollegiate community. This concern was voiced in the fall of 2001, when there was tremendous interest in selecting a topic that dealt with terrorism for 2002-2003. At that time, however, it was felt that the necessary literature might be 'too ripe,' that is not sufficiently explored in scholarly detail, to allow for the best possible topic. This concern was also raised in this last topic cycle, when some argued that there should be additional time to let the congressional debate on immigration policy settle before it was considered. An author of a paper develops additional insight into a controversy and the community would benefit from this moment of evaluation. Accordingly, we would ask that authors provide their recommendation of the topic's inclusion on the upcoming ballot. Options for this recommendation include: strongly support, support with reservations, no opinion, oppose with reservation, strongly oppose.

Research Resources – We encourage authors to identify and share important research resources. Authors should specifically consider identifying and building bundles of RSS feeds that could be used by the entire community. In our new media environment, it is very important to identify important research materials that will allow the topic to develop over the course of the season.

Final Thoughts

Writing topic papers at any stage is a process fraught with a tremendous amount of hard work and little thanks. The nature of the process ensures that every topic but one will be rejected each year. That seemingly cold fact should not dissuade potential authors. It is the process of identifying, comparing and ultimately voting for a specific area that helps to keep this process valuable. I mention this only to encourage people to work

on these papers, but not to invest so much of themselves that it is difficult to handle the selection of another paper. For this process to work at its best, we need a number of committed community members to write these papers each year. They need not be longer than 10-15 pages if they follow these guidelines. Even if they are not selected, each author can share in the comfort that they are providing a valuable service to the community and that each controversial area may be considered in following years.

Thanks and please let me know if you have questions or suggestions.

Gordon Stables is the chair of CEDA's Topic Selection Committee. The document was originally released June 2006, Modified March 2010, April 2012.