DT101 Module 2

Handout: Arguments

Arguments

The main goal of a case is trying to prove a *truth*. Whether it's you trying to prove your policy is better, your side of the world more desirable, or your goals being more important, you are essentially trying to prove to an adjudicator that an idea is more valuable in the debate.

This is the essence of truth in parliamentary debates, truth is not just about honesty and knowledge, but rather the relevance, the value, and the analysis behind the truth.

Why is this the kind of "truth" preferred in parliamentary debate formats? It's simple: the point of debate is less about what your opinions are (you get random sides) and how knowledgeable you are (you get random topics) and more about the academic exercise of proving arguments to the average intelligent person. In the academic exercise of debating, we put aside the value of absolute truth for a bit, and prefer valuing the debaters' skill rather than them lucking out getting a familiar motion.

Persuasiveness

Persuasiveness, then, is the standard way in debating to roughly quantify how strong or weak an argument is. An argument is more persuasive if it is argued more effectively, and less so if it isn't.

Intuition and the AIP

Most debating formats use a specific heuristic to determine how much intuition is allowed. They use the heuristic of the "*Average Intelligent Person*".

The Average Intelligent Person (AIP) is a hypothetical benchmark judge in parliamentary debating. Rather than representing a literal person, this persona establishes an objective standard of fairness and accessibility.

An Average Intelligent Person has the following attributes:

1. Possesses the awareness of a well-informed global citizen who regularly follows major international news, understanding:
    - Major current events and global geopolitical trends,
    - Broad historical milestones and general world geography,
    - Fundamental civics, basic economics (e.g., supply and demand), and how major institutions function (e.g., democratic systems, the UN, courts),
2. Lacks advanced academic, technical, legal, or hyper-local knowledge, meaning they will not recognize niche trivia, obscure statistics, or specific statutes unless a speaker explains them.
3. Can follow complex, multi-step chains of logic, evaluate cause-and-effect relationships, and weigh competing moral principles against practical outcomes.
4. Refuses to connect unstated logical dots, assume missing premises, or credit unexplained academic jargon—requiring speakers to prove every link in their argument from first principles in plain language.
5. Holds no fixed political, religious, or cultural dogma, remaining open to persuasion from any side while caring broadly about human well-being, fairness, and minimizing harm.
6. Sets aside any real-world personal biases, lived experiences, or professional expertise the actual judge may hold outside the debate round.

Other names for AIPs are the Ordinary Intelligent Voter, Average Reasonable Person, or Informed Global Citizen.

By becoming an Average Intelligent Person, the judge is able to evaluate, more fairly, the arguments being brought by the teams. Thus, as debaters, we only use intuition to the extent that an AIP would have.

Anatomy of an Argument

While I encourage you to experiment later on, for now, you can use this as an easy model to build arguments:

Argument Anatomy Cheatsheet	
Claim What are you trying to prove	
Context What does the relevant background look like?	
Stakeholders Who is involved, and who is affected?	
Mechanisation Why is your claim true or likely to occur?	
Impact What tangible effect does this have on those stakeholders?	
Link How does this impact directly prove your side?	

Impacting an Argument

Impacting is a part of the argument that is often left to intuition when it shouldn't be. Your impact proves that your argument needs attention and is generally what people use to compare the relative importance of arguments.

Probabilistic Utilitarian Impacting

One very simple way to impact arguments is using probability. This gives you a rough quantity for your impact, and is therefore seen as a concrete way to impact your arguments.

The *Aggregate Utility* is also commonly called the "*total happiness*" or "*total pleasure*" of a system. This is the quantity that measures how much "good" or "bad" your argument is putting into the universe. Utilitarian arguments heavily rely on this quantity, as proving that your side creates more *total happiness* is the main way utilitarian arguments are proven. Note that while we can talk about Aggregate Utility in specifics (20 hours of happiness each for 20 people), in debate we typically broadly estimate the Aggregate Utility ("this new healthcare policy will save millions of lives").

The quantity we want to compute for our argument is the *Expected Value* of the *Aggregate Utility*. In other words, we want to find the *Expected Aggregate Utility*. You may recall, the equation for Expected Value of a random variable to be:

$$E(X) = \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} xf(x)\,dx$$

In this case, we take $f(x)$ to be the probability density function of our impact and x to be the magnitude of our impact for this given probability.

Thus, we can simplify:

$$E(X) = Expected\,Value = \Sigma(Magnitude * Probability)$$

However, in debate, Magnitude isn't just about one person, it scales across everyone affected. To capture the full picture, we split Magnitude into **Severity** (how deeply one person is affected) and **Frequency** (how many people are affected, or how often it happens), and multiply by **Likelihood** (the chance it occurs).

The sum function becomes irrelevant as we are only evaluating this for a single, representative impact scenario. Thus, the final, simplified expected value formula is:

$$Expected\,Value = Severity * Frequency * Likelihood$$

Other ways to impact arguments

The probabilistic route is what debaters (knowingly or unknowingly) most strongly rely on. However, it is not the *only* way to impact arguments. In later courses, you will learn more complex case making techniques, which includes more advanced impacting.

For now, you can rely on this as the simplest way to estimate your impacts.

Worked Examples

Example 1: Banning single-use plastics in universities

Argument Component	Worked Application
Claim	Banning single-use plastics on campus drastically reduces local waste and drain blockages.
Context	Universities host thousands of students daily who buy grab-and-go meals and drinks packaged in disposable plastic. Campus bins overflow regularly, and local waste systems rarely recycle thin plastics.
Stakeholders	1. University students 2. Campus sanitation workers 3. Nearby residents affected by clogged drains and landfill runoff
Mechanisation	1. **Removing the default**: When canteens stop handing out free plastic cups and wrappers, the convenience habit breaks. 2. **Quick adaptation**: Because students visit campus every day, buying one reusable bottle or lunchbox pays for itself within a week. 3. **Vendor shift**: Canteens switch to washable plates or paper packaging to keep student customers.
Impact	**Severity**: Moderate. Prevents localized flooding from blocked drains and reduces microplastic pollution. **Frequency**: High. Eliminates thousands of plastic items per campus every single day. **Likelihood**: Very high. Students still need to eat on campus and will easily switch to reusable containers.
Link	Because this rule reliably cuts massive amounts of daily waste with almost no inconvenience to students, banning single-use plastics makes campuses cleaner and healthier.

Example 2: Switching to a four-day workweek

Argument Component	Worked Application
Claim	A four-day workweek reduces severe employee burnout without hurting productivity.
Context	Under a standard five-day schedule, office workers often spend hours in unnecessary meetings or working slowly due to exhaustion.
Stakeholders	1. Full-time office workers 2. Their families 3. Employers
Mechanisation	1. **Cutting wasted time**: Having 32 hours instead of 40 forces teams to drop pointless meetings and focus on real tasks. 2. **True recovery**: A three-day weekend gives workers an actual rest day after catching up on personal errands. 3. **Better retention**: Rested employees make fewer mistakes and quit less often, saving companies hiring costs.
Impact	**Severity**: High. Prevents chronic stress, exhaustion, and burnout-related health problems. **Frequency**: Broad. Improves the weekly lives of millions of full-time workers. **Likelihood**: High. Companies maintain output without cutting pay, so both sides benefit.
Link	By protecting worker mental health while keeping output steady, a four-day workweek creates a healthier, more sustainable workplace.

Example 3: Weighing Two Sides (Banning private cars from busy city centers)

Impact Factor	Argument A: Cleaner City Air (For the Ban)	Argument B: Slower Ambulances (Against the Ban)
Severity	Moderate: Reduces asthma attacks and long-term respiratory illness.	Extreme: An ambulance stuck in traffic could cost a patient's life.
Frequency	Massive: Affects hundreds of thousands of residents breathing city air every day.	Rare: Only affects the small number of medical emergencies happening near the boundary.
Likelihood	Very High: Removing thousands of cars directly cuts exhaust emissions immediately.	Low: Emergency vehicles can still enter restricted zones using dedicated emergency lanes.
Expected Value	Higher Total Utility: Moderate severity × massive daily frequency × near-certain likelihood outweighs a rare worst-case scenario.	Lower Total Utility: Despite extreme severity, low frequency and low likelihood shrink the overall expected harm.