DT101 Module 3

# Handout: Motions

# Motions

In parliamentary debating, the participants of the debate role play as Members of Parliament (MPs). It would be impractical, then, to propose and discuss entire bills within the span of an hour, which is why, we debate on a generalised idea of a bill. This is called a *motion*. Although, confusingly, its named after the motions that decide the proceedings of parliament, a motion in parliamentary debating is a bit different.

A motion is, simply put, a proposed idea put forward by the government team, which the opposition team opposes. Motions typically contain the term "this house," referring to the house of parliament the debate is occurring in. It is useful, when starting off, to swap "this house" with "we" or "I".

# Infoslides

Infoslides, short for information slides, are an add-on to the motion that is used for informational purposes. You can assume that the other team has read the infoslide but it is best practice not to assume the judge has read it with that much attention. It is better to redefine what an average intelligent person would not know than to blindly rely on everyone having correctly and completely understood the infoslide.

# Motion Decomposition

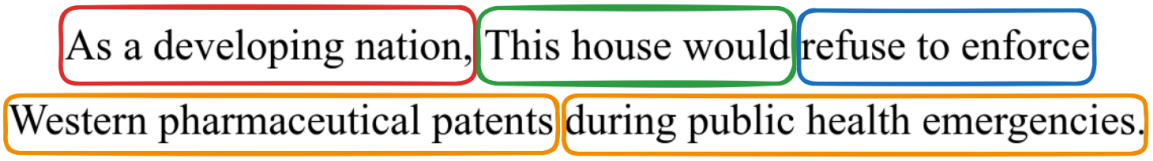
A useful starting point when understanding motions is to use motion decomposition, a technique that allows one to convert a motion into its constituent parts, and then build an understanding of it from there.

Take the motion:

As a developing nation, This house would refuse to enforce

Western pharmaceutical patents during public health emergencies.

This motion can be decomposed as follows:




**Actor**: Who is making the decision? A developing nation.
**Prompt**: What is the nature of the decision? This house would [do something]…
**Subject**: What is the prompt acting on? [This house would] *refuse to enforce* [something] …
**Specifications**: What other information do we have?

1. We aren't enforcing Western pharmaceutical patents
2. We aren't enforcing them during public health emergencies

Once the motion is decomposed, it is trivial to build a holistic understanding of what each team is supposed to do in the debate. The government/proposition team convinces the *Actor* that they should vote in favor of the motion whereas the opposition convinces them to vote against it.

## Actor

The actor is the decision making body of the debate. This is the person, group, or entity you are convincing to take your side in the debate. For example, for the motion:

This house, as Modi, would go on a life-threatening hunger strike.

The actor is Modi. Modi is an individual, yes, but he is the individual responsible for making the decision to go on a hunger strike. Government team convinces Modi to do it, Opposition convinces him not to do it. Modi's current beliefs and world-view are the same but he has not yet made the decision to go on a hunger strike.

## Prompt

Prompts are general phrases explaining what the motion is doing. You may encounter phrases like "this house would," "this house believes that," "this house supports," "this house regrets." While these terms generally hint what is expected of the motion (a THW motion would typically expect you to argue a policy) it is dangerous to use the prompt alone when trying to understand what the motion is about. ALWAYS consider the info-slide, specifications, and generally what the average intelligent person would think the motion is about.

## Subject

This is not the subject the verb is acting on, rather it is the subject that the prompt is acting on. For example, for the motion:

This house regrets the glamorisation of day trading as a job

The subject is surprisingly not day trading, ie. the motion is not about whether day trading is good or bad, but instead, the subject is glamorisation, whereas day trading is a specification. Why this is important is because a strong case for this motion will focus on how glamorisation of day trading affects people, rather than arguing whether day trading is a plus or a minus.

## Specification

A specification provides further context or explanation on the motion. Typically these are modifiers, specifiers, or information.

**Modifiers** give an additional condition or factor to the subject (Western Pharma Patents) is the modifier for the example decomposed motion.

**Specifiers** limit the scope of the motion. In the example decomposed motion, the scope is specifically during public health emergencies, rather than the motion applying always

**Information** gives us other knowledge that can help understand the motion.

# Worked Examples

## Example 1

This house, as a cabinet minister, would resign in protest over an unpopular war.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Actor** | A cabinet minister | The decision maker is clearly the cabinet minister considering resigning, but has not made up their mind. |
| **Prompt** | This house would | What is the nature of the decision?<br>This house would [do something]… |
| **Subject** | Resign | Government team is trying to convince the cabinet minister to resign, opposition is trying to convince him not to |
| **Specification(s)** | 1. In protest<br>2. Over an unpopular war | 1. Resigning in protest is a modifier, it tells us that the resignation is done with a specific purpose<br>2. Over an *unpopular* war is a specifier, it tells us that this potential resignation would happen over a war, and this war is unpopular. |

Also, if you use the “We/I” heuristic provided above, you can make this motion a bit easier to understand:

I, as a cabinet minister, would resign in protest over an unpopular war.

## Example 2

This house prefers cats to dogs

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Actor** | The Average Intelligent Person / Society (Implied) | Because no specific actor is named, both teams are convincing a neutral, rational observer which animal is objectively better overall—both for individual owners and for society at large. |
| **Prompt** | This house prefers | A comparative prompt. In a "prefers" debate, teams compare two options (Option A vs. Option B) and weigh which one produces better net outcomes. |
| **Subject** | 1. Cats<br>2. To Dogs | Prefers debate can have one or two preferences.<br>1. The *positive preference* (in this case cats), is what the government/proposition team wants the actor to prefer.<br>2. The *negative preference* is what the opposition team argues for. |
| **Specification(s)** | N/A | - |

Heuristic: I prefer cats to dogs

# Example 3

This house, as the Pakistani medical community, would go on an indefinite nationwide strike to demand better hospital security.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Actor** | The Pakistani medical community (doctors, nurses, healthcare unions) | Unlike an individual actor (like Modi or a single cabinet minister), this is a collective group making a unified decision. Government argues why doctors as a group should walk out; Opposition argues why they shouldn't. |
| **Prompt** | This house would | A policy/action prompt. Because the actor is a collective union/community, they have the capacity to organize and execute a strike. |
| **Subject** | Go on a strike | The core action being debated. Government defends withholding labor; Opposition defends continuing to work while pursuing other channels. |
| **Specification(s)** | 1. Indefinite<br>2. Nationwide<br>3. To demand better hospital security | 1. Modifier: Tells us the duration/severity: it doesn't end after 24 hours; it lasts until demands are met.<br>2. Specifier: Defines the geographic scope: every hospital across Pakistan, not just one city or ward.<br>3. Modifier: Establishes the specific goal of the strike (this isn't a strike for higher pay, so arguments must focus on workplace safety). |

Heuristic: We, as the Pakistani medical community, would go on an indefinite nationwide strike to demand better hospital security.

# Example 4

This house believes that social media algorithms do more harm than good for teenage mental health.

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|---|---|---|
| **Actor** | The Average Intelligent Person (Implied) | Because this is a "believes that" motion making a general truth claim, there is no specific policy-maker implementing a law. Instead, both teams are trying to convince the Average Intelligent Person—someone informed, rational, and unbiased—of an empirical and moral truth. |
| **Prompt** | This house believes that | Signals a truth/value debate rather than a policy debate. Neither team can propose a policy (e.g., you cannot argue "we will ban algorithms" or "we will regulate them")—you must evaluate their net impact as they currently exist. |
| **Subject** | Social media algorithms do more harm than good | Government must prove that the negative consequences of recommendation algorithms outweigh their benefits; Opposition only needs to show they do at least as much good as harm. |
| **Specification(s)** | For teenage mental health | Specifier: Narrows the scope of the debate particularly for teenage mental health, helping us better quantify what “more harm than good” means. |

Heuristic: We believe that social media algorithms do more harm than good for teenage mental health.

# Example 5

Motion: This house would ban unpaid internships.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Actor** | The State/Government (Implied) | Because this is a standard policy motion without an explicit actor, the decision-maker is a generic, rational Parliament or State. Arguments must evaluate what is best for society as a whole, rather than just one narrow stakeholder. |
| **Prompt** | This house would | A standard policy prompt. The house is deciding whether to pass and enforce a law, so teams debate whether the policy itself is good for society. |
| **Subject** | Ban | The core action being debated. Government defends using legal prohibition; Opposition defends keeping the practice legal (or relying on non-legislative alternatives). |
| **Specification(s)** | Unpaid internships | Specifier: Narrows the ban specifically to uncompensated labor arrangements, leaving paid internships and formal academic apprenticeships intact. |

Heuristic: We would ban unpaid internships.