

Neotraditionalism: A Paradigm for Adjudicating Rounds

Matt Johnston, who debated for Lexington until his graduation in 2003, has written a sixteen-point explanation of his judging paradigm - which he labels "neotraditionalist" - and is urging others to adopt this paradigm as well. "Neotraditionalism is a debate philosophy I feel a lot of people have on the tips of their tongues," he explains. "I wish to articulate it." This seems to be a perfect guide for any experienced LD judge.

Are you a neotraditionalist? Do you object to this type of judging paradigm? What is your preferred judging paradigm? Let us know by reading and commenting! Remember, judging paradigms and philosophies are not simply a convention of "the national circuit": let's hear all voices, from all circuits and communities. That's what real discourse is all about.

Neotraditionalism is a debate philosophy I feel a lot of people have on the tips of their tongues. I wish to articulate it. There has been a lot of very vocal backlash of late toward decisions that seem to be based on absolutist rejections of new approaches to LD. Neotraditionalism responds to this backlash by admitting that, yes, some judges are unfairly rejecting positions and styles simply because they are unusual, and, yes, that is an unfair way to adjudicate a round. However, just as it denies competitive equity to reject a position for being unusual, it is also unfair to reject a traditional approach simply for being traditional.

I ask only that you read carefully before agreeing or disagreeing. I suspect that a great many 'nontraditional' judges will actually agree with most or all of this. I have selected words carefully, so please don't assume broader assertions that often accompany these ideas unless those broader assertions are actually articulated here.

Finally, please consider declaring yourself a Neotraditionalist. There is great value in a variety of judging paradigms in the debate world. I do not think someone is a bad judge for disagreeing with a lot of the tenets below. I do, however, fear that too many judges are being bullied into rejecting some of their 'traditional' ideas simply because they are not trendy.

(1) Arguments must be made orally. Cards and cases should not be called after the round simply to give debaters the equivalent of extra time by having a set of meanings that were clear in the round and a second set of meanings derived from a post-round examination of written argumentation. Cards and cases should be called when their content is discussed in the round and the judge wants to ensure that the original source is in line with what it was later represented as.

(2) Speaking very quickly is not an important skill. If a debater is going to spread, s/he should certainly, as a bare minimum, be adding to the round rather than blipping. S/he should certainly be an unusually clear speaker who does not stumble or slur. But the more talented debaters are those who can get through a lot of material without spreading,

because this is a skill that is valuable outside of the constructed world of debate. Speaker points should be used to penalize debaters who attempt to spread but make a mess of the thing. This concept is not unique to speed; debaters who make a mess of speaking should generally be docked. Speaking style should not affect decisions, except on the level that judges won't know to vote for incomprehensible debaters because they will not understand what is being said.

(3) No new arguments can be made in the 2N or the 2AR. No existing arguments can be given new warrants or impacts in the 2N or the 2AR. When an argument is dropped, a debater can recover by outweighing with arguments from elsewhere on the flow or demonstrating that the dropped argument was on the flow several times and that s/he responded in at least one place. It is UNETHICAL to intentionally bring up new arguments in the 2N or the 2AR. If a judge feels the new material was introduced, s/he should IGNORE the argument. When an experienced debater who knows better is sliming, judges should consider docking speaks or, in extreme cases, dropping that debater on face.

(4) In fact, all types of unethical behavior are unacceptable. Judges should seriously consider penalizing debaters for falsifying evidence, misrepresenting what took place in CX, or otherwise intentionally cheating in order to gain advantage in the round.

(5) Arguments need not be conventional or stock. Original arguments are always welcome. Arguments that operate outside traditional standards, such as kritiks, narratives, and out-of-round implications are also welcome. However, these arguments are not held to some lower standard or automatically given preference to conventional material. Debaters running such arguments should still be explaining, warranting, impacting, and, most importantly, responding to attacks made by the other debater. Other debaters do not gain any ground by responding that something "doesn't belong in LD," but they do gain ground by demonstrating that something is outweighed, unresolutional, or false. Arguments that can be argued are preferred. If the only reasonable responses to an argument regard whether or not it belongs in a round, the argument is not going to make for a good debate. Ironically, many cases that seek to diversify the arguments made in LD actually reduce the number drastically. Everyone runs about the same five responses to every narrative--and they all deal with getting it ejected from the round.

(6) However, judges should not base decisions on how much they like arguments or how true they think they are. If a debater claims something that the judge feels is false, it is still true for the purposes of the round until the other debater proves it false.

(7) Debate is distinct from oratory in that the two participants must engage one another. Debaters often attempt to win by hiding their arguments from rebuttal and then pulling them across as drops. They use strategies including mislabeling arguments as conclusions, putting out a large number of unrelated points on an opponent's arguments in order to give the appearance of rebuttal when really they have just run a 7 minute case, and otherwise organizing rounds illogically in the hopes that opponents will, out of confusion, miss something. Other debaters use 'sticky note' style, putting out the same

generalized blocks no matter the nuance of a given argument. These methods are antithetical to debate, which is, by definition, an activity that requires at least two people. It is still the opponent's burden to explain why such arguments should be thrown out, but judges should be open to such suggestions when it is clear that an argument's only purpose on the flow is to evade debate and turn LD back into dueling oratory.

(8) Drops aren't special. A drop is an argument that has been conceded. It is not automatically on-face. A certain number of called drops does not guarantee that there will not be outweighing issues. Called drops still need to be weighed into the context of the round. Further, they need to be re-explained to some extent. Saying, "pull the Smith card, the three impacts, and the entire second contention," puts these things back on the flow, but it doesn't give them any weight in the round without an explanation of why they matter.

(9) Calling something 'on-face' does not make it on-face automatically. If something is truly an on-face reason to vote, it will probably take more than a few seconds to explain why it outweighs EVERYTHING else on the flow.

(10) Clarity is wonderful. One example of it, crystallization, is a valuable organizational tool. Crystallization points do not automatically become on-face. They do not automatically outweigh other points in 2N and 2AR. They are not merely collections of three random arguments. They are reorganizations of the material in the round into a few coherent points which are derived from pieces from all over the flow. Signposting is also preferred. Using correct terminology is preferred. Generally, anything that makes the round easier to flow and weigh is preferred.

(11) Debate is a fun activity. Speaker points should be docked for behavior that makes the activity unfun: turning a discussion of issues into a personal attack, being rude or offensive, etc. In extreme, extreme cases, such debaters simply will not get the message until they drop ballots, and thus, they should drop ballots.

(12) Judges have a great many reciprocal obligations. They MUST flow. They MUST be attentive throughout the round, even during CX.

(13) Judges must be open to questions at the beginning of the round. It is acceptable for a judge to have a certain number of quirks so long as there is full disclosure. If, for example, a judge has a real problem with policy-jargon, this judge has an obligation to mention this before the round even if neither debater asks about it.

(14) Judges must be prepared to justify their decisions and, in a more general sense, their speaker points. This should be done on the ballot and in the oral critique, if allowed. Judges should field questions from debaters about the decision, why some things didn't come into play, etc. Debaters should not seek to make the judge feel awkward about a decision. No purpose is served by challenging a decision. Ballots should be signed before the critique. Otherwise, there is too much potential for a 3N and 3AR in every round. However, on the rare, rare occasion that a legitimate judge realizes that his/her decision

was incorrect, that judge should just admit that and redouble efforts to get future decisions right. Nobody is perfect. Nobody gains from heated disputes after ballots have been turned in. Everyone benefits from calm discussions of a round in which the debaters are open to the possibility that they may have made some mistakes and judges are open to questions and concerns.

(15) Judges should be polite in critiques. Most debates contain positive attributes. Judges should point them out along with the negative ones. Debate is an educational activity: some degree of encouragement is necessary to make it feel worthwhile.

(16) Judges should not make a habit of using the critique as a time to relive life as a debater. It is not a time to reenact the flow with one's own responses. It is a time to mention how a few arguments might have worked better, how issues played out, and why the decision ultimately went one way or the other.