

What is the “Critique” or “Kritik”?

A strategy used primarily (though not exclusively) by negative debaters designed to question the assumptions which underlie the other team’s advocacy.

Where did the term “Kritik” come from?

The term “critical theory” or “the critique” (German = “kritik”) was coined by the philosophers associated with the “Frankfurt School”

When was the Kritik first used in policy debate?

The use of Kritik arguments became common in college debate in the early 1990s; the Kritik crept into high school debate in the mid-to-late 1990s and has since become common in “national circuit” high school debating.

What would be an example of a Kritik on the China topic?

An author named Chengxin Pan argues we should not treat China as a threat.

Treating China as a threat makes them a threat.

We should stop treating China as a threat.

What are the main types of China kritiks?

- ❖ China-specific kritiks: China threat, Orientalism
- ❖ Kritiks of International Relations: Securitization, Gender in International Relations
- ❖ Economic Kritiks: Marxism and variants: The view that world capitalism is the root of all evil and should that we should work to speed its demise.
- ❖ Race or Gender Critiques: The opposing team has used offensive language or made racist/sexist assumptions.

What are the parts of a Kritik argument?

- ❖ Framework for Analysis: How should one view the role of Kritik arguments in policy debate?
- ❖ Link: What does the particular Kritik have to do with the opposing team's advocacy?
- ❖ Implications: Why does the Kritik justify voting against the opposing team?
- ❖ Alternative: What should be done instead of the affirmative plan/advocacy in relation to the Kritik?

What is the “Frankfurt School?”

- ❖ Group of philosophers who coined the term “critical theory”
- ❖ These philosophers shared an association with the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany
- ❖ All advocates of Karl Marx’s theory of “historical determinism”

What is the “Frankfurt School?”

- ❖ “Historical materialism” holds that communism will inevitably replace capitalism as the economic system of choice.
- ❖ The transition to communism, though inevitable (they claimed), is delayed by “masking”
- ❖ “Masking” happens when a capitalist society takes actions designed to improve social conditions — this deludes the public into thinking that capitalism works

What theorists are associated with the “Frankfurt School?”

- ❖ Theodor Adorno
- ❖ Walter Benjamin
- ❖ Herbert Marcuse
- ❖ Max Horkheimer
- ❖ Jurgen Habermas

Historical examples of “Masking”

- ❖ Marxists believed that the Great Depression of the 1930s should have represented the death knell of capitalism
- ❖ Franklin Delano Roosevelt “masked” the evils of capitalism by providing temporary jobs through the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) — the masses were deluded
- ❖ The passage of the Social Security Act “masked” the evils of poverty, thus delaying the demise of capitalism

“Critical Theory” turns “doing good” on its head

- ❖ By “doing good,” capitalist societies are merely putting a friendly face on fascism
- ❖ If the capitalist society simply showed its true nature (being bad), the masses would throw off their shackles

“Critical Theory” is profoundly counter-intuitive

- ❖ Though its goals are hidden by shadowy terms such as “reification” and “commodification,” the objective is clearly to bring down world capitalism
- ❖ Thus, in capitalist societies, whatever is good, becomes bad and whatever is bad becomes good

Questions to ask of “critical theorists”

- ❖ Is it moral to allow social evils to exist just so that some larger end can be served?
- ❖ Isn’t this a clear case of expecting the ends to justify the means?

Questions to ask of “critical theorists”

- ❖ By ignoring social evils, “critical theorists” hope to bring down world capitalism.
- ❖ Can we justify the conscious seeking of worldwide depression which would inevitably be associated with the collapse of capitalism?

Questions to ask of “critical theorists”

- ❖ After all the economic chaos is over and millions have died, the way would then be cleared for communism.
- ❖ Given the failure of communism wherever it has been tried, is there any reason to believe that we should welcome this communist future?

Do all Kritiks advocate the communist “grand narrative?”

- ❖ No — Though “critical theory” got its name from the Frankfurt School, debaters use the term to refer to a much broader range of arguments. Many of the “Kritiks” used in debate rounds will have nothing to do with Marxism.

What is a “Framework Argument?”

- ❖ Framework for Analysis arguments explain why the Kritik (even if true) offers no reason to vote for your opponent
- ❖ Framework for Analysis arguments allow you to keep the Kritik debate on your terms

Framework Questions

- ❖ What are the implications of the Kritik for the stock issues in debate?
- ❖ What are the implications of the Kritik for the policy maker in debate?
- ❖ What are the implications of the Kritik for the notion of “fiat?”
- ❖ What are the standards (if any) for determining who wins a Kritik argument?

What about the “stock issues?”

- ❖ From a stock issues perspective, Kritiks are irrelevant to the decision in a debate
- ❖ Kritiks fail to address any of the stock issues
- ❖ Kritiks fail as disadvantages because they are not unique

What Is the Relevance of the Kritik for Policy Making?

- ❖ Most Kritiks actually preach the view that policy implications are irrelevant: Debaters should decide what they personally will affirm rather than to focus on what the United States Federal Government should do
- ❖ This view is a complete rejection of a policy model, demonstrating that the Kritik has no relevance for policy making.
- ❖ Most Kritiks are profoundly nihilistic in their implications: They insist that we understand certain things, while being exceptionally unclear about what should be done as a result.

Why is uniqueness important?

- ❖ Consider an affirmative case advocating the use of economic engagement to solve warming.
- ❖ A negative team offers a “management” critique, arguing that the affirmative is attempting to assert human control over nature.
- ❖ Yet this is no more an indictment of the affirmative plan than it is of the present system. The present system already includes dozens of efforts to manage the environment like environmental regulations—this proves the harms are inevitable.

Why is uniqueness important?

- ❖ The negative team will claim that Kritiks do not need to be “unique” — often acting as if there is some debate authority who has declared this is the case. Affirmative debaters using a kritik will often argue that they do not need to meet the normal burden of proof for the affirmative.
- ❖ Yet the admission that Kritiks are not unique is actually an admission that the Kritik has no bearing on the affirmative case.
- ❖ In ecosystem-based management case example, the “management” critique applies equally, if not more, to the present system as it does to the affirmative plan. It is, therefore, irrelevant to economic engagement.

What about a policy maker model?

- ❖ From a policy maker model perspective, Kritiks are irrelevant to the decision in a debate.
- ❖ A policy maker weighs the advantages of making a change against the disadvantages.
- ❖ A Kritik cannot serve as a disadvantage because it is not unique — it applies equally to the present system and to the plan.

What is “fiat” and why is it important in policy debate?

- ❖ Every policy resolution includes an “agent of action” and the term “should.”
- ❖ The “agent of action” is usually “the United States federal government.”
- ❖ The resolution, therefore, sets out a role-playing task. It requires both teams to assess what would be a good thing for the “United States federal government” to do.

What is “fiat” and why is it important in policy debate?

- ❖ Fiat creates an imaginary world where the affirmative team has the power to do whatever falls within the realm of the resolution.
- ❖ Fiat, therefore, creates a policy framework where the debate participants are brought into the world of the “agent of action”

Users of the Kritik reject the whole notion of fiat

- ❖ Their argument is that “fiat” is a silly concept which should be discarded
- ❖ Debaters should, according to this view, be concerned with the “personal” rather than the “political” — they should focus on what they believe and affirm, rather than on what the government should do.

The Kritik's focus on “the personal” demonstrates its inapplicability to policy debate

- ❖ Policy debate participants should focus on whether the resolution is true
- ❖ First, the very name “policy debate” indicates we are focused on policy.
- ❖ Second, all participants agreed to debate the resolution when they accepted the invitation to attend the tournament. The resolution asks what the “United States federal government” should do, not what individual debaters should do.

What are the standards (if any) for a Kritik argument?

- ❖ The problem is there are no standards. There really is no way to know who wins.
- ❖ This problem is complicated by the fact that Kritik advocates use vague terminology making it nearly impossible to determine the true objectives of the particular Kritik

A Final Problem With the Kritik: Vague Use of Language

- ❖ When you venture into the world of the Kritik, you are entering a totally different linguistic world.
- ❖ You will quickly notice the difficulty in following the language.
- ❖ In the Kritik Killer briefs, we have tried to include long paragraphs (much longer than you would actually read in a round of debate) so that you can see & evaluate the context for the evidence.

A Final Problem With the Kritik: Vague Use of Language

- ❖ The problem you will have is no different from the problem even prominent academicians have in understanding critical language.
- ❖ Consider the case of Alan Sokol, professor of physics at New York University.

A Final Problem With the Kritik: Vague Use of Language

- ❖ Sokol became personally convinced that postmodern scholars had created such an unreal world that even they didn't know what they were talking about.
- ❖ He concocted a deliberate hoax, writing an article containing pure gibberish (rather senselessly pasting together language he saw associated with postmodern thought). He submitted the article to the leading journal of critical thought: *Social Text*

A Final Problem With the Kritik: Vague Use of Language

- ❖ He titled the article: “Transcending the Boundaries: Towards a Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity.” Consider the following section of his article: “I suggest that pi isn’t constant and universal, but relative to the position of an observer, and is, therefore, subject to ineluctable historicity.”
- ❖ After appropriate peer review, *Social Text* published his article in its Spring/Summer 1996 issue. After publication, professor Sokol revealed that the article was a hoax designed to illustrate the hollowness of thought in critical theory.
- ❖ Assignment: Explore a Google search for “Alan Sokol” and “Social Text” to learn more about this hoax.

Strategic Summary for Defeating Kritiks

1. Insist that opposing debaters explain (in simple terms) their Kritik during cross-examination — often explanation is simply impossible. Don't allow yourself (or the other team) to assume that just because the language of the Kritik sounds “deep” that it IS deep. It is more likely pure gibberish.

Strategic Summary for Defeating Kritiks

2. Ask the other team to explain in cross-examination why the Kritik gives any reason to vote against your case. Often the Kritik has so little to do with your case that if the judge so chooses, he/she could affirm the Kritik and vote for your case as well. This would be the Both/And permutation strategy explained in the briefs.

Strategic Summary for Defeating Kritiks

3. Focus on defeating the Kritik through your Framework arguments. If it is a Foucault Kritik, don't allow the debate to focus on the details of the views of Michel Foucault; this is their ground. If they are running this Kritik, they probably do it every round and probably will know more about Foucault than you will. You can make Foucault answers, but expect to win the debate on the Framework, not on your substantive answers to Foucault.

Strategic Summary for Defeating Kritiks

4. Pay attention to negative contradictions. Kritik arguments so often contradict other positions used by the negative. Most postmodern Kritiks, for example, follow a “good is bad” formula. They claim that any effort to reform the present system perpetuates capitalism and masks evil. Advocates of such a Kritik will contradict themselves if they make any other answers to your case.

Strategic Summary for Defeating Kritiks

5. Understand that many judges are on your side — they are uncomfortable with what the Kritik is doing to high school debate. They would like an opportunity to vote against it, but they have to have substantive answers allowing them to justify their vote. Many users of Kritiks in high school debates win purely from the shock value of their arguments; they win because the affirmative team is confused and unsure how to answer a Kritik based in nearly incomprehensible language.

Strategic Summary for Defeating Kritiks

6. Show the inapplicability of the negative critique to the China topic. Many teams who use critique arguments use the same briefs year after year, not even making them applicable to the particular resolution being debated that year.