Framing Effectively

By Mark Csoros

***Resolved: In the field of biomedical engineering, restraint ought to be prioritized over scientific advancement.***

In Lincoln Douglas debate, most rounds are won or lost before the rebuttal speeches even begin. In fact, most rounds are won or lost before the two-minute mark of the Negative’s constructive. For all the attention paid to values, applications, contentions, cross-examination, and rhetoric, the most important part of LD is how the resolution is framed.

Conceptually, resolutional framing refers to the process of defining resolutional clash. Clash simply means “conflict between the two sides of the resolution,” and it’s such an important part of LD because of the word “over” in the resolution. Obviously, restraint and scientific advancement are both generally good things, and in a perfect world we could prioritize both. But because the resolution reflects the realities of an imperfect world, we have to choose one above the other, which means that we must debate about circumstances in which restraint and scientific advancement clash (or are in conflict). Thus, resolutional frameworks demonstrate how and when the two sides of the resolution clash, which allowing us to see what it really means to value one side of the resolution above the other.

In practice, resolutional framing impacts nearly every aspect of LD debate. It determines which applications are used (by indicating which applications demonstrate clash) how applications are used (by revealing which examples fall on which side of the resolution), how cases are structured, and how persuasive rhetoric is deployed. But despite their importance, frameworks are often treated as an afterthought, or mentioned briefly in a point of Resolutional Analysis and then ignored for the rest of the round. Effectively framing the resolution’s conflict provides a huge advantage, and this article is designed to help you gain and hold that advantage.

There are four main sections in this piece. The first introduces a unique difficulty in effective framing posed by the wording of this resolution. The following three sections lay out some strategic methods of overcoming that difficulty, along with the respective strengths and vulnerabilities of those methods.

**The Problem of Inherent Advancement**

To understand why this framing this resolution is harder than normal, we need to briefly review the definitions of a few key terms. Restraint, the concept championed by the Affirmative, is defined by Merriam Webster as:

Merriam Webster, “Restraint” [*https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/restraint*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/restraint)  
“an act of [restraining](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/restraining) **:**the state of being [restrained](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/restrained).”

That doesn’t help us much, so let’s turn to the definition of “restraining”:

Merriam Webster, “Restraining” *https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/restraining*

“To prevent from doing, exhibiting, or expressing something; to limit, [restrict](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/restrict), or keep under control. To moderate or limit the force, effect, development, or full exercise of.”

On the Negative side, advancement is defined as:

Merriam Webster, “Advancement” *https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/advancement*   
“The action of [advancing](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/advancing) **:**the state of being [advanced](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/advanced). Promotion or elevation to a higher rank or position; progression to a higher stage of development.”

Therefore, while restraint and advancement aren’t necessarily polar opposites or mutually exclusive, they are conceptually at odds. You can still advance in a restrained manner, but perfect restraint wouldn’t allow for any advancement at all.

So far, everything is pretty much as we’d expect. The definitions for each side of the resolution are intuitive, simple, and conflict in predictable ways. But things become trickier when we apply those resolutional concepts to this year’s topic area. Take a look at the following excerpts from definitions of biomedical engineering, and see if you can spot the issue that arises:

Merriam-Webster. *“Biomedical Engineering”*

[*https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/biomedical%20engineering*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/biomedical%20engineering)

“The application of engineering principles, practices, and technologies to the fields of medicine and biology especially in solving problems and improving care.”

Michigan Tech University. *“What Is Biomedical Engineering?”; Michigan Technological University Department of Biological Engineering.* [*https://www.mtu.edu/biomedical/department/what-is/*](https://www.mtu.edu/biomedical/department/what-is/)

**“Biomedical engineering** focuses on the advances that improve human health and health care at all levels.”

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, April 2021.

“Occupational Outlook Handbook, *Bioengineers and Biomedical Engineers”;* U.S. Department of Labor. *(Article last modified April 9, 2021).*

[*https://www.bls.gov/ooh/architecture-and-engineering/biomedical-engineers.htm#tab-2*](https://www.bls.gov/ooh/architecture-and-engineering/biomedical-engineers.htm#tab-2)

“Biomedical engineers focus on advances in technology and medicine to develop new devices and equipment for improving human health.”

Could you spot the problem? The problem is that, by definition, biomedical engineering seems to be inherently and inextricably linked to advancement. Under the simplest, most straightforward manner of framing this resolution, where we simply allow our definitions to do the heavy lifting, we find a significant bias towards scientific advancement ingrained in the very fabric of biomedical engineering.

**Strategy 1: Capitalizing on Bias**

The first way of dealing with this framing problem, which is primarily helpful for the Negative, is to embrace the definitional tilt of biomedical engineering by framing the resolution as a broad, constant conflict between restraint and advancement. Under this framework, every single moment, every decision in every experiment by every biomedical engineer, is an instance where one side of the resolution is prioritized over the other. Thus, every application, as long as it is topical to the field of biomedical engineering, exemplifies resolutional clash.

The corresponding Negative strategy argues that, because of how biomedical engineering is definitionally predisposed, scientific advancement is prioritized over restraint the vast majority of the time. This strategy has several benefits. First, it takes advantage of the resolution’s apparent tilt. By emphasizing that the point of biomedical engineering is to attain higher levels of scientific advancement, Affirmative is forced to argue (somewhat counterintuitively) that restraint ought to be prioritized despite the fact that advancement is the definitional goal of biomedical engineering. Second, this strategy coopts the status quo. Unless there are glaring ethical problems with the current system of prioritization, it’s usually easier to persuade judges to stick with the status quo than it is to convince them that a new system is better. This is especially true if they accept that clearly positive outcomes—like the eradication of smallpox—are the result of the priorities we currently hold and will continue to hold with a Negative ballot. Third and finally, this way of framing the resolution relies on a very simple definitional logic. It’s persuasive because it’s clear, and it takes the terms and definitions of the resolution at face value.

Like all strategies, this one has its fair share of weaknesses. First, this strategy relies on an exceptionally broad framework, and then uses that framework to argue that the very phrasing of the resolution helps to justify a Negative ballot. One of the core assumptions of academic debate is that both sides of the resolution are equally able to be proven more valuable, and so judges tend to react poorly to arguments implying that the resolution itself favors one side above the other. If the field of biomedical engineering inherently prioritizes scientific advancement over restraint, then Aff has grounds to argue that the resolution is fundamentally unfair. Debaters who seek to capitalize on fundamental unfairness seldom gain judges’ sympathy, so be careful about if, when, and how you implement this strategy. Second, Affirmative can preempt this strategy by coopting the framework of constant conflict, as we’ll discuss in the following section. Finally, the wide scope of this resolutional framework can leave it, and the strategies that rely on it, vulnerable to a narrower, more nuanced method of conflict framing outlined in Strategy 3.

**Strategy 2: Checklist Priorities**

A broad resolutional framework can also form the basis of an effective Affirmative strategy, when used in conjunction with the necessary supporting arguments. Those arguments are fairly reasonable—even commonsense—when run correctly, but are so vital to this strategy that they must be maintained throughout the round. They are that 1) that priorities come first, and 2) that the resolution is being argued in the present day.

Normally, LD resolutions ask us to determine which side “ought to be valued” above the other; this resolution asks us which side “ought to be prioritized.” The present tense of “prioritized,” according to Oxford, means to:

Oxford’s Lexico Dictionary, “Prioritize.” <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/prioritize>  
 “1. Designate or treat (something) as more important than other things.

1.1 Determine the order for dealing with (a series of items or tasks) according to their relative importance.”

This connotation of sequence, of doing things in a particular order, adds an interesting wrinkle to this resolution and provides a way for Aff to successfully use a broad interpretation of the resolution’s conflict. Imagine that you’re a biomedical engineer, and you have a checklist with only two items on it: restraint and scientific advancement. As long as restraint is the first item on your checklist, you can make huge scientific advances at a breakneck pace and still affirm the resolution. Even though advancement is the definitional purpose of your profession, you can maintain the type and extent of caution that prevents you from violating ethical guidelines, while fulfilling your profession’s purpose, just by putting restraint at the top of your checklist. The great and profound scientific breakthroughs achieved through biomedical engineering aren’t necessarily examples of when the resolution was untrue, because many of those breakthroughs checked restraint off the list before pursuing advancement.

The second key piece of this strategy is the present-day setting in which we’re debating this resolution. If we were having this debate in the 1940s, perhaps restraint would be the lesser priority. Perhaps the Negative’s applications about long-extinct diseases really do exemplify why our predecessors needed to focus on scientific advancement at the expense of other values, and perhaps to our predecessors those applications would be persuasive reasons to negate the resolution. But we live in a different world, with different priorities and other needs and new challenges. Our level of technological ability means that we can afford to exercise more restraint than we once did, and that we expose ourselves to much greater risks if we fail to exercise that restraint. It may very well be true that we owe our present circumstances to men and women who threw restraint to the wind in the name of scientific advancement, but our present circumstances dictate that we operate under different priorities than those men and women operated under. Those marvelous, risky, ethically questionable experiments of the past may make for stirring examples of a time when standard scientific practice was squarely aligned with the Negative side of the resolution, but they are not sound reasons to continue those practices in the modern world in which we live.

Just as with the previous strategy, the broad framework of constant conflict does create vulnerabilities to strategies based on more refined interpretations of the clash. At the same time, the nuance of this strategy’s first key argument (that we can prioritize restraint while achieving advancement) might have difficulty persuading inexperienced judges, or those who value simplicity, especially when faced with the brute force clarity of Negative’s argument that biomedical engineering definitionally prioritizes advancement. Even the very concrete illustration of a checklist might not be enough to overcome arguments based on plain meaning, so be careful that the finer points of this argument don’t get lost or overpowered.

**Strategy 3: Breaking the Tie**

This method of framing the resolution requires a much more delicate line of reasoning than is needed for the framework we just finished discussing. However, that increase in nuance yields a narrower scope of resolutional conflict and a balanced and reasonable framework that both sides of the resolution can safely found strategies upon. In a nutshell, this framework holds that the two sides of the resolution only conflict in very select situations of moral uncertainty, and that this debate is fundamentally about whether restraint or advancement should be the “rule of thumb” to which we default in those select situations.

There are one hundred U.S. Senators, which means that every single Senate vote present the possibility of a 50-50 tie. The odds of such a tie are extremely low, but the Senate votes so frequently (thousands of times per year) and has been voting for so long (for 232 years, since April 6th, 1789), that, on rare occasions, a tiebreaker is required. The Vice President of the United States has only two constitutional duties, and breaking ties in the Senate is one of them.

Under the tiebreaker framework of resolutional conflict, restraint and scientific advancement are competing to be the Vice President of the field of biomedical engineering. Whichever side of the resolution is chosen will, like the V.P., be the deciding factor in those rare cases of perfect split, and just as there’s no need to call out the V.P. for a 51-49 vote, resolutional conflict only exists in cases where the resolutional principles are the only way to decide on a course of action.

The analogy breaks down a little when we get into the details of the electoral process, and when we realize that 50-50 ties are much easier to identify than the moral dilemmas of biomedical engineering, but I think that the heart of the analogy is a good reference point for the core of this framework. Very few situations demonstrate real conflict between restraint and scientific advancement, because not many circumstances allow for both principles to simultaneously be truly viable options. Consider the following hypothetical scenarios:

Scenario A: You find ancient dinosaur DNA inside a prehistoric mosquito encased in amber. It would be a landmark event in biomedical engineering if you managed to splice that DNA into a frog’s genome. Should you prioritize scientific advancement or restraint in this situation?

Scenario B: You have spent the last two decades researching pancreatic cancer, and you’re close to a cure. The final test, which you are 80% sure will result in a cure, must be performed under extremely specific conditions, on the appendix of someone with an extremely rare blood type. A coma patient in your hospital, who has a 5% chance of coming out of the coma, meets all the necessary requirements. Removing his appendix for the test will cause no permanent damage, although there is some unavoidable risk inherent to all surgery, and there is no way for you to get consent. The next opportunity to run this test won’t come for another decade or so, during which time about 480,000 people will die of pancreatic cancer. Should you prioritize restraint or scientific advancement?

For the first scenario, there are several award-winning movies that demonstrate why restraint is the only viable option, and the details of the second scenario pretty clearly indicate, to everyone except the most strictly deontological medical ethicists, that prioritizing scientific advancement is the only reasonable decision. Thus, these scenarios don’t show conflict between the sides of the resolution, because we don’t need those tie-breaking principles to help us decide between two equivalent choices.

The main benefit of this resolutional framework is that it narrows the scope of the resolution to a very few situations of clear conflict, down from the nearly infinite areas of conflict allowed under the frameworks of the previous two strategies. This allows debaters (on both sides, since this framework supports both affirmative and negative strategies) to focus their efforts onto the most impactful and specific parts of the resolution, instead of dealing with a multitude of broader and less-clearly defined conflict scenarios.

This strategy is vulnerable on the grounds that sometimes, it does make sense to widen the resolution’s scope and debate over larger areas of conflict. There are sound arguments for broad and narrow frameworks for this resolution, and there are occasions where a debater with a broader framework will justifiably protest that a narrower interpretation of the clash is a bad-faith attempt to restrict legitimate argumentation. If you encounter such protests, be sure to have good reasons for why your resolutional framework is a fair and appropriate method of defining conflict.

**Conclusion**

If you immediately forget everything this article said about the problem of inherent advancement, the framework of constant conflict, or the analogy of the Vice President’s tie-breaking duties, I don’t mind…as long as you retain some insight on how to strategically analyze topics like this resolution. The strategies in this article won’t help you for very long if you use them just as I wrote them, because strategies evolve over the course of an LD season and an LD resolution only lasts for nine months. But, if you use these strategies as templates, as examples of how to tactically approach a topic and position yourself for success, they will be of help to you both throughout and beyond this competitive season.