

# Counterfactual Debates

## Identifying Counterfactual Debates

*There are two general types of debates: normative (model) debates, and empirical (test) debates. For example, "That we should invade New Zealand" is a model debate, whereas "That dogs are better pets than cats" is an empirical debate. A counterfactual debate is a special type of empirical debate which contains the phrase "we regret" or "we prefer".*

For example, "That we regret the creation of social media" or "That we prefer a world in which Australia spends less money on its military" are both counterfactual topics.

## Interpreting Actor Debates

*The best way to interpret a counterfactual debate is "That the world would be better if some event had not occurred."*

For example, the topic "That we regret the creation of social media" can be interpreted as "That the world would be better if social media were never created." Similarly, the topic "That we prefer a world in which Australia spends less money on its military" can be interpreted as "That the world would be better if Australia spent less money on its military."

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## What is the Counterfactual?

*When trying to convince someone that the world would be better if some event never happened, there are generally three main things that you must do:*

- 1. Explain what the world would look like if the event had never happened*
- 2. Compare this world to the world we currently live in*
- 3. Demonstrate that the world in which the event never happened is better than the world which we're currently living in*

The first idea here, the explanation of what the world would look like if the event never happened, is the counterfactual. To define it more formally, the counterfactual is the different sequence of events that would transpire if a particular historical event were to change. For example, in the topic "That we regret the outcome of the 2016 American Presidential Election" the counterfactual would be a description of what would have happened had Donald Trump not been elected as president.

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## Proposing a Counterfactual

*Both teams should propose a counterfactual, and it must be proposed by the first speaker on each team. Whereas in a model debate, both teams have “fiat,” that is, the right to exactly define the policy being debated and the general assumption that whatever policy they propose is feasible, in a counterfactual debate, neither team has fiat. Therefore, when proposing their counterfactuals, both teams must use clear and logical reasoning about causation to justify that their counterfactual is a likely outcome had the event in question not occurred.*

## Key Ideas in Counterfactual Debates

*Ultimately, a counterfactual debate is about comparing two worlds, one being the status quo, that is, the world in which we currently live, and the other being the counterfactual, an alternate world which is different to the status quo because some historical event has changed. Both teams compare these two worlds and argue over which is the better world to live in.*

Teams may disagree about what the counterfactual world looks like. Even if they agree on this, they may disagree over whether the counterfactual is a better or worse world to live in than the status quo. Therefore, to win teams need to be prepared to argue about both, need to provide very clear, well-reasoned arguments about causation, and often may need to employ “even if” rebuttal to engage with the opposition’s counterfactual even if they disagree with it.