Fair Trade or Free Trade?  
Wording and Strategies of the Resolution by Sydney Travis



Have you ever been in a store or restaurant that advertised selling fair-trade products? Do you wonder about the importance of free trade when trade-restriction policies fill the news? This year’s debate resolution is about fair trade and free trade economics and how their philosophies and policies affect individuals all around the globe.

Before going into specific details of the resolution, it is important to understand the basic framework of the resolution’s wording. This year’s Lincoln-Douglas resolution specifies the context you will be debating within. The wording of the resolution informs us that the main actor in the round is the government and that we are only going to be looking at examples involving direct conflicts between the ideologies of fair and free trade. **This article will evaluate the factors of a conflict resolution, importance of a government actor, the meaning behind the ideologies of fair trade and free trade, and how to make a general case for each side of the resolution.**

# “When in Conflict”

Cambridge Business Dictionary defines Conflict as “a situation in which there are opposing demands or ideas and a choice has to be made between them.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This definition informs us that within the context of the resolution, fair trade and free trade must be in opposition to each other and therefore the ideologies cannot be equally valued.

## Factors of a Conflict Resolution

A conflict resolution implies that the government must put emphasis on one of the ideologies over the other. When a situation of conflict arises, the government must decide if fair trade or free trade holds more inherent value. It is your job to prove that your side holds more value and should be prioritized at the expense of the other ideology.

Additionally, a conflict resolution provides a framework for the round. The “conflict” in the resolution presents a specific context and anything outside of that conflict doesn’t apply to the debate. Essentially, when a conflict doesn’t present itself, the two ideologies have the potential to not only co-exist but be valued equally. If your opponent starts bringing up examples that don’t directly link to a conflict situation, you can tag them as non-unique because they are outside the realm of this debate round. Make sure that your examples clearly link back to the conflict specified within the resolution.

# Government Actor

The resolution tells us that the debate is only going to focus around examples of a government choosing between the two philosophies. Individual choices on what investments to make are outside the realm of the resolution. This resolution focuses on governments regulating (or not regulating) trade between other countries. When writing a case and thinking of a value, the actor is important to keep in mind because your value should take into consideration the purpose and obligations of governments both in general and in the context of trade decisions.

Now that we have an understanding of basic resolutional framework, let’s dig deeper into understanding of the content of the resolution and how you can make arguments for both sides.

# Fair Trade and Free Trade – What are They?

What is trade and why is it important? The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines trade as “the business of buying and selling or bartering commodities”[[2]](#footnote-2) Countries trade with each other so that they can put their resources towards producing the goods they are most efficient at producing and open up their markets to a wider range of goods. The International Monetary Fund states,

There are clear efficiency benefits from trade that result in more products – not only more of the same products but greater product variety[[3]](#footnote-3)

Without trade, a country would have to use its limited resources to produce all the goods used within that country. Trade prevents this by increasing both productivity and efficiency!

## Fair Trade

Merriam Webster defines Fair Trade as, “A movement in whose goal is to help producers in developing countries to get a fair price for their product so as to reduce poverty, provide for the ethical treatment of workers and farmers, and promote environmentally sustainable practices”[[4]](#footnote-4) Essentially, Fair trade focuses on the conditions of the producers of products. Fairtrade.org explains that

Fairtrade sets standards: Fairtrade sets social, economic, and environmental standards for both companies and the farmers and workers who grow the food we love. For farmers and workers the standards include protection of worker’s rights and the environment, for companies they include the payment of the Fairtrade minimum price.[[5]](#footnote-5)

When a government values fair trade, they make sure that the imports coming into their country follow certain ethical guidelines. Rather than importing the cheapest goods for the consumer, they prioritize the quality of life of those producing the goods.

## Free Trade

Dictionary.com defines Free Trade as “trade between countries, free from governmental restriction or duties.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Essentially, Free Trade is when countries exchange goods with each other without imposing tariffs, quotas, and other restrictions. FEE.org explains

Free Trade gives global citizens the economic freedom to maximize or advance their economic interests as consumers, distributers and producers without government intervention. Hence, the globalization of commerce creates entrepreneurship, economic growth and innovation within a global society.[[7]](#footnote-7)

When governments value Free Trade they accept the philosophy that greater prosperity for all comes through the free flow of goods within a market (regardless of how the goods were produced). Even if a good is made in an unethical way, free trade permits it to be imported into a country without consequence because it provides an overall benefit to the economy.

# Where Fair Trade and Free Trade Conflict

## The Conflict

In order to understand the conflict between the affirmative and negative sides of the resolution, we need to examine the priorities and goals of the differing ideologies. The Fair Trade Federation breaks down the interests of fair trade and free trade — illustrating the conflict between the two ideologies. They explain that free trade advocates increasing the economic growth of a nation. It

focuses on trade policies between countries, lowers tariffs, quotas, and regulatory barriers to trade, creates change through market policies, [and] primarily benefits corporations and businesses who export and import in participating countries.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In contrast, free trade advocates

[empowering] marginalized people and improving the quality of their lives, focuses on commerce among individuals and businesses, [works] in partnership…to ensure favorable financing, a living wage, and higher labor and environmental standards, creates change through living wage and community improvement costs, and primarily benefits [those] who lack economic and social opportunity[[9]](#footnote-9)

Fair trade has local and individual interests; advocating equitable interactions that seek to improve the quality of life of producers. In contrast, free trade has broader and global interests; advocating that unrestricted labor leads to an overall better economy and quality of life on a wider scale.

The main conflict of the resolution comes down to the question – does valuing the lives and conditions of workers that may be marginalized or the prosperity of the global economy lead to better quality of life?

Should governments hold other governments accountable for their labor conditions? Be prepared to bring up examples of when governments have had to make a choice between the two ideologies and what and why they chose what they did.

## The Argument for Fair Trade

The Affirmative position of the resolution is in favor of fair trade. When arguing this side of the resolution focus on the exploitation that can take place within a free trade system. Bring up the dangerous working environment, low wages, and slave-like conditions in the factories and farms that make the products we use every-day. Goods we use in our day-to-day lives are regularly made at the exploitation of third world farmers and workers. The Center for Research on Globalization reports that

Free trade is negative for the international working class for numerous reasons. When labor and regulation costs are too high for competitive profits in the U.S., for instance, corporations jump ship and leave the country to exploit the slave wages of poor countries, working with subjected foreign nations that limit labor and human rights to keep poverty wages in place.[[10]](#footnote-10)

As the affirmative, you need to present the benefits of fair trade and the solutions that it provides by increasing the quality of life of workers. Discuss how governments can still trade with nations as long as they put limits on what type of trade they engaged in and enter into agreements that ensure good working conditions. Valuing the lives of those making the products we use every day should take priority over a system with no economic restrictions. An affirmative ballot states that even more important than cheap products and a high GDP is the human rights and quality of life of all workers on the globe.

## The Argument for Free Trade

The negative position of the resolution is to argue in favor of free trade. When arguing this side of the resolution you want to focus on the ties between free market principles and high quality of life. Focus on the overall picture rather than the specifics. FEE.org reports,

The astonishing enrichments of the world in the past 50 years, when extreme poverty has fallen from more than 50 percent to below 10 percent of the world population, could not have happened without free commerce and the innovation it delivers[[11]](#footnote-11)

Additionally, Economist Arvind Panagriya of Colombia University reports that free trade has been extremely beneficial to those in poverty with poor working and living conditions, stating,

Few countries have grown rapidly without simultaneous rapid expansion of trade. In turn, rapid growth has almost always led to reduction of poverty.[[12]](#footnote-12)

When countries are free to trade, their economies boost leading to higher living standards within those countries. As the negative, you need to argue that the best way to improve living conditions of those in other countries is not through trade restrictions but rather through boosting a country’s economy. Valuing free trade not only protects the human rights for both the producer and consumer but increases global prosperity on a huge level.

Another way to approach the negative would be to argue that the resolution is simply false – a conflict between fair and free trade does not exist or that the two should be valued equally when in conflict. This strategy is fairly complicated and if you do choose to run this be prepared to have a solid explanation for why your opponent’s examples of conflict don’t actually count.

# Conclusion

You should now have a fairly good understanding of what the resolution means, the context in which the debate takes place, and the general argumentation for both sides of the resolution. This resolution is much more policy than the average LD resolution; however, by focusing on goals and values of the ideologies you should be able to have a good philosophical debate without making the entire round about policy. Have a great debate season and good luck case writing!

1. “Conflict,” Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/conflict#dataset-business-english> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Trade,” Merriam Webster Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trade> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Brad McDonald “Back to Basics: Why Countries Trade,” International Monetary Fund, December 2009,

   http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2009/12/basics.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Fair-Trade,” Merriam Webster Dictionary, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fair-trade [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “What Fairtrade Does,” Fairtrade Foundation, https://www.fairtrade.org.uk/What-is-Fairtrade/What-Fairtrade-does [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “Free-Trade,” Dictionary.com, http://www.dictionary.com/browse/free-trade [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Baruti Libre Kafele, “Free Trae is the Key to Economic Growth,” Foundation for Economic Education, October 9 2016, <https://fee.org/articles/free-trade-is-the-key-to-economic-growth/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rachel Spence, “Fair Trade, Free Trade: Similar in Name Only,” Fair Trade Federation, <http://www.fairtradefederation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Free-Trade-Is-Not-Fair-Trade_20161.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Shamus Cooke, “Crises of the Global Economy: Trade Conflicts and Fair Trade,” Centre for Research on Globalization, April 5 2010, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/crisis-of-the-global-economy-trade-conflicts-and-fair-trade/18498> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Matt Ridley, “Free Trade Makes People Nicer” Foundation for Economic Education, October 14, 2017, <https://fee.org/articles/free-trade-makes-people-nicer/> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Marian Tupy, “Free Trade Benefits All” Cato Institute, January 3 2006, <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/free-trade-benefits-all> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)