



CHAPTER TWO: REBUTTAL

BEGINNER

THE IMPORTANCE OF REBUTTAL

Congratulations on making it through Chapter One! By now, you should have a good understanding of the many important techniques of case development. With some practice, you should be able to develop strong arguments in favour of your side of the topic, and anticipate the strongest arguments in favour of the opposing side of a topic.

However, two opposing cases do not make a debate, however important they are. To have a debate, we need something more – we need *interaction* between those cases. It is not enough for your team to present and support its own arguments – you must also attack your opponents' arguments. This is what we call 'rebuttal'.

Rebuttal is vital for debating. Unfortunately, many less experienced debaters seem to treat rebuttal as an 'added extra' to their prepared arguments.

It is easy to understand why – because rebuttal involves attacking your opponents' arguments, it is generally much more difficult to prepare rebuttal in advance than to prepare your substantive arguments. However, this really should not be a problem. Rebuttal is not particularly difficult. When you think about it, rebuttal is really just about pointing out the differences between your arguments and your opposition's arguments. Given that you are both arguing opposite sides of the one issue, these differences should be easy to spot and straightforward to point out!

Of course, this does not mean that you will always manage to rebut without stumbling a few times. But that doesn't matter! Rebuttal is so important to successful debating – particularly in younger grades – that it is *much better* to stumble somewhat while spending significant time on rebuttal than to give a word-perfect speech that contains little or no rebuttal at all.

WHAT SHOULD YOU REBUT?

This is a simple question with a simple answer. The goal of a debate is to convince your audience that your side of the topic is true – that is, for your case to defeat your opposition's case. Therefore, you should refute your opposition's case – by rebutting any notion, assertion, argument, example, statistic or anything else whose demise will contribute to the successful collapse of your opposition's case.

Of course, there is a difference between *rebutting* your opposition's case and *adjudicating* it. As a debater, it is not your role to adjudicate your opposition's case.

For example, suppose that your opposition speaks over time. This may be a significant flaw in your opposition’s approach – it could even cost them the debate – but it is not your role as a debater to point this out. Speaking over time does not affect the persuasiveness of your opposition’s case, so it is not a debater’s role to criticise it. Similarly, suppose that your opposition presented an argument without any supporting example. It is not enough to say, “This argument didn’t have an example” – that sounds like something an adjudicator would say. Instead, a debater should identify the lack of example as *evidence* of why the argument is not true – essentially, by saying, “Our opposition claimed [X] was true, but they couldn’t find a single example where this was the case! We, on the other hand, claimed [Y]. We showed you how this is true by using the following examples ...”.

The general principle of rebuttal is straightforward, but we need to examine some of its specific implications – particularly because so many adjudicators, coaches and debaters confuse this issue by resorting to trite mantras (for example, “never rebut examples”).

REBUTTING YOUR OPPOSITION’S THEME

The first issue is rebuttal of your opposition’s theme. There is no question that you must rebut the underlying themes of your opposition’s case, but this does *not* necessarily mean directly rebutting the one sentence that your opposition has called their ‘theme’. Inexperienced debaters often explicitly rebut their opposition’s theme. This is not necessarily a bad thing – at the least, this approach gives inexperienced debaters an easy way of targeting the main idea underpinning their opposition’s case. However, there are ultimately better approaches. Explicit rebuttal of your opposition’s theme quickly becomes redundant when you become more experienced at directly identifying and attacking the ideas underlying your opposition’s case. The better approach, therefore, is to attack the important ideas and assumptions underlying your opposition’s case, *and to refer to your opposition’s theme while doing this*. This distinction is explained by the examples in the following table.

| SIMPLE APPROACH | BETTER APPROACH |
|--|---|
| <p>“The main problem with our opposition’s case is their theme, which states [X]. This theme is wrong because....”</p> | <p>“The main problem with our opposition’s case is their underlying assumption that [Y]. There is no question that this assumption was a vital part of our opponents’ case. For example, their theme stated that [X]. Now, the assumption that [Y] is clearly not true, for a number of reasons...”</p> |

REBUTTING EXAMPLES AND STATISTICS

The second issue is rebuttal of substantiation: examples and statistics. As we noted earlier, it is often common to hear adjudicators, coaches and debaters boldly declare, “You should never rebut examples!”. This statement is absolutely untrue, for the important reason given earlier: your goal in rebuttal is to destroy your opposition’s case; if your opposition’s case is well supported by certain examples or statistics, you need to rebut them! However, a modified version of the earlier statement *is* true: *Examples and statistics of themselves prove nothing. Therefore, if you do rebut examples and statistics, you need constantly to consider and discuss their relevance and context in the debate.* In simple terms, it can be very effective to rebut an example or statistic, *if* you show how your opposition’s case was reliant upon that material.

The alternative approach is simply to go through your opposition’s case like a commando with a machine gun, shooting everything in sight! This approach leads to ‘argument by example’, where the debate becomes about examples and statistics, rather than about principles and arguments. This style of argument and rebuttal is rightly condemned, because no list of examples (whether in substantive argument or in rebuttal) can show an abstract principle to be true – as we learned in developing arguments, you need some kind of reasoning and explanation.

REBUTTING REBUTTAL

The third issue is rebuttal *of* rebuttal. Debaters commonly ask, “What happens if our opposition rebuts one of our arguments? Should we rebut their rebuttal?”. This question may seem to demand a very technical and rule-based answer – until you rephrase it somewhat. What these debaters are really saying is, “If our opposition has managed to attack one of our arguments, should we let that attack stand?”. The strategic answer to this question is clearly “**NO!**” – you should answer your opposition’s attack.

However, rebuttal of rebuttal is quite different from rebuttal of a substantive argument. Although defence of your case is important, your *ultimate* goal in rebuttal is still to attack your opposition’s case. Therefore, although it may be strategically vital to rebut some of your opposition’s rebuttal, it would usually be strategically weak to spend significant time doing so – it is very important not to look defensive. In particular, you should never explicitly identify rebuttal of rebuttal as a key issue of debate (for example, “The first problem with our opposition’s argument is that they have misrepresented our case.”). This looks defensive in the extreme, and gives the impression that you are shying from actually rebutting your opposition’s case. It is important to remember that, when rebutting rebuttal, you have the luxury of relying on a substantive argument that your team has already developed in detail (that is, the argument that you are defending). Therefore, it should not usually prove difficult to deal with such rebuttal briefly.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING THOROUGH

Every debater has an opinion about which are the main issues of the debate. Naturally, you need to focus on these issues when you are preparing your rebuttal – if you think that an issue is particularly important, you need to spend more rebuttal time dealing with it.

However, just because you think that something is a main issue of debate does not mean that the adjudicator shares that view. The adjudicator may (quite legitimately) see a completely different issue, argument or example as vital to the outcome of the debate.

Therefore, it is vital to be thorough in your rebuttal. One way or another, you should deal with *every* argument, example and significant idea that your opposition raises. This does not mean spending equal time on everything, of course, but it does mean clearly rebutting all of the important ideas at some point. For example, if you have shown that an argument is logically false, you should then ideally say something like, “I have now dealt with this argument, and therefore shown that the examples of [X] and [Y], which were part of that argument, do not assist our opposition’s case.” This ensures that you avoid a situation where the adjudicator thinks (perhaps illogically), “Well, she rebutted the idea behind the argument successfully – but I still found the example convincing.”

Further, the *third* speaker must work hard to ‘mop up’ anything that has not otherwise been rebutted. We will examine the role of the third speaker shortly, and this principle does not change that role substantially. A third speaker must be particularly careful to note down everything that has been said, and to provide an answer to it – either by rebutting it directly, or by showing how it has already been rebutted in another point.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of following these rebuttal strategies whenever you know (or suspect) that your adjudicator may be using a flowchart approach. For example, the Grand Final of the 1998 World Schools Debating Championships in Israel was won 4-3 by Australia (against Scotland). One of the majority adjudicators awarded the debate by a very narrow margin, and was apparently swayed by Scotland’s failure to deal with a small but substantial part of the Australian case. As technical as it may seem, this approach literally can make and break world championships – it pays to follow the correct technique whenever flowchart adjudication is in place.

Preparing for rebuttal

We have already seen that good rebuttal is vital for success in debating, so it is naturally important to think about how to prepare rebuttal effectively.

The most important point about effective rebuttal preparation is what it's *not*: effective rebuttal preparation is not 'pre-prepared rebuttal'. 'Pre-prepared rebuttal' is rebuttal that your team has planned to the finest detail – essentially, by knowing *exactly* what you will say if your opposition raises one of a few given arguments. Some teams even go so far as to write their pre-prepared rebuttal on palm cards!

The problem with this approach should be clear. Good rebuttal is about effectively attacking your opposition's arguments, *as they were presented*. Preparing very detailed rebuttal to attack very specific arguments is ineffective – if your opposition presents somewhat different arguments, or even the same arguments with a different emphasis, your pre-prepared rebuttal will be almost useless.

The best way to prepare for rebuttal is to sit down as a team and think about the *kinds* of arguments and examples that your opposition may raise. You can then plan your *general approach* to those arguments and examples. This approach allows you to be flexible (and hence much more effective) in responding to your opposition's case.

INTERMEDIATE

DEFINITIONAL REBUTTAL

In a perfect world, this section would not be necessary – both teams would agree on the same definition, so there would be no need for definitional rebuttal. In fact, not even a perfect world would be necessary – most definitional disputes would be avoided if both teams had followed the guidelines set out in Chapter One for choosing an appropriate and even-handed definition.

However, avoidable or not, definitional disputes do happen. What's more, when they happen, your adjudicator will expect you to follow a relatively standard approach in dealing with the situation. Of all the aspects of rebuttal, this is one of the driest; however, it is also one of the most technically demanding.

DEFINITIONAL RULES REVISITED

Before we dive into the techniques of definitional rebuttal, we need to be clear about the definitional rules. Remember, there are two definitional rules, and you need to know which applies to you and your competition.

They are:

1. No exclusive right of definition, and
2. An exclusive right of definition.

You will recall that there are two tests for whether one definition is ‘better’ than another, and that these tests change depending on the definitional rule being used. When there is *no* exclusive right of definition, the two tests are:

1. Which definition is *more* reasonable?
2. Which definition is *closer* to the ‘real’ issue (otherwise known as the ‘plain meaning’) of the topic?

Where there *is* an exclusive right of definition, the affirmative team has the right to define the topic, and two questions can then be asked of that definition:

1. *Is* the affirmative’s definition reasonable?
2. *Is* the affirmative’s definition reasonably close to the plain meaning of the words of the topic?

(This was explained in detail earlier in the book. If you are unsure of the details, you should go back and re-read that section now. Definitional rebuttal is very confusing if you don’t know your definitional rules!)

DECIDING TO REBUT YOUR OPPOSITION’S DEFINITION

The first issue is how to decide whether to rebut your opposition’s definition. Debating is about disagreeing with what your opposition says *about the issue posed by the topic*. We do not assemble debaters, adjudicators and audiences to quibble about the meaning of a word or two – at least, not if we can help it. Therefore, a negative team should only rebut the definition if it’s absolutely necessary. But *when* is it ‘absolutely necessary’?

The simple approach is to ask a single question: “*Can we continue with our case under this definition?*”. Usually, the answer should be, ‘yes’. In most debates, your opposition will have used slightly different words to define the topic, but their definition will be substantially similar to yours – similar enough that you can easily continue with your case under their definition. However, let’s return to the topic “THAT BIG IS BEAUTIFUL”, and suppose that you (as negative) have defined the topic as relating to globalisation, while the affirmative has defined it as relating to body images. You cannot continue under the affirmative’s definition: if the adjudicator accepts that the topic is about body images, your arguments about globalisation are irrelevant.

If you cannot continue under the affirmative’s definition, you need to do something. Exactly what that is will depend on *why* you cannot continue, and on *which* definitional rule applies. Let’s consider this with a table.

Definitional rule

| | | <i>No exclusive right of definition</i> | <i>Exclusive right of definition</i> |
|--------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Why can't you continue? | <i>You could not argue under the affirmative's case if you tried.</i> | You <i>can challenge</i> , on the basis that the affirmative definition is <i>unreasonable</i> (that is, that your definition is <i>more reasonable</i>). | You <i>can challenge</i> , on the basis that the affirmative definition is <i>unreasonable</i> . |
| | <i>The affirmative has defined the topic as relating to a different issue, but the definition is not itself unreasonable.</i> | You <i>can challenge</i> , on the basis that your definition is <i>closer to the plain meaning of the words of the topic</i> (that is, your definition has picked the 'real' issue posed by the topic). | You <i>cannot challenge</i> , unless the affirmative definition is particularly bizarre (' <i>not reasonably close to the plain meaning of the words of the topic</i> '). If you cannot challenge, you must <i>abandon your prepared case</i> in this scenario. This was discussed earlier. |

The table shows the various combinations of definitional problem and definitional rule, and indicates the best response for a negative team. The table is essentially just a summary – it should be clear that the principles in the table follow directly from the definitional rules that were set out earlier in the book.

One point deserves emphasis before we move on: *It is a big step to rebut a definition. If you rebut the definition wrongly, or badly, you will often lose as a result. Therefore, only rebut the definition when you feel confident that you cannot continue under the affirmative's approach.*

HOW TO REBUT THE DEFINITION

We will examine a general structure for a rebuttal point shortly. Rebuttal of the definition is nothing more than a special form of that general structure. However, we just learned that poor definitional rebuttal can lose a debate, so it is worth considering this special form carefully!

The most important requirement of definitional rebuttal is *clarity*. Your adjudicator needs to understand *precisely* why you are rebutting your opponents' definition, *and* how you propose to replace your opponents' definition. Therefore, it is vital to signpost clearly, speak clearly and avoid any distractions (for example, jokes) during this aspect of your speech.

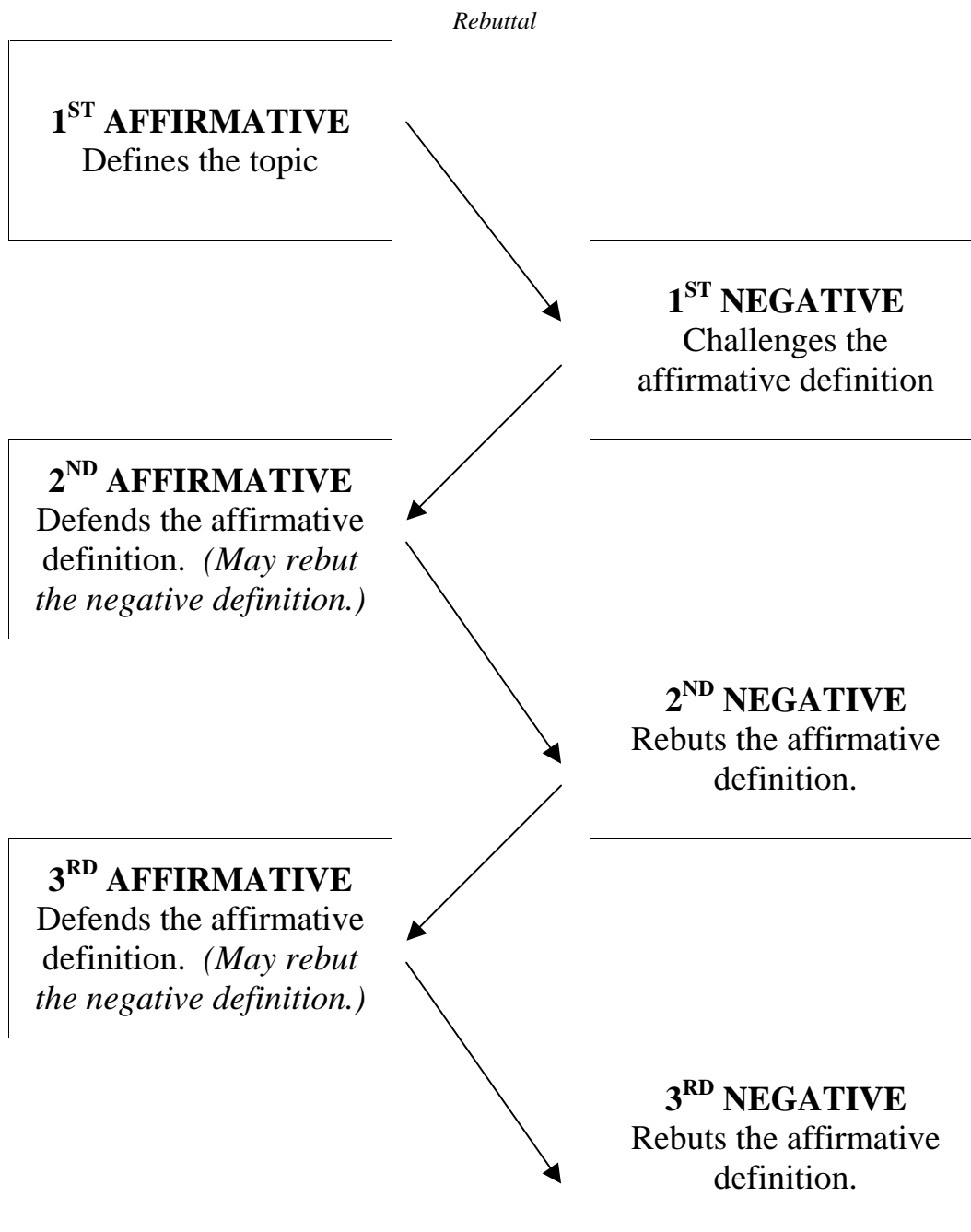
There are four essential parts to rebutting the definition.

1. ***Make it clear that you are challenging your opponents' definition.*** Too often, teams whinge and whine about their opposition's definition, but don't actually formally challenge it. This is a waste of time. Either challenge your opponents' definition or accept it. It is helpful to actually use the word 'challenge' – for example, "First, we challenge our opposition's definition."
2. ***Explain how their definition is wrong.*** We have already examined the reasons that a definition might be wrong, and the way that those reasons depend upon the definitional rule in place.
3. ***Replace their definition with your own definition.*** This is vital, because every debate needs a definition – if your opponents' definition is not good enough, you need something to replace it. You need only replace your opponents' definition to the extent that you disagree with it. For example, if you disagree with your opponents' definition of one word in the topic, you need only replace their definition of that word with your definition of that word – there is no need to redefine the entire topic.
4. ***Explain how your definition avoids the problems of your opposition's definition.*** You don't need to spend much time on this, but it is important. This involves showing how your definition avoids the pitfall(s) of your opposition's. For example, if you have criticised your opposition's definition for being unreasonable, you should briefly explain how your definition *is* reasonable (or is *more* reasonable).

DEFINITIONAL CHALLENGES AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE DEBATE AS A WHOLE

In many respects, a definition is to a debate what a foundation is to a building. It is inconceivable, therefore, that an attack on that foundation (a definitional challenge) would not send shudders throughout the entire structure. Definitional challenges have important ramifications for the debate as a whole.

If you are *not* challenging your opposition's definition, it is generally good technique to say so – formally accepting your opposition's definition is a valuable way of adding clarity to your case. However, you don't *need* to do so – if you do not challenge your opposition's definition, *you are taken to have accepted it*. At first, this seems like a mere rule of convenience, but its effects are much greater than that. Specifically, this rule means that a definitional challenge *must* be continued throughout the debate, as the following diagram shows.



This diagram shows how the definition should be treated in a definitional debate. The definition is presented by the first affirmative. If the negative team wishes to challenge the definition, it must do so in the first negative's speech. In that case, the affirmative team will want to defend their definition – this must be done by the second affirmative. This process must continue throughout the debate.

The diagram says that the second and third affirmative speakers 'may' rebut the negative definition. The meaning of this will depend on the definitional rule.

If there is no exclusive right of definition, the issue is whether the affirmative team's definition is *better* than the negative team's definition. In that case, the second and third affirmative speakers defend their own definition *and* should rebut the negative

team's definition as well – this, after all, is the best way for the affirmative to show that it has a 'better' definition.

However, the situation is different if the affirmative holds an exclusive right of definition. In that case, the issue is whether the affirmative's definition is acceptable on its own merits (for example, the issue will usually be whether or not the affirmative's definition is reasonable). Therefore, under the exclusive right of definition rule, the affirmative team should rarely (if ever) rebut the negative definition directly. It is far more strategic in that case for the affirmative team simply to show how its own definition is acceptable.

The effects of not continuing a definitional dispute throughout a debate can be disastrous. For example, suppose that the two teams have very different definitions of the topic. If the first negative challenges the affirmative definition (as he or she almost certainly should in this circumstance) and the second affirmative speaker does not defend the affirmative definition, the affirmative is *taken* to have accepted the negative's definitional challenge – even if the affirmative clearly disagrees with the negative team's definition! In that case, the debate is understood to proceed under the negative team's definition. This means that the affirmative team's case will essentially be irrelevant, because it will be supporting an interpretation of the topic that the affirmative team itself has conceded.

This means, of course, that the negative team must challenge the affirmative definition at first speaker or not at all. If the first negative speaker does not challenge the affirmative definition, the negative team is taken to have accepted the affirmative definition, so it will be considered a contradiction if the second negative then turns around and challenges.

Many teams claim to disagree with their opposition's definition when in fact the definitions are essentially the same. For example, a negative team may try to rebut the affirmative definition because the affirmative has defined a term using different words to achieve the same meaning. In this case, it is still wise for an affirmative to defend its definition, even if that defence essentially involves showing that the negative's definition is the same as that provided by the affirmative.

THE DEFINITIONAL 'EVEN IF'

Definitional debates can often be difficult. One reason is that definitional disputes can reduce the amount of argument on the substantive issues posed by the topic. In a normal debate, the disagreement between the teams centres on the actual difference between the cases; in a definitional debate, however, it is confined to the difference between definitions.

This poses a problem. Suppose that your team is caught in a definitional debate. You face the prospect of losing the debate if the adjudicator disagrees with your arguments on the definitional issue. Therefore, you ideally need a way to rebut your opposition's case while maintaining your stance on the opposition's definition. You can do this with a definitional 'even if' – essentially, by saying, "We disagree with our opposition's definition. However, *even if* our opposition's definition were correct, we would still disagree with their case – it does not even prove their side of *their* interpretation of the definition!". Naturally, this is done *after* rebutting the opposition's definition.

James Hooke and Jeremy Philips have described this as creating "a mini-debate within the debate proper",³ and their point (as usual) is a good one. An 'even if' allows your team to (i) rebut your opposition's definition, *and* (ii) show the adjudicator that you can happily rebut your opposition's case. Essentially, this creates insurance: your adjudicator can say, "Well, I preferred your opposition's definition, but you completely destroyed their case, so you deserved to win the debate." If both teams use 'even if' techniques, there are essentially three 'mini-debates' occurring:

1. A debate about whose definition is correct;
2. A debate under the affirmative's definition (on the assumption that it is correct);
and
3. A debate under the negative's definition (on the assumption that it is correct).

This is unquestionably a very sophisticated technique. However, quite obviously, it is also a very complex technique and for that reason, alarm bells should be ringing - remember: ***fear complexity!*** Just as important as understanding *how* to use an 'even if' is understanding *when* to.

The key issue is the basis on which you are challenging your opposition's definition. If you are challenging on the ground that your opponents' definition is bizarre, you are generally safe in using a definitional 'even if' – you can essentially say, "Well, we don't think you're debating the right issue, but we'll happily beat you on that issue as well." If you are challenging on the basis that your opposition's definition is somehow unreasonable, you face much greater problems. You cannot say, "Our opposition's definition is totally unreasonable and leaves us no room to argue. However, if we *were* to accept it, we'd produce the following arguments...". This is clearly a contradiction.

In practice, under an exclusive right of definition, it is rare for a team to argue that a definition is not reasonably close to the plain meaning of the topic. Therefore, as a general principle, it is unwise to attempt a definitional 'even if' under the exclusive right of definition rule. In these circumstances, it is better to focus your attention on winning the definitional argument and on substantiating your own case well.

³ Philips J, Hooke J (1994). *The Debating Book*, UNSW Press, Sydney at page 68. Also, Philips J, Hooke J (1998). *The Sport of Debating: Winning Skills and Strategies*, UNSW Press, Sydney at page 101.

DEALING WITH AN UNREASONABLE DEFINITION

We have already dealt with the issue of unreasonable definitions in some detail. However, this can be an area of significant confusion, so it is worth briefly unifying the principles.

It is always important to be very clear when rebutting a definition. This is particularly true if you are accusing your opposition of having defined you out of the debate – that is, of defining the topic to leave you with an unreasonable case to argue. It is very easy to accuse your opposition of having defined you out of the debate by simply saying, “Our opposition’s definition is unreasonable.” However, this is a particularly dangerous and weak approach. It is not always clear that a case is unreasonable to those who are not forced to oppose it – whereas you may have sat through your opposition’s case thinking, “What a truism!”, your audience and adjudicator may easily have thought, “Hmmm...makes sense!”. Therefore, if you are accusing your opposition of having defined you out of the debate, it is vital to explain *exactly* how it is unreasonable.

For example, “The topic is “THAT THE NEXT CENTURY SHOULD BE BETTER THAN THE LAST”. Our opposition has defined and treated the word ‘should’ as meaning ‘a moral and practical obligation’. This is unreasonable. If this definition is accepted, we on the negative team must argue that we have a moral and practical obligation *not* to make the world a better place – essentially, that we are obliged to make the world worse! It is unreasonable to expect us to argue this – *nobody* in society argues that we should make the world a worse place, and we should not be forced to do so.” You would then proceed to replace your opposition’s definition of the word, and explain how your definition was reasonable. Finally, you would clearly refuse to deal with your opposition’s case, on the basis that you could not reasonably oppose it. You could safely proceed to substantiate your own material under your own definition.

This is the best approach because it is the clearest. Some suggest that the best approach is to ‘conditionalise the truism’, meaning that you essentially say, “Of course, our opposition couldn’t possibly be arguing [X], because that would be a truism. The real issue is [Y].”⁴ However, at least at a schools level, this approach seems dangerously subtle and confusing. First, it leaves the adjudicator unclear as to whether you are actually challenging the affirmative’s definition – as we learned earlier, you should either challenge or accept the affirmative’s definition, not merely complain about it and carry on. Second, if a team is mistaken enough to argue an unreasonable case, it may not immediately see *why* that case is unreasonable. There is a significant risk that your opposition would respond with, “No, we’re definitely arguing [X].” An adjudicator who did not see that case as unreasonable might think

⁴ For example, see Philips J, Hooke J (1994). *The Debating Book*, UNSW Press, Sydney at page 74. Also, Philips J, Hooke J (1998). *The Sport of Debating: Winning Skills and Strategies*, UNSW Press, Sydney at page 107.

simply that you had misrepresented your opposition's case and missed the issue of the debate.

PARALLEL CASES: A SPECIAL ISSUE

Parallel cases occur when both teams argue substantially the same case – notwithstanding that they are on opposite sides of the topic! We have already considered an example of a parallel case when we covered the definition. In that case, the topic was “THAT TERTIARY EDUCATION IS A RIGHT”.

Let's consider a different topic: “THAT IT'S ALL DOWNHILL FROM HERE”. Suppose that both teams take this topic as a reference to the overall trends in our world – about whether things are getting ‘better’ or ‘worse’. Imagine that the affirmative team takes ‘downhill’ to mean ‘getting better’ – just as a cyclist might understand it. Imagine, however, that the negative team takes ‘downhill’ to mean ‘getting worse’ – as in ‘the world is going downhill’. In that case, *both* teams will argue that the world is getting better! The only real disagreement will be about which side of the topic their common approach supports.

Two things should be clear. First, since debating is supposed to be about a clash of issues and ideas, parallel cases should not arise – they are somebody's “fault”. Second, if each team thinks that the same case shows its side of the topic, there must be a disagreement about the meaning of the topic. That is, a parallel case is essentially a definitional issue.

The best response to a parallel debate, therefore, is twofold:

1. You should acknowledge that there are parallel cases.
2. You should show, using the accepted method of definitional rebuttal, that your understanding of the topic and definition is ‘right’, and that your opposition's is ‘wrong’.

That is, the affirmative team should try to convince the adjudicator that the parallel case is the negative's “fault”; the negative team should blame it on the affirmative. Each team will essentially be trying to show that *it* was arguing what the topic required, but that its *opposition* was arguing ‘the wrong way’.

THE INTERNAL STRUCTURE OF A REBUTTAL POINT

At this point, we need to assume that you have identified some problem with your opposition's case or a specific argument within it. We will shortly examine some of the specific problems that you may have identified, but these problems are really little more than a crystallisation of every debater's reaction to an opponent's argument: “That's wrong!”. For now, we are interested in the best way to internally structure a rebuttal point.

As with most elements of debating, it is impossible to be completely rigid about the internal structure of a rebuttal point. However, a good rebuttal point will always demonstrate a number of key characteristics.

First, it is important to identify the argument or idea that you are attacking. Too often, debaters simply launch into a criticism of an opposition argument, without explaining *which* argument or idea, and *where* it appeared in the opposition case.

Second, you obviously have to show what is wrong with that argument or idea. This is the essence of rebuttal, and to the extent that someone might be a naturally talented rebuttal speaker, this will be his or her strength. We will look at this part in more detail later.

Third, you need to bring your case into the picture, either by referring to an argument that your team has already presented or to your overall case approach, then showing how your team responds to the problem that you have identified in your opposition's case. This is particularly important because of the 'initiative debating' approach to adjudication. Many adjudicators, whether they know it or not, place significant emphasis on the issue of which team has gained the 'initiative' in the debate. 'Initiative' can mean different things to different adjudicators. However, if one team's case plays a more prominent part in the debate as a whole, it is a fair bet that many adjudicators will view that team as having taken the 'initiative' of the debate, and will reward that team accordingly. If you spend time attacking your opposition's case, but do not tie that rebuttal back to your own case, you will run a significant risk of losing the 'initiative', no matter how good your rebuttal is. It is vital, therefore, to use your rebuttal not merely to attack your opposition's arguments but to compare and contrast both teams' approaches.

These three requirements reduce neatly (perhaps too neatly!) into a four-step mantra that summarises the simplest effective internal structure for a rebuttal point:

1. What they said;
2. Why it's wrong;
3. What we said;
4. Why it's right.

The essence of rebuttal is unquestionably the second point, and you should almost always spend most of your time here. The first, third and fourth points may be 'padding', but they are vital 'padding' nonetheless and they deserve to be included.

It is important to emphasise again that this is *not* the only acceptable internal structure for a rebuttal point; indeed, there are probably countless internal structures that could be very effective. However, regardless of how you structure your rebuttal point, it really must contain the four elements set out in this simple approach.

THE OVERALL STRUCTURE OF REBUTTAL

We have now examined the important elements for internally structuring a rebuttal point. However, good rebuttal structure is about more than the internal structure of each argument – it also requires an effective overall structure for your rebuttal. We will start by considering the general elements of good rebuttal structure, then the specific requirements of first and second speaker and third speaker rebuttal structure.

STARTING YOUR REBUTTAL

What is the most effective way to start your rebuttal? It can be tempting to dive straight in to the first individual rebuttal point. However, this will probably leave your audience and adjudicator somewhat confused – they will hopefully understand your rebuttal on that individual point, but they may be left wondering ‘how it all fits together’.

The best way to start your rebuttal, therefore, is to focus on the ‘big picture’ – to make a concise attack on the main idea (or the key weakness) that underpins your opposition’s case.

A simple way to decide this introduction is to ask yourself, “If I only had time to make *one brief point* before sitting down, what would that point be?”. It is unlikely that you would waste this one brief point on an easy put-down, a witty aside or a convincing but trivial piece of rebuttal. Instead, you would hope to use your time to target the *fundamental* flaw in your opposition’s case.

The introduction to your rebuttal may often be closely related to a separate rebuttal point that you have prepared. Hopefully, however, your introduction will encapsulate your opposition’s entire approach. The technique of developing an effective introduction to your rebuttal is similar to the technique of developing an effective formal introduction, which we examined earlier. A formal introduction can take many forms, but should be a brief characterisation of the issue as you see it; your introduction to rebuttal can also take many forms, and should be a brief characterisation of your opposition’s case and the fundamental basis upon which you oppose it.

STRATEGIC ALLOCATION OF REBUTTAL TIME

In Step Five of Chapter One, we examined the general internal timing of a speech, with different components (rebuttal, substantive argument, conclusion, etc) each allocated an ideal time. It is also important to consider the internal timing of your rebuttal itself.

There is no required internal timing for your rebuttal, but there are two important general principles:

1. More important rebuttal should come before less important rebuttal.
2. More important rebuttal should be allocated more time than less important rebuttal.

Whether rebuttal is ‘more important’ depends *not* on how easy or convincing a rebuttal point is, but on the importance of a rebuttal point to the debate as a whole. For example, an inexperienced debater might think, “Point [X] *must* be the first point – I can make the opposition look really stupid and get some good laughs with that point!”. However, a more experienced debater is likely to think, “Well, we definitely have point [X] won, and I’ll emphasise that in good time. But point [Y] is really the core of the issue, and that’s where the adjudicator is probably most concerned. Therefore, I’ll start with a careful and detailed rebuttal of point [Y], and wipe off point [X] briefly later.”

The only apparent exception to this rule concerns the definition. The definition really is the foundation to the entire debate. Therefore, *any* rebuttal or clarification of the definition is *automatically* considered the ‘most important’ point, at least for these purposes. (That does not mean it will necessarily be most important in determining the outcome of the debate.) Therefore, if you are taking up any point concerning your opposition’s definition, you must order that point first. (This does not apply to the first negative accepting the affirmative’s definition – this can safely be done in one sentence at the end of rebuttal.)

FIRST AND SECOND SPEAKER STRUCTURE

There are really two overall rebuttal structures – that is, two ways of organising your rebuttal points in your speech. One structure is for first and second speakers; the other is for third speakers. We will start with the structure for first and second speakers.

The key to organising rebuttal as a first or second speaker is *efficiency*. As a first or second speaker, you have a substantive case to present. Therefore, you do not enjoy the third speaker’s luxury of delving or exploring a point more deeply – you need to rebut very efficiently and move on.

If possible, it is important to start with some kind of ethos attack. The alternative is simply to dive into your first rebuttal point, but this is not particularly inspiring and doesn’t give much of a ‘big picture’ context for your rebuttal. An ethos attack at first or second speaker needs only to be one or two sentences long, but you should ideally use one if you can.

Following your ethos attack, you can simply move through your various rebuttal points. There is no need to outline your rebuttal as a first or second speaker – it is enough simply to give each distinct point a clear label, so your adjudicator and audience can follow your ideas. You should aim to have two, three or four rebuttal points – any more is difficult to manage in a limited time; any fewer seems like you are lacking ideas! If you find that you have more than four rebuttal points, you should try to group some of your points together to reduce the number, or pass your ideas to a later speaker. As a general rule, if you find that you have only one rebuttal point, you need to look harder!

Finally, having moved through your rebuttal, you can move on to your substantive case. As a first negative, this means setting up your team’s case before moving to your substantive arguments. As a second speaker, it usually means briefly reminding your audience and adjudicator of your case approach and split before outlining and delivering your arguments. As a second speaker, this link is important in giving a sense of unity to your team’s approach. For example, you can say, “Our team, on the other hand, argued the theme that [X]. Our first speaker discussed the social aspects of this issue; I will discuss the individual aspects. Specifically, I will make two arguments: [Y] and [Z]. Now, to my first argument, [Y]...”. (This same point was examined in Step Five of Chapter One.)

THIRD SPEAKER STRUCTURE

The fundamental difference between first and second speakers on the one hand and third speakers on the other is that third speakers do not present any substantive arguments. Instead, they must spend their speech rebutting and summarising. Essentially, the first part of the speech is spent on rebuttal; the second part is spent on summary and conclusion.

The transition between these two parts occurs at about the time of the warning bell (for example, in an eight-minute speech, this would usually be at the seven minute mark). It is certainly possible to deviate from this timing – for example, you may feel the need to spend a little more time on summary. However, it is important not to deviate *too* much from this. Far too many third speakers, particularly in younger grades, rebut for all of two minutes, then provide a summary that is far too intricate. This is strategically weak and a complete waste of time: although summary *is* a vital part of a third speech, a five-minute summary is no better than a one- or two-minute summary. As a third speaker, it is much better to spend your time rebutting.

This is all very well for a general guide. But how exactly is the ‘rebuttal’ part structured? We learned earlier that the biggest challenge for effective first and second speaker rebuttal structure is *efficiency*, because of the limited time available for rebuttal. The situation is very somewhat different for third speakers, however, because third speakers have longer to rebut. There is no doubt that efficiency is important for

third speakers, too – there is no point wasting time when you present a rebuttal point. However, the biggest challenge for effective third speaker rebuttal structure is *overall clarity*. That is, because you are rebutting for longer, it is important to give your audience and adjudicator some sense of your overall structure.

The easiest way to organise your rebuttal is simply to move through one rebuttal point after another, jumping randomly from one idea to the other. However, this approach (often called a “shopping list” of rebuttal points) lacks overall clarity. Although your audience and adjudicator may understand very clearly the point that you are making at any given time, they will struggle to see any ‘big picture’ in your speech. This is particularly unfortunate because, by the time that a debate reaches the third speakers, a sense of the ‘big picture’ is vital – your audience and adjudicator will crave a speaker who can unify and organise the various ideas, arguments and examples that have been presented in order to show why one side has won the debate.

The simplest and best approach, therefore, is to *group* your rebuttal points into common ideas and concepts. You can then move through *concept-by-concept*, using your individual rebuttal points to show how your team has prevailed on the major *issues* of debate. It is generally most effective to identify two, three or four major issues, which become your rebuttal groupings. To provide an overall sense of structure, it is worth giving an outline and summary of your own rebuttal – *not* of your individual rebuttal points, but of your overall rebuttal *groupings*. As always, your rebuttal should be preceded by an effective ethos attack.

Hopefully, this sounds like a good approach. However, it poses a question: *how* do we decide how to group our individual points into rebuttal targets? There is no single way of doing this effectively. The simplest approach is to write your rebuttal points separately as you listen to your opposition’s arguments. You can then lay your palm cards out on the desk, and group similar ideas together. For example, you might find that you have two points relating to ‘social’ ideas, three to ‘political’ and one to ‘economic’. These can become your labels. Having grouped your palm cards together, it is simply a matter of writing a single palm card for each label (‘SOCIAL’, ‘ECONOMIC’, ‘POLITICAL’, in this case), to use as a ‘placeholder’ of sorts. Fill out a single palm card for each of your outline and summary, and you will be ready to speak!

Of course, this is not the only way to group your rebuttal. Sometimes, you can find your rebuttal groupings by considering the overall structure of your opposition’s case. Perhaps, for example, your opposition has established a set of criteria by which the issue will be judged. In that case, you *may* wish to use those criteria as your rebuttal groupings – essentially saying, “Our opposition identified three criteria by which to judge this issue. I would like to move through those criteria, showing how we have prevailed on every one.”

As with the ordering of substantive arguments, rebuttal arguments can essentially be ordered on two bases. The simplest approach is to order your groupings (and your individual points within those groupings) on the basis of importance: the more important issues go before the less important ones. Alternatively, you might find some logical sequence that matches your groupings – that is an equally strategic way of ordering your points. Ultimately, you should order and group your points in order to best “take your audience and adjudicator by the hand”, to lead them through the issues of the debate in a clear and logical way.

ADVANCED

KEY GROUNDS FOR REBUTTAL

Rebuttal, like debating itself, is a part of everyday life. All of us, whether we realise it or not, have experience in finding reasons to oppose other peoples’ arguments and perspectives. In this section, we examine some of the common grounds on which to rebut an argument. This is certainly *not* an exhaustive list of the reasons that an argument might be flawed, nor the grounds on which it can be rebutted. However, your rebuttal should improve greatly if you bear these grounds in mind while listening carefully to your opponents’ speeches and while preparing your rebuttal.

LOGICAL IRRELEVANCE

Logical irrelevance is one of the simplest problems that a case can suffer: even at its most convincing, your opposition’s case may simply not be proving your opposition’s side of the topic.

For example, suppose the topic is “THAT JUNK FOOD SHOULD BE BANNED FROM SCHOOL TUCKSHOPS”. Your opposition can argue with all the passion in the world about how junk food is unhealthy, but that in itself does not show why it should be banned from school tuckshops – to make that link, your opposition would need to discuss why schools (not merely parents or students) have a responsibility to ensure that students eat healthy food.

Similarly, consider yet again the topic “THAT THERE IS TOO MUCH MONEY IN SPORT”. As we have already discussed, it does not matter how many arguments or examples your opposition provides to show that there is *a lot* of money in sport: they also need to show how the amount of money is causing *overall harm*.

Although somewhat rare, this ground for rebuttal really is a debate winner! If you can convince your adjudicator that your opposition’s case does not fulfil the logical

requirements of the topic, you will stand an excellent chance of winning the debate (assuming, of course, that your own case does not suffer similar problems!).

Don't get too excited! It can be very easy to overlook logical irrelevance. Often, debaters concentrate so hard on rebutting what their opposition *says* that they forget to think about what their opposition is *not saying*. In the first example earlier, a negative team might easily spend their rebuttal arguing, "Junk food is not *that* bad!", simply because this is the direct opposite to what the affirmative argued.

The message here should be clear: rebuttal is not merely about repeating your opposition's arguments with the word 'not' inserted! You should spend time, both before and during the debate, considering exactly what your opposition is *required* to prove, and whether in fact they *are* proving it. This is the best way to identify logical irrelevance.

INSIGNIFICANCE

When we considered 'testing your arguments', we examined 'insignificance' as a potential weakness of an argument: although valid, an argument or example may not represent the general norm that you are arguing about. This, therefore, is a ground for rebuttal. The rebuttal technique that best deals with this situation is *marginalisation*.

Marginalisation is a common form of rebuttal but, unfortunately, marginalisation by distinction is much less common. Too often, debaters dismiss opposing examples or even arguments with responses like, "Our opposition's example is just one isolated case. We have given you many more examples supporting our side of the topic." Perhaps the worst possible response is, "That example is just the exception that proves the rule." The reason that these approaches are so weak is because they lack any explanation as to *why* a perfectly good example or argument should merely be cast aside.

We need to draw a distinction in order to marginalise an example or argument. But what kind of distinction should we draw? On what *basis* should we set aside our opposition's arguments or examples? The only guidance is very general: the distinction must be on a relevant ground in the context of the issue being debated. It is very easy to distinguish examples on irrelevant grounds. Consider a debate about the benefits of nuclear power, where a speaker has used the example of Chernobyl to argue that nuclear power is dangerously unsafe. An opposing speaker could try to distinguish Chernobyl by arguing, "Chernobyl occurred in the Soviet Union, and we are talking about using nuclear power in the United States." However, although this *is* a distinction, it is not a relevant difference between Chernobyl and modern American nuclear plants in the context of a debate about the overall safety of nuclear power. The better response is that given earlier – draw a distinction on the very basis of the disasters: the technology and safety measures themselves.

Therefore, ‘marginalisation by distinction’ reduces to three important points:

1. Marginalisation is an effective way of rebutting an argument or its example.
2. However, in order to marginalise an argument or example, you need to provide a basis on which to distinguish that argument or example from the direct issue being debated.
3. You can distinguish arguments and examples on any ground. However, it is important to choose the most relevant distinction possible in order to make your marginalisation effective.

THE TECHNIQUE OF CONCESSION

So far, we have examined grounds for rebuttal. We will continue to do so. However, it is worth pausing for a moment to examine a *technique* for presenting either a logical irrelevance or a marginalisation by distinction: the technique of concession.

As a general rule, you certainly *don’t* want to fall into the habit of conceding points to your opposition. However, when used effectively, concession can be a devastating rebuttal technique, because it clarifies so strongly that your team sees your opposition’s argument as either logically irrelevant or insignificant. Essentially, you are saying, “Sure, we agree with what you’re saying – but that’s not enough for you to win the argument!”.

For example, consider one debate on the topic “THAT WE SHOULD SUPPORT AFFIRMATIVE ACTION”. The negative team argued that affirmative action had failed in South Africa because it had alienated a minority of racist ‘white’ South Africans from the process of national reconciliation. The affirmative team could effectively say, “Sure, it probably *has* alienated a minority of racist ‘white’ South Africans, but national reconciliation isn’t about pandering to racist minorities! Racist ‘white’ South Africans are an insignificant minority in the context of a debate about reconciliation across South Africa, and their views shouldn’t determine government policy.”

The technique of concession can be devastatingly effective because it is so blunt and clear. However, these same characteristics can make it very easy for your opposition to spot a contradiction. There is nothing worse than one speaker boldly conceding an opposition argument when another speaker on the same team attempts to rebut the same argument! Therefore, if you are going to concede a point, it is important that your entire team understands that fact, and understands what that concession entails.

FACTUAL INACCURACY

It is inevitable in the rustle of newsprint, the tangled web of Internet searches and the dusty recesses of a debater’s memory that, sometimes, your opposition will just get things plain wrong!

Merely being able to correct your opposition's factual inaccuracy does not mean that you have found a legitimate ground for rebuttal. For example, suppose that you are debating on the issue of terrorism generally, and that your opposition refers to "the bombing of the USS Cole on October 12 2001". Pointing out that the USS Cole was bombed on October 12 2000, not 2001, may make you look intelligent, but it is not itself a good rebuttal point. An adjudicator would be entitled to think, "Okay, so they got the date wrong – but the argument itself was solid, and the opposition didn't touch it."

Consider, in contrast, that the debate was about the Bush administration and its response to terrorism, and suppose that your opposition argued, "The Bush administration did next to nothing in response to the bombing of the USS Cole on October 12 2001." This is the same factual inaccuracy but, in this case, it has very different consequences. In this case, you can argue, "The USS Cole was not bombed on October 12 2001 – it was bombed on October 12 2000, *during the Clinton administration!* Therefore, our opposition's best criticism of the Bush administration in fact doesn't apply to the Bush administration at all!". This would be a very effective rebuttal point – in fact, it would deservedly destroy the value of the example completely.

The point here should be clear: factual inaccuracies are not automatically grounds for rebuttal. However, they can be grounds for rebuttal if they substantially affect the argument being made.

One final point deserves a mention. Even if a factual inaccuracy does not substantially affect the argument (and hence is not a ground for rebuttal), it can still be used as an effective one-line attack on the credibility of your opposition's case.⁵ For example, in one debate at the 1997 Australian National Schools Debating Championships, a speaker claimed that, on the eve of the 1991 Gulf War, "Saddam Hussein phoned Bill Clinton and begged for peace." Whether or not this is true, the speaker clearly meant to say "President George Bush", not "Bill Clinton". This factual inaccuracy did not change the essence of the argument, so it could not ground a rebuttal point itself. However, it did make for an effective ethos attack: an opposing speaker responded with, "...And, ladies and gentlemen, our opposition would even have us believe that, on the eve of the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein phoned Bill Clinton, *the Governor of Arkansas*, to beg for peace!". That debater realised that even a trite factual inaccuracy, if used effectively, can devastate a speaker's overall credibility.

⁵ We discussed 'ethos attack' earlier as a way of starting your rebuttal. This is essentially a form of ethos attack, although it does not necessarily need to be used to start your rebuttal – it can simply be added to a rebuttal point.

UNSUBSTANTIATED ASSERTIONS

We learned in Part One that it is vital to substantiate your arguments, either with examples, statistics or some other accepted form of substantiation. If you fail to substantiate an argument or any other proposition, you are left with a mere assertion – a bald statement without any effective substantiation. This is a ground for rebuttal.

Pointing out that your opposition has merely asserted something, without substantiation, is a good start. However, rebuttal is about *opposing* your opposition's case, not merely *criticising* or *adjudicating* it. Therefore, you need to show why your opposition's assertion is *false*, rather than merely *unsubstantiated*.

For example, consider that you are debating the merits of censorship, and suppose that your opposition (without further substantiation) says, "The government has an obligation to censor violence in the media, because media violence causes significant harm to people, particularly to young people."

You could start by pointing out, "Our opposition has merely *asserted* that media violence causes harm to people, particularly children. However, they have not given us any supporting proof of this!". This is a valid criticism, but not one that impacts on the issue. To rebut the point effectively, you would need to oppose the assertion itself. For example, you could continue, "*The Guardian Weekly* claims that, over the past 70 years, over 10 000 studies have been done on this issue in the United States alone, yet none has convincingly found a clear causal link between media violence and violent actions. As for young people – in 1982, Milavsky, Stipp, Kessler and Rubens studied the lifestyle and behavioural patterns of 2400 primary school students and 800 adolescents. They found that there was 'no significant association' between television violence and behavioural patterns."

Whether the argument is actually correct or not, this would be an effective rebuttal response. You would have rightly criticised your opposition for not substantiating its argument, but carefully avoided falling into the same trap yourself – by providing convincing evidence to the contrary.

UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

Whether we realise it or not, every opinion we hold – as well as every case and argument that we as debaters present – rests on numerous underlying and often unexpressed assumptions. Why do events like the Tiananmen Square massacre or the killings in Kosovo shock us? Because, as a general rule, we believe that killing our fellow human beings is wrong. Why were allegations of voting irregularities in the 2000 US Presidential election so emotive? Because, as a general rule, we believe that democracy is a good thing, and that it is important to respect the principles of a fair election.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with resting opinions, cases or arguments on underlying assumptions. Similarly, there is no automatic need to identify these assumptions, nor to justify them. Earlier, we examined the strategic weakness of spending significant time justifying propositions that may not be controversial in your debate (for example, the proposition that ‘human rights are good’). However, although they are not inherently wrong, these underlying assumptions can become a ground for rebuttal *if a rebuttal speaker makes them such*.

This is an important point. Many speakers proudly *identify* the assumptions underlying their opponents’ arguments, but do not conclusively adopt any stance on those assumptions. For example, it is not unusual to hear a rebuttal speaker declare, “Our opposition has *assumed* that democracy is a good thing! However, it *may* not be...”. This is a very weak approach – unless you are going to argue that democracy is not always good, you cannot complain that your opposition has assumed it to be good!

The key to this ground for rebuttal, therefore, is a strategic choice: whether or not your team wants to challenge the assumptions that underlie your opposition’s case. In some cases, it will be eminently strategic to challenge those assumptions. For example, we have already considered the example of the Victorian team that successfully challenged the Queensland team’s assumption that performance-enhancing drugs in sport is necessarily a bad thing. In other cases, challenging those assumptions would be a very weak approach. For example, a debate about the NATO intervention in Kosovo can be a straightforward debate on a simple (although not easy) issue. There is no strategic need to challenge the assumption that human rights are good – even if done well, this would make the debate very abstract, philosophical and complex. A team that tried it would probably suffer as a result.

A final reminder about challenging underlying assumptions: when we discussed ‘playing hardball’, we discussed a simple mantra: *Be fundamentally controversial, or not controversial at all!* If you are going to make a particularly controversial challenge to an assumption underlying your opposition’s case, you really need to incorporate it as a fundamental part of your entire case approach.

What if you find yourself on the receiving end of such a challenge? What is the best way to deal with an attack on the key assumptions that underpin your entire case? The answer is simple: you need to return to the core values that are being challenged and explain very carefully just why you support them. For example, if your opposition is challenging your assumption that democracy is good, don’t scoff incredulously – go back and explain precisely *how* democracy is so good, and *why* we should support it. In many respects, the strategy of challenging underlying assumptions is useful as an effective surprise tactic. However, it need not be – any team can respond to such a challenge by carefully justifying any assumptions under attack.

CAUSATION

Many debates and arguments involve the issue of whether one thing causes another – that is, whether there is *causation*. We have already considered one example: the issue of whether media violence causes violence in society.

Arguments about causation tend to have a typical pattern. There will usually be some evidence that two trends move together (for example, it might be claimed that violent people are more likely to watch violent media). This is called ‘correlation’. One team (your opposition, say) will claim that one trend (for example, the trend to watch violent media) *causes* the other trend (for example, the trend to be a violent person). This is called ‘causation’ – so the issue essentially is whether there is *causation and correlation*, or merely *correlation*.

It is easy to overlook an important issue of causation – essentially, to listen to your opposition’s argument and think, “Well, those trends move together, so it makes sense that one causes the other.” However, this is often not the case, and challenging an assertion of causation can be a useful rebuttal strategy.

Of course, simply identifying an issue of causation is not particularly effective. The strongest way of expressing this in a rebuttal point is to provide and support some other explanation for why the trends move together. For example, your opposition may argue, “Violent media causes people to be violent. We know this because of the large number of violent crimes that are committed by people who had been watching violent movies and playing violent video games.” You could respond to this by arguing, “It is true that many violent people watch violent media. However, many non-violent people also watch violent media as a form of entertainment, but suffer no harmful effects. The more logical conclusion is that there are many *other* causes for violence – violent people watch violent media *because* they are violent.”

CONTRADICTIONS

Contradictions are obviously grounds for rebuttal, and we have considered them earlier – when we examined the importance of ‘testing your arguments’. Let’s consider three important points about effectively rebutting contradictions.

First, many contradictions will be clear and explicit. For example, we have already considered a situation where one speaker concedes a point, but yet another speaker on the same team nonetheless tries to oppose the same point. This is a clear contradiction, and you should refer to it as such.

Second, many contradictions are indirect or implicit. For example, we have examined the case of a debate about ‘AIDS drugs’, where one speaker argued that the drugs were *as bad* as generics, while another speaker on the same team argued that they were

worse than generics. This form of contradiction is clearly not as damaging as a direct or explicit contradiction – in this case, unlike in the earlier example, one argument does not completely destroy the other. However, this is an inconsistency nonetheless, and it is therefore worth pointing out. At the least, it will damage the credibility of your opposition’s case (for example, “Our opposition could not even decide among themselves how bad these drugs are supposed to be!”).

Third, it is often not enough merely to point a contradiction out. It is often necessary to clearly state your team’s stance on the issue. For example, in the ‘AIDS drugs’ example, you could explain, “Of course, our team disagrees with *both* of those inconsistent assertions – we have already shown you that AIDS drugs can be very effective in suppressing a patient’s symptoms.” Sometimes, you need to agree with *one* of your opposition speakers. For example, in the case of the clear contradiction earlier, you could respond, “The opposition’s first speaker said that this argument was irrelevant. However, our opposition’s second speaker rebutted this argument at length, and called it an important issue of the debate. Although we disagree with her rebuttal, we agree with her concession that this is indeed an important and relevant issue.”

MISREPRESENTATION

Misrepresentation is an easy form of rebuttal – simply reduce or contort your opposition’s arguments until they are unrecognisable and weak, then treat them as though they are self-evidently wrong. There is only one problem with this approach: it is extraordinarily weak!

The aim of rebuttal is to attack your opposition’s arguments: meaning your opposition’s *actual* arguments. If you twist or misrepresent your opposition’s arguments, you will find yourself refuting the wrong argument – and your rebuttal will be rendered almost completely meaningless if your adjudicator realises the fact or your opposition points it out.

Most debaters recognise and avoid blatant misrepresentation. However, it is equally important to avoid even subtle misrepresentation – for example, by suggesting that your opposition was implying something that they were not. As a rule of thumb, your opposition should not listen to your rebuttal and say, “We definitely didn’t say that!” – this would indicate blatant misrepresentation on your part. However, you should not even give your opposition reason to say, “That’s not what we meant when we said that!” – this would indicate subtle misrepresentation, but it would still be wrong. Ideally, your opposition should think, “That’s exactly our argument – and we didn’t spot all these problems with it!”.

At the lower levels of debating, misrepresentation is often regarded as unsporting. Teams are likely to be offended to hear their arguments misrepresented, and speakers are taught not to misrepresent because “that’s not what debating is all about”. This

approach is not wrong. However, at the higher levels of debating, misrepresentation is usually considered a significant technical and strategic flaw – teams often don't mind being misrepresented, because they can be confident that their opposition's rebuttal is much weaker as a result.

The word on misrepresentation, therefore, is simple: *don't!* This means that you should not *deliberately* misrepresent your opposition, but it also means that you must be careful not to *accidentally* do so. Often, misrepresentation is the result of lazy listening as much as it is a symptom of some nefarious plan. Either way, it will not help a team that does it!

CUMULATIVE REBUTTAL

So far, we have considered individual grounds for rebuttal in isolation. We also have some understanding that those grounds fit into the “why it's wrong” section of a simple rebuttal structure! However, we have not considered the use of more than one ground for rebuttal – that is, what if your opposition's arguments are wrong for a number of reasons?

This is not a problem – in fact, from your perspective, it's a very good thing! The simplest approach is simply to move through the various reasons one at a time. There is no need to outline the various reasons – it is enough to move through and explain (for example) that your opposition's argument depends on a factual inaccuracy, is contradictory and rests on an assumption that you are willing to challenge.

This approach works well if you have a number of separate and independent grounds on which to rebut your opposition's case. However, often, your grounds for rebuttal are not independent – they stand ‘behind’ each other, in a *‘retreating line of defence’*. Earlier, we discussed the definitional ‘even if’. The approach we are now considering is essentially a general argumentative ‘even if’ – you can provide a number of responses to an opposition argument, each becoming relevant only if the previous response fails. To return to the military analogy, you present a second line of rebuttal in case your front line fails; perhaps a third line in case your second line fails, and perhaps further still.

Let's consider this with a tangible example. Suppose that the debate is about whether the war on Iraq was justified, and that the affirmative team argues that, from the perspective of the United States and her allies, Iraq posed a threat to the peace and stability of the world – essentially, because there was a real risk that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. Whether this argument is ‘correct’ or not, you could effectively rebut it with the following ‘retreating line of defence’. This diagram shows only the essence of each response – naturally, each assertion would need to be substantiated with some explanation and substantiation.

Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction, and posed no tangible threat to any other nation...

However, *even if* we accept that Iraq appeared to have such weapons, or may have been pursuing such weapons...

Attacking Iraq was unprincipled and inconsistent given the global response to weapons of mass destruction programs in North Korea, Pakistan, India and Israel...

However, *even if* we take a purely pragmatic approach...

The war has succeeded only in destabilising Iraq, providing increased opportunities for Al-Qaeda and inflaming radical sentiments around the world.

Conclusion

Rebuttal is undoubtedly one of the most exciting parts of debating, both for the audience and for the debaters themselves. Unfortunately, for many debaters, rebuttal appears quite daunting, because it involves limited preparation. In this chapter, we have covered a number of techniques to make rebuttal clearer and simpler. We have also recognised that rebuttal is a vital part of good debating. Most importantly, we saw that rebuttal can be quite straightforward – ultimately, there are two cases in the debate, and you need to show why yours is right and theirs is wrong!

It is rebuttal that distinguishes debating from ordinary ‘public speaking’, by giving participants a chance to openly criticise their opponents’ arguments. As a debater, you should grab this opportunity with both hands. Not only will your debating improve – it will be a lot more fun!

