The ‘big picture’

Grounds for rebuttal

Structuring rebuttal

Definitional rebuttal

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REBUTTAL
Outline

1. The ‘big picture’
2. Grounds for rebuttal
3. Structuring rebuttal
4. Definitional rebuttal
Why rebut?

A **debate** is **not** just two opposing cases.

Every debate needs **interaction** between the cases: **clash** between ideas.

**Rebuttal** — attacking your opponent’s arguments — provides this interaction.

**Rebuttal** is therefore **vital** for debating.
What should you rebut?

In short, you should rebut everything!!

Convincing the audience that your opposition is wrong includes attacking anything that you believe to be incorrect about their case.

Of course, there are techniques to develop regarding the appropriate emphasis to place on different parts of your opposition’s case. However, nothing is ‘untouchable’.
Rebuttal specifics — the case line

There is a difference between merely rebutting your opposition’s **case line** and rebutting the **ideas, assumptions** and **logic** lying behind the theme (a much stronger approach!).

That is, you should focus energy on identifying and then attacking the core structures **behind** the theme, not just the wording of the theme itself.
Rebuttal specifics — examples and statistics

There is a common misconception that you ‘should not rebut examples’; however, this is wrong.

However, you should always remember: examples and statistics prove nothing by themselves. Therefore, when rebutting examples and statistics, you must constantly analyse their relevance and context in the debate.
Although this sounds complicated, it merely involves responding to your opposition’s rebuttal. The decision whether or not to rebut rebuttal is quite a strategic one.

Sometimes, if it is a crucial point, rebutting rebuttal may be essential. However, it is strategically weak to spend a long time doing so because you will appear too defensive.

Generally, if you think it is necessary to rebut rebuttal, do so quickly and efficiently.
Being **thorough** in rebuttal

Although *you* may have a clear idea of the main issues of the debate, the adjudicator *may not agree*

Therefore, it is important that your team deals with *every argument, example* or *significant idea* raised by your opposition.

Third speakers must work hard to ‘**mop up**’ anything not already rebutted by their team.
Preparing for rebuttal

Pre-prepared rebuttal is perhaps the worst method of rebuttal preparation!

Good rebuttal is about attacking your opposition’s arguments as they were presented in the debate.

Pre-prepared rebuttal risks rebutting an argument subtly different to the argument presented by your opposition. This is a weak approach.
Preparing for rebuttal

The best way to prepare rebuttal is to consider the kinds of arguments and examples that may arise, and then plan a general response to those arguments and examples.

Critically, this method allows for flexibility in rebuttal.
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The most common grounds and techniques for rebuttal are:

- logical irrelevance;
- insignificance;
- concession;
- factual inaccuracy;
- unsubstantiated assertions;
- underlying assumptions;
- causation errors;
- contradictions; and
- misrepresentation.

Let’s consider each in turn...
Logical irrelevance

This is one of the simplest problems that a case can suffer!

For example, suppose that a debate is about banning junk food, and that the proposition speaks about the health risks of junk food, without explaining why this ought to bring about a ban. Then the opposition may attack this health argument for being logically irrelevant to the issue.

This approach is usually very effective, but can often be tricky to spot! It may help to ask: what is the opposition not saying?
Marginalisation

‘Marginalisation by distinction’ argues that a point is insignificant because there is some distinguishing factor that makes it unsuitable for comparison.

It is very important to have a strong, logical reason why the opposition’s point is insignificant.
Concession is a rebuttal technique, rather than a ground for rebuttal.

By conceding a point, you agree with the opposition that the argument is correct but insufficient to win the issue.

It is potentially a very effective response to arguments that are logically irrelevant (as we discussed earlier).

However, you need to be careful not to:

- Concede too much; or
- Contradict your team by later rebutting something you have conceded to be true!
Factual inaccuracies are quite common in debates.

Identifying a factual error in the opposition’s case might make you look smart. But this is usually not enough to make a strong rebuttal point.

For a strong rebuttal point, the factual inaccuracy must substantially affect the argument being made.

(Of course, a factual inaccuracy can still be used for a one-line attack on the opposition’s credibility.)
Unsubstantiated assertions

If your opposition presents an argument *without examples*, *statistics* or some other form of *evidence*, they are making an *assertion* that can be attacked.

However, *merely* pointing out that your opposition’s argument is an assertion shows *nothing* — *your rebuttal may become an unsubstantiated assertion itself!!*

So, when rebutting an unsubstantiated assertion, *always* provide evidence that opposes the opposition’s assertion.
Underlying assumptions

Every argument rests on numerous underlying assumptions.

For example, the assumption that **killing is bad**, or that **racism if wrong**, or that **democracy is good**. . .

Usually, there is **nothing wrong** with arguments resting on such assumptions. But there **are** occasions where attacking underlying assumptions is **strategically advantageous**.

Of course, unless you are prepared to argue the other side of the assumption, you cannot criticise your opposition for relying upon it. . . **only attack assumptions that you are prepared to refute!**
Causation errors

It is very common for speakers to confuse causation with correlation. Of course, just because two phenomena often happen at the same time does not mean that one causes the other.

Simply identifying an issue of causation is not particularly effective: instead, you should try to provide and support an alternative explanation for why different phenomena occur together.
Contradictions can occur **between speakers** or **within one speech**. They can be either **explicit** or **implicit**.

As a result, contradictions can sometimes be **difficult to spot**. This is one reason that you should **pay careful attention** to the opposition’s stance on each issue.

Again, it is **not enough** merely to **point out** a contradiction; you should go on to explain state your team’s stance on the issue.
Misrepresentation

Misrepresentation is a very weak rebuttal tactic that involves twisting your opposition’s words.

When rebutting an opposition’s arguments, you should be very careful to ensure that you explain the arguments precisely as they were intended. Your opposition should never think,

“We never said that!”,

or even

“That’s not what we meant when we said that!”.

Instead, they should think,

“That’s precisely our argument, and we didn’t spot all these problems with it!”
Cumulative rebuttal involves combining numerous **levels of rebuttal**. This may involve an ‘**even if**’ rebuttal technique. For example, consider a debate about whether the war against Iraq was justified...

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...

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

However, **even if** we take a purely pragmatic approach...
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Internal structure of rebuttal points

Rebuttal must be **clear and targeted, sufficient in depth**, and relate back to your own case.

With this in mind, the following four-step guide is worth following:

1. **what they said**;
2. **why it’s wrong**;
3. **what we say**; and
4. **why it’s right**.

The **second step** is the **fundamental part** of rebuttal — but **all** steps are important for presenting rebuttal effectively.

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Every speech should **start** with rebuttal (except First Proposition, of course!).

A good way to plan this introduction is to consider the question:

“If I only had time to make **one brief point** in my speech, what would it be?”

Ideally, this introduction **encapsulates** and **attacks** your opposition’s **entire approach**.
There are two principles to remember when **allocating time to rebuttal**:

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

‘**More important**’ doesn’t mean ‘**easier**’; this should be judged by whether rebuttal deals with **more contentious issues in the debate**.

Remember: **definitional rebuttal must always come first**!
There are **two** different ways of organising rebuttal into a speech:

1. Rebuttal for **first and second** speakers; and
2. Rebuttal for **third** speakers.

We will examine these structures in turn.
First and second speaker rebuttal structure

As a first or second speaker, you should usually structure your rebuttal like this:

1. If possible, try to start with an **ethos attack**. This need only be one or two sentences long.

2. Move on to your **rebuttal points**. Aim for **two, three or four distinct ideas**. If you have **more** than four, try to group them together into issues.

3. Finally, continue to your **substantive case**.

**Efficiency** is important for all speakers — but is particularly critical for first and second speaker rebuttal; **don’t spend too long** rebutting!
Third speaker rebuttal structure

As a third speaker, you have two roles:

1. **Rebut** the opposition; and
2. **Summarise** the opposition case.

The more important task — by far! — is **rebuttal**. The summary should usually occur only **after** the warning bell.
The **easiest** structure for rebuttal is to plough through your points as if they are **items on a shopping list**. However, this approach almost always **lacks clarity**.

The **better** method is to **group** rebuttal points by their common ideas and then move through your rebuttal as a few **key issues**.

It will also help to provide a brief **outline** and **summary** of these issues.
Third speaker rebuttal structure — creating issues

One method of creating rebuttal issues is this:

- Write each rebuttal point onto a separate palm card;
- Then place your palm cards onto the table and group similar ideas together.
- Add labels, cards for outline and summary, and you are ready!

It is usually sensible to address these issues in the order of importance. However, your primary goal is to lead your adjudicator and audience through the debate in the most logical and clear method as possible.
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In most debates, each team will have the same definition, so there is no need for definitional rebuttal.

Unfortunately, this is not always the case. When teams disagree over the definition, there is a standard rebuttal approach expected of each team.
Definitional rules

There are two definitional rules:

1. **No exclusive right** of definition; and
2. **An exclusive right** of definition.

The choice of which team’s definition is ‘better’ depends on which rules applies. Different tournaments use different rules.
No exclusive right of definition

If the rules state that there is no exclusive right of definition, there are two tests for deciding which definition is preferable. They are:

1. Which definition is more reasonable?
2. Which definition is closer to the plain meaning of the words of the motion?
An exclusive right of definition

If the rules state that there is an exclusive right of definition, there are two different tests:

1. Is the proposition’s definition reasonable?
2. Is the proposition’s definition reasonably close to the plain meaning of the words of the motion?
Deciding to rebut your opposition’s definition

Debating is designed for interesting argument about issues posed by a motion — it is not designed for petty disagreement over the meaning of a few words!

For this reason, you should only rebut your opposition’s definition when such rebuttal is absolutely necessary!

But when is it ‘absolutely necessary’…?
Deciding to rebut your opposition’s definition

The **most important practical question** to consider is:

> can we **continue with our case** under this definition?

Usually, the answer will be ‘**yes’**, in which case you need not change your case, nor rebut the definition.

**But** if the answer is ‘**no’’, you must **change something**!

The table on the next slide summarises your options...
Deciding to rebut your opposition’s definition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>PROBLEM:</strong></th>
<th><strong>No exclusive right</strong></th>
<th><strong>Exclusive right</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You cannot argue against the Proposition Case.</td>
<td><em>Challenge</em>, on the basis that their definition is unreasonable</td>
<td><em>Challenge</em>, on the basis that Proposition definition is unreasonable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Proposition definition relates to different issues, but is not unreasonable.</td>
<td><em>Challenge</em>, on the basis that your definition is closer to the plain meaning of the motion.</td>
<td><em>Cannot challenge</em> — you may have to abandon your case!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Deciding to rebut your opposition’s definition

Remember, if you rebut the definition incorrectly or poorly you will often lose as a result!

You should only rebut the definition when you feel confident that you cannot continue under the proposition’s approach!
How to rebut the definition

Rebuttal of the definition requires a special structure.

The most important requirement of definitional rebuttal is clarity!

There are four parts to rebutting the definition:

1. Make your intention to challenge the definition very clear.
2. Explain how the Proposition definition is wrong.
3. Replace the Proposition definition with your own definition.
4. Briefly explain how your definition avoids the problems of your opposition’s definition.
How to rebut the definition

A definitional challenge may change the entire course of a debate.

Therefore, there are some important principles to remember.

- A team that does not state whether or not it accepts its opponent’s definition is assumed to accept.
- Definitions should be challenged by the First Opposition or not at all.
- Given the serious nature of a definitional challenge in a debate, all subsequent speakers should defend their team’s position if a definitional challenge occurs.
- If there is an exclusive right of definition, the Proposition need only defend its definition — rather than attack its opposition’s definition.
The definitional ‘even if’

A definitional ‘even if’ involves rebutting the opposition’s substantive case, regardless of the fact that you disagree with their definition.

This can be complicated; see www.learndebating.com for details!
Dealing with an unreasonable definition

If your opposition’s definition is such that you can’t argue against it, it is **not enough** simply to **accuse** them of defining you out of the debate.

Instead, you should **always explain carefully why your opposition’s definition is unreasonable!!**
Sometimes, due to an **error in interpreting the motion**, it is possible that both teams may be **arguing substantially the same case**.

If this situation ever arises, it is necessary to have a twofold response:

1. **Acknowledge** that there are parallel cases; and
2. **Show**, using the methods of definitional rebuttal, that **your** interpretation of the topic is the **correct one**.
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