COUNTER-ARGUMENT

The Role of Rebuttal in a Debate

Rebuttal is the offensive component of a team case. The substantive matter aims to show that one side of the topic is true. Rebuttal tries to show that the substantive matter presented by the other team does not prove the other side of the topic to be true. It is essential to remember that rebuttal is aimed at the other team’s case, not at the other side of the topic.

It is also important to note that there are five critical rebuttal speakers in every debate. Every one of them has a responsibility to directly attack the opposition’s case, in a varied degree of detail.

The key to rebuttal is listening. Throughout the debate, take note of the opposition definition, theme, split, outlines, arguments, and links between arguments. Think about their case in these terms, rather than randomly recording statements that you disagree with.

Do not assume that the opposition will be well structured. Listen to everything they say, and record key points as appropriate. Use time between speakers to group opposition arguments together in ways you can answer them.

Note that what you should write down is not rebuttal, but is the essential basis for your rebuttal. There is little point in writing down answers to what your opponents are saying, without writing down the arguments that you are countering. Finding ways to rebut is the final stage of rebuttal, not the first.

What to Rebut

Definitions

The first thing which must be clarified is the definition. Please note that the definition is only an issue if the affirmative has defined the topic in such a way that a substantial amount of your team’s material is irrelevant. If this is not the case, then you have a problem with emphasis, criteria or interpretation, not definition. Rebut definition when you have to, don’t do it just because your definition disagrees with theirs. You’re there to convince the audience about your side of the topic, not your side of the definition.

If you must argue about the definition, do it quickly and cleanly. Every second you spend on what is essentially a technicality will lessen your overall impact as a speaker. Rebuttal is ATTACK, not clarification or defence.
At the very end of your speech, aim for a “bottom-line” statement which is the focus of your speech, and is thought provoking. Remember that the adjudicator is about to allocate your marks, so a strong, confidence conclusion is important.

As a point of etiquette, it is not necessary or desirable to end a debating speech with “Thank you”. A good peroration followed by a brief pause before sitting down will make it perfectly clear that your speech is finished, and that it is time for the audience to thank you.
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To rebut a definition:

- State what their definition of the term was, how you disagree, and why they are wrong.
- Explain why your definition is right. There are six ways to do this.
  - Spirit of the topic - what the topic was intended to mean. For example, if the opposition have defined a figurative debate literally, or vice versa.
  - Logic. For example if they have defined the topic half figuratively and half literally, it is illogical.
  - Person on the street - what the term means to most people.
  - Current affairs - if a definition makes the topic relevant to what is currently going on in the world, it is more valid.
  - The technical meaning of the word

Note that all of these require the opposition’s definition to be strange or unusual in some way. If both teams have a common sense, reasonable definition, there shouldn’t be any problem.

It is not valid to attack a definition because it is ‘too wide’ or ‘too narrow’, or because it is ‘unreasonable’. All of these claims just indicate that you think that it is wrong, they don’t prove why it is. Similarly a dictionary is not sufficient justification for a definition. How do you know that Oxford had this particular debate in mind when they wrote the book? Sometimes a dictionary has up to ten various definitions available.

Restate the correct definition, and explain why that part of the definition is important. Remember that no one is going to be happy with you for making a definitional debate, so justify doing so. Only attack the definition if it is unfair. If there is only a small difference in definitions, clarify the position and then proceed with the debate.

Note that there may be a difference between the opposition’s stated definition, and the way that they actually use terms during the debate. If you agree with the way that they use the words, then don’t argue even if you disagree with the formal definition. On the other hand, if you agree with the formal definition but don’t agree with the way they are using the terms, then point this out.

**Main Ideas**

The first item in any set of offensive (as opposed to definitional) rebuttal is to deal with the fundamental idea behind the opposition argument. This is a four stage process.

1) Identification of the main idea. NOT something they have said which is wrong. NOT what you expected or hoped them to say. NOT a twisted version of what they said that makes it seem less intelligent, but an accurate, fair version of what they were saying.

2) Find how they were trying to prove this idea. This is usually explained in their split, their outline, and/or their summary. First and second speakers should usually try to identify one or two key points that the speaker immediately before them was
making. Third speakers will need to answer all of the supporting arguments used throughout the debate. It is important that you record and answer all of the arguments that the opposition puts forward. The argument that you miss will probably be the one that the adjudicator thought was the key issue in the debate.

3) Work out the general image that they were trying to put across through their ideas.

4) Find a way to counter all of the above.

**Ethos**

The most damaging rebuttal is that which begins with an attack on the credibility of your opposition. This is known as an *ethos attack*. Note that it is an *ethos* attack, NOT a personal one. Dress sense, mannerisms, and political leanings are not good targets. Oversimplifications, hyperbole, or throw-away lines are useful ones, so long as the attack is brief and witty. Note that ethos attacks are not a necessary part of rebuttal, and should only be used if they will be fair and effective.

The overall aim here is to establish yourself as a reasonable authority by showing the opposition to be unreasonable. However, there is no point in a good ethos attack if you don’t then go right for the heart of the opposition’s case. At this point you state clearly the opposition’s key argument, in the same fashion as you have summarised it to yourself - fairly and accurately. Spend a little time to show how they supported it. Then, show why it is flawed.

**Further Rebuttal**

For first and second speakers, an attack on the opposition’s key idea and one or two supporting arguments is all that is necessary. Third speakers need to answer all of the oppositions points, although disputes of lesser importance will naturally require less time.

Occasionally this can be done by grouping points together - such as answering all of the “environmental” or “economic” arguments at once. Examples in particular lend themselves to being discussed as lists, rather than as separate entities. Do this for less important points and examples - arguing against minor points in detail can become very time consuming, and can appear to be a superficial “fly swot” approach, detracting attention from your rebuttal of the key issues.

*Always rebut your opposition’s case first - be aggressive from the outset of your speech. Move on to defend your own case if necessary after the attack on your opposition’s case, and before your own matter.*
Methods of Rebuttal

Rebuttal Tools

It is never sufficient to answer a point made by the opposition with part of your own material. Treat the opposition’s case as a separate entity which deserves the right to be considered on its merits. Remember that every point that they make involves a general idea, a cause, an effect, concrete examples and relevance to the team case. If they include these elements, they can be attacked. If they don’t, you can highlight the weakness and provide your own alternatives.

The following non-comprehensive list offers some tools for disproving arguments:

A) Factual - show that the facts behind a particular argument are incorrect. Usually these are not stated directly. For example, there is little point in saying that the opposition’s statistics are wrong and then giving some of your own. There is a lot of merit in saying that they have assumed certain facts to be true, and then showing those ‘facts’ to be false.

For example, consider the argument that “we should televise parliament in order to make politicians more accountable”. This assumes the facts that (i) There exists a mechanism for televising parliament, and (ii) that people are actually going to watch it.

B) Causal links - show that whilst a fact might be true, the conclusions that they have drawn from it are incorrect.

Again, refer to the example of televising parliament - is making politicians accountable in this way necessarily a good thing? Aren’t the people better off thinking them respectable?

C) Logical Extensions - think of the implications of an argument. If we should televise parliament just in order to make it more accountable, doesn’t that mean that we should televise trials, the stock market, and the private lives of the clergy in order to make them more accountable?

D) Labelling. It is often useful to put an argument into its simplest form in order to deal with it. For example, a long list of ways in which a certain project will hurt the environment can be labelled as saying that environment is more important than jobs (or, if you which to make it an ethos attack, that the psychological comfort of Southeast Green Spotted Cane Toads is more important than human lives, jobs, and well-being). Note that labelling isn’t rebuttal, but it’s often a good starting point.

E) Another tool for finding flaws in an argument is to consider causes and effects. If your opponents have claimed that certain things cause or are caused by others, then ask yourself whether these links are correct. Alternatively, find causes and effects which they have not considered.
Note that all of the above examples, whilst not necessarily good arguments, are still more effective than saying “Well, they said that it would make politicians more accountable, but think how expensive it will be”.

F) “Even Ifs”. In court it is possible to present multiple, possibly contradictory defences for the same charge. “I wasn’t there, and even if I was I didn’t shoot him. It was an accident - besides, he had it coming!”. Similarly, but without the contradictions, an argument can be dissected on multiple levels, starting with the concrete evidence and gradually becoming more general.

For example, if the opposition has argued that we need to stop all logging, citing as an example the “terrible damage done to Kakadu”. This could be attacked by saying that there was no logging in Kakadu, and even the logging that does happen is not threatening our forests, and even if it did the forests are not as important as the people who need the timber.

“Even ifs” are a very damaging technique, and should be used often.

Tools NOT to Use

- Don’t just accuse the opposition of not proving something, or of mere assertion, or say that they were irrelevant. You must: (i) Justify that this was so, and (ii) Disprove it anyway. Always give your opposition some credit. They obviously thought the point was important, so you should assume that it is. This is a perfect circumstance in which to use an “even if”. Show that they are wrong, and then show that they are irrelevant.

- Note that there is a fine line between answering every argument and giving credibility to ridiculous ideas. Make sure that you answer everything, but do it quickly if it doesn’t seem important.

- Never deny the validity of the topic. It is sometimes tempting to show that the topic isn’t debatable, let alone true. For example, in a debate “THAT AUSTRALIA IS THE LAND OF WEALTH” some debaters might argue that it’s impossible to measure the wealth of a nation. This might seem to rebut the affirmative, but it does nothing for either side of the topic.

- Don’t use personal attack. There is no “fine line” between valid argument and abuse. ANYTHING which makes use of information beyond the words used by a speaker, or refers to the intelligence or personal beliefs of the speaker, should not be used. If a debater uses themself as an example, or makes use of religious doctrine or quotes, they should respectfully be told that such things are not valid proof.

- Don’t attack stupid hypothetical examples. Regardless of how tempting it is to “tear the opposition to shreds”, if they’re talking about “my friend Jane” or “mice in the house” they’re going to lose anyway, so you may as well be nice. Don’t risk them getting the sympathy vote.
• Don’t say “Their case merely proves ours.” This just gets confusing for everyone.

• Don’t misrepresent the opposition. This is known as straw casing. If you don’t understand what the opposition said, it is best to let one of your other speakers deal with it rather than accusing them of saying something that they did not. Ideally, quote the opposition directly to avoid confusion.

**Tools for Attacking a Case**

As well as particular arguments, there are some techniques which can be used to attack the credibility of a case as a whole. Note that these will only work when the opposition has a major team problem, but they can be useful at times.

• **Contradictions.** Look for areas where speakers contradict each other or themselves – in particular contradictions between what they say as rebuttal and what they use in their main speech. Note that it is never enough merely to identify a contradiction – by all means use it as an ethos attack to destroy their credibility, but then show how neither alternative proves their case.

An example of this is where a team defined political “Independents” as groups in parliament smaller than five people, and then claimed that the Greens, who they admitted had more members than this, were Independents. The opposition speaker pointed this out, but then correctly went on to deal with the argument EVEN IF Greens could be considered to be Independents.

• **Implied Contradictions.** Look for areas where the opposition defines a term initially in one way, but where other speakers use it in a different sense, usually either “softer” (e.g. First speaker stating that terrorists are those who actively use and advocate violence, and second speaker implying that groups which have stop using violence are still terrorists) or “harder” (e.g. First speaker stating that success requires fame, fortune or personal satisfaction, and Second speaker rebutting an example by saying that sure, rock singers are rich, but they aren’t happy so they aren’t successful).

• **Setting Low Targets.** Often a team can try to make things easy for themselves by setting unreasonably easy goals for proof. Typically, this could be claiming that because something is not true in a couple of isolated cases, it is not true in general, or vice versa.

• **Failure to Prove Topic.** Occasionally, the opposition may leave out, or merely imply, a vital element of proof. For example, in a debate that “WE SHOULD LEGISLATE AGAINST Intolerance” they might imply that racism was actively harmful, without actually proving this to be so. It is valid to argue against this, even though they haven’t actually given any arguments for it.

• **Lack of Matter.** It is very hard to argue against an opposition who has only used examples, or where they simply haven’t said enough to give you enough rebuttal. In this instance, at the end of your rebuttal, group silly points and examples together and deal with the principle that they were trying to say by using these points.
How to Find Rebuttal

If you are struggling to find something to rebut, remember that the opposition is always wrong. Some very successful debaters keep a page of opposition main points, with “THEY ARE WRONG” printed at the top of the page. Break their theme down into its component arguments, and remember that each one is wrong, or doesn’t prove the theme, or both.

For each argument, tell yourself “It’s wrong. Why is it wrong?”. If it refers to the current state of the world, ask “What caused it?”. If it talks about human nature, look for evidence to the contrary. If what they are arguing is true, then they must be applying it incorrectly.

Prepared Rebuttal

Often when you are preparing a case, possible opposition cases will occur to you. It is perfectly valid to find answers to these and to either incorporate them into your case (pre-empting) or reserve them for rebuttal. It is very important when preparing rebuttal before the debate to remember that it is there to be used if and only if the opposition uses the particular argument which the rebuttal counters. Nothing is more damaging to your credibility than to rebut something which the opposition didn’t say.

When to Make Concessions

A concession is where you agree with some or all of the opposition case. It is a useful tool, since it can be used to render parts of the opposition case irrelevant, or to avoid arguing against things that are obviously true. However, every concession gives you one less thing that you can argue about, so excessive concession should be avoided.

A) Always concede the definition where possible. If the opposition wants to debate a broader topic area, then you should state that you do not think that the topic is that broad, but that you are prepared to argue on their terms. Then, use your prepared material as a specific case of the more general debate.

If the opposition wants to narrow the topic area, explain that they are talking about a specific case, but that your general principles still hold true, and focus on the specific area.

B) If you wish to concede material, do it as early as possible. Ideally, concessions should be made by the second affirmative or first negative. Never concede something that one of your team members has already argued against, except as an “even if”.

C) Concede “universal truths”. Universal truths change over time, but should be fairly obvious. At present, it is valid to argue against initiatives such as affirmative action, but not to contest the premise that equality of opportunity is a good thing. Similarly, never directly attack a mainstream religion.
D) Concessions should be made by stating something like “We agree with the opposition when they say that...” Don’t suggest that “The opposition is agreeing with us”, or “They are helping to prove our case.”

**Presentation of Rebuttal**

As with most aspects of debating, good rebuttal is CLEAR rebuttal. A useful method for improving clarity is **targeting**.

Targeting involves dividing rebuttal into points, similar to those used in the main body of a speech, and outlining them near the start of rebuttal. The most common way of doing this (and perhaps also the most overused way of doing this) is to state:

“I find three major problems with the opposition’s speech. These are

1. Their assumption that...
2. Their assertion that ...
3. ....

**Firstly, the assumption that ...**

Note that targets do not have to be numbered, and that numbers can lead to confusion. It can be quite disconcerting to hear a speaker mention “firstly” in relation to three totally separate points. Targets do not even necessarily have to be outlined at the start of a speech, although this is advisable in most cases. Either way, the target should be introduced in the form “The first problem I have with our opposition’s case is...” (and deal with it) “...the next problem I have is...”. Signposting targets allows your audience and adjudicator to follow your logic and destruction of the concepts of your opposition’s case.

**Unusual Situations**

**Parallel Cases**

A parallel case occurs when both teams define the topic so that they are trying to prove almost the same thing. For example, consider the topic “THAT THE DREAM OF RECONCILIATION IS OVER”. If the affirmative says “the dream is over because it is now a reality”, and the negative says “the dream is not over because it is achievable”, both sides will be using the same fact (that reconciliation is possible) to prove two different conclusions (either that the dream is over or that it is not over). Parallel cases usually occur because one side is trying to ease out of a difficult case or avoid debating a side of the topic. The team which avoids the topic usually loses.

In this situation, clarity is more important than anything else.

1) Explain that the two sides are arguing parallel cases.
2) Show how this has come about. Usually either you or the opposition will have defined the topic in some strange way. At this stage you need to show that your interpretation is the correct one.
3) Explain which areas the two teams agree on, and where they disagree. Focus your rebuttal on the areas of disagreement. Don’t try to rebut things that your team is also trying to prove.

Often a particularly experienced negative team will recognise that a parallel debate is about to occur, and will shift their entire case so that a proper debate occurs. This is commendable (and necessary in competitions where the affirmative team has absolute right of definition, such as the Australian and World Championships) but is not required at high-school level. Just remember to be clear, and to find as many things to disagree about as possible, so that rebuttal can occur.

**Truisms**

The section of this handbook which deals with definitions mentioned that it is important to have a reasonable definition. Occasionally you will find an opposition who are not willing to be reasonable. This situation is difficult, because often their stated definition will be similar to yours, but the way in which they use it might be different.

For example, consider the following definition for the topic “THAT SMART PEOPLE ARE BETTER THAN KIND PEOPLE” - “Smart people are people with lots of intelligence. Kind people are people who want to do the right thing.”

This is reasonable by itself. However, what if they then go on to argue that smart people will always do the best thing to do in every situation, whereas kind people will always want to do the best thing, but won’t know what it is?

In other words, smart people are better than kind people by definition. This is known as a truism. Truisms occur when people confuse definition and argument. The way to answer a truism is not just to accuse the opposition of truism or assertion, but to identify how the truism has come about, and counter it.

“Despite their original definition, the opposition has constantly assumed that the terms ‘smart person’ and ‘person who does the best thing’ are identical. However, they have merely said this, not proved it. A smart person does not necessarily do the best thing. They may know what the best thing is, but greed, selfishness, or even just laziness may prevent them from doing it.”

All debating topics are chosen with a fair balance of affirmative and negative arguments. If you find yourself thinking that there is no way that an opposition could counter your case, then check to see that you aren’t using truisms. Your opposition must be left room to manoeuvre.

**Equivocation**

Equivocation is when the same word is used to mean different things. When used within a team it can lead to contradiction and confusion, when it occurs between both teams it results in mis-targeted rebuttal and even more confusion. Equivocation usually occurs with words in the topic. For example, in the topic “THAT AUSTRALIA HAS
LOST ITS WAY**, the phrase “lost its way” will probably be defined slightly differently by each team, and used differently by each speaker within a team.

To avoid confusion, it is desirable not to overuse particular words and phrases during a debate, as the more they are used, the vaguer their meaning becomes. Use a thesaurus to find synonyms for words in the topic, and use a different synonym for each new context in which you are arguing.

Equivocation is a particular problem when rebutting. This is one reason why the tool of *labelling* is used. Quoting the opposition exactly is fine, but then use different labels to discuss the merits of what they said.

**Challenges**

A challenge is a direct request made of one team by the other. For example,

> *You claim that the UN has been successful without USA assistance. Give us an example!*

Challenges should be made when the opposition is talking in generalities, and you don’t believe that their abstract ideas apply in real life. Be very careful when making challenges, since a good answer will only improve the opposition’s case. For this reason challenges are, and should be, used sparingly.

If the opposition challenges you, the rules of debating say that you must answer, but it is acceptable just to say something such as:

> *The opposition has challenged us to provide an example of... We do not feel that such a challenge is relevant because...“*

However, if you can answer a challenge directly, it is best to do so.