

# Rebuttal and Reply

Perhaps the most important skill in debate is rebuttal. If the essence of a debate is the clash between teams, then effective rebuttal is the means to achieve it. The team with the better rebuttal will often win the debate.

Part of the secret of an effective rebuttal is appearance: you need to look like you have dealt with all of the opposition arguments. That means that you need to be organized, and label what you have done, so the judge can clearly see how it relates to what he or she has already heard.

The purpose of the rebuttal and reply speech is to help the judge to relate the arguments which have been made by each side. Something happened during the debate: a point was made, it was conceded, or it was knocked down, or it was knocked down and rebuilt. The rebuttal lets you knock down points, but it also lets you tell the judge what happened in the round and therefore what points remain (and consequently why your side wins the debate).

There are at least three separate skills at work in an effective rebuttal speech:

- point by point rebuttal of the opposing team's points;
- defence of the points you and your partner have made; and
- big picture analysis (a summary of the round).

I will go on to talk about each of these three skills in a moment, but first let me make some general observations.

Rebuttal time is very precious. In a conventional parliamentary debate, your opponents might have about 20 minutes to make their case: your rebuttal is likely no more than three minutes. It follows that you cannot simply deal in order with everything that has been said. You and your partner need to coordinate your rebuttals: you mustn't waste time dealing with issues she has already effectively dealt with, but you must deal with all of the "big issues" which are still outstanding.

Accordingly the most important rebuttal skill is judgment: you have to choose which arguments to respond to, and in how much detail.

Typically, your opponents will have organized their speeches around several points. Take a moment to consider which of these points are the key to winning the round. Don't waste much time on red herrings, or trivial points.

Second, consider which of these points have already been successfully dealt with by your partner, and not rebuilt. You need to deal with only those points which she did not deal with.

Third, consider whether these are separate arguments, whether they are consistent (do they contradict each other?), and what your answer to each of the points would be. Feel free to re-label or combine the points the opposition team put forward so that it makes more sense to the judge.

Let's look at an example:

Suppose you are the affirmative in a debate on whether single sex education is superior to co-education for junior high. Suppose the negative team offered three reasons why co-ed schools are better for junior high:

- co-ed schools offer important social benefits
- academic performance is similar in co-ed and single sex schools;
- co-ed reflects what happens in the real world.

If your affirmative case dealt with the issues of academic performance, then that is something that you can point out, without a huge amount of rebuttal. That argument needs only a brief rebuttal, or maybe a rebuilding of your case.

The "it reflects what happens in the real world" is *not* an argument, it is a statement of fact. The negative may have labelled their point this way, but it is still not an argument.

An argument is a reason for doing something, and you can normally restate it as a "benefit" statement. In the first two negative arguments, for instance, you have social benefits and academic benefits.

What's the benefit referred to in the third point? Well, it's not stated. To answer it effectively, you need to make the benefit statement. It is: "that students will benefit from attending a school that reflects the real world."

Re-stating the issue this way makes it clear that this “argument” only means something *if* the negative team can answer the question, “how (or why) is it a benefit to attend a school that reflects the real world?” If the negative hasn’t answered that question (and if there is no answer which is obvious) — then the point is meaningless. Point out to the judge that this is a statement of fact, not an argument, and that the negative has offered no reason why it is a benefit, and that’s it.

In this example, the third argument may simply be a re-statement of their first argument — that there are social benefits in attending co-ed schools (because it prepares students for a co-ed existence in the real world). It may be that the negative has two points under this heading: there are social benefits to students *while* they are in a co-ed junior high; there are social benefits to students *when they leave* a co-ed junior high. When the argument is sized up in this way, it may be easier to answer it—because the focus is clearly on the benefits, and (as a result) whether it is necessary to have co-ed junior high schools to obtain those benefits.

In your rebuttal in a particular debate, you need to decide which of the three skills (rebuttal, defence, big picture) you need. Because these are distinct skills, it’s often important to decide which you need to use today. In some debates, you don’t have time for point by point rebuttal. In some debates, there is really no need for a detailed defence (rebuilding of your team’s points). In some debates you may in fact divide these two responsibilities among the debaters.

In my judgment, every debate requires a big picture analysis in which you offer a summary, however. In some cases it is logical to leave this for the last speaker for each team, in others every debater should attempt it.

### **Point by point rebuttal**

What many debaters mean by “rebuttal” is point-by-point rebuttal.

This consists of two steps, and many debaters forget the first step. *FIRST*, you have to tell us what the opposition point was, for example:

“The opposition told you that there are academic

advantages to co-education.”

Don’t feel you have to adopt the label that the opposition used themselves. If it is convenient, by all means do so, but if there is a label that works better, feel free to substitute it. Some debaters can ridicule a point by substituting another label, “What their first point amounts to is “Aw, mom, it’s hard.”

*SECOND*, answer the point. There are different ways to do this, depending on how important the point is:

- already dealt with it

“My partner dealt with this issue when she was reviewing the studies from the American Association of Girls’ Schools” or

- “It’s wrong”: facts are wrong

“in cross examination I asked my opponent to give us a single study that showed students improved their academic results when they switched to a co-ed school, and she was unable to do so.” or

“the only study the opposition was able to refer to was a study of 8 to 10 year old children. The resolution we are debating today is for junior high. The opposition has given us no evidence to show that the results from one study concerning children in elementary school should be preferred over the several studies we presented for junior high students.”

- “It’s irrelevant”: reasoning is wrong

“the opposition argued that most workplaces are co-ed. That’s true, but it is irrelevant to this debate. We have already agreed in our first speech that it would be appropriate for high schools to be co-ed. We don’t need co-ed junior highs to prepare students for the “real world” because that can occur in high school.

- “It supports our side”

“it’s true that students attending co-ed schools enjoy the social aspect of having girls and boys in the same class. That’s exactly why it’s desirable to have single sex classes. Because the social aspect is a distraction for students and the purpose of school is education.”

In any event, begin your rebuttal by characterizing or summarizing the opposition case. A useful technique is to characterize the whole opposition argument as essentially one point: "What the opposition case amounts to is basically that we shouldn't trust western governments with nuclear weapons." If your characterization is accurate, and you answer that point, there is no need to answer each of the arguments later. It may be more effective to deal with the argument as a whole rather than with each part.

If you don't have enough time to answer all of the arguments, you must choose which to answer. You *must* reply to all of the *important* arguments. Reply as well to the less important arguments according to which you can most effectively answer. For the sake of clarity, it is normally easier to answer the major arguments in the order in which they were made. But if the arguments are clear, it may be possible to answer them in the order you presented your case - with the weakest rebuttal in the middle and the strongest at the beginning and end.

The most effective way to rebut an argument is to employ several answers. For example, "My friend the Prime Minister told us that the system worked well in the United States. We have three answers to this claim:

1. There is no evidence it has worked in the U.S. as it has only been in place for eighteen months and the consumer price index was declining over that period in any event;
2. The Canadian economy is different from the American because the Canadian dollar is weaker and because foreign trade is much more important to Canada than to the U.S., so even if the statistics were accurate, they would not prove that the same result would occur here.
3. Finally, even if the affirmative plan would work here, it still does nothing to provide for the 110,000 unemployable that the federal government admits exist but would not benefit from this plan."

### Defence

An important, and overlooked part of rebuttal is re-building your own case. Be selective. It may be that a couple of your points have been

successfully attacked and you cannot (in the time available, anyway) rebuild them. Rebuild what you can. The formula is very similar to the one used for rebuttal. State the opposition argument (or evidence) and answer it. You might do that by showing the facts are wrong, the reasoning is wrong.

### Big Picture (summary)

In some respects, the most important part of rebuttal is to summarize the debate. This is *not* a re-statement of your team's points as they were introduced into the round half an hour ago: this is a summary of what happened in the debate.

Your purpose is not to produce a record but a judgement. Identify the key issue or issues in the debate, and deal with them. Tell us why—given what happened in the debate on those key issues—your side wins the debate.

"Mr Speaker there were two key ideas in this debate: Junior high schools are places for learning academic skills, and junior high schools as places for building social networks and social skills."

"We concede that co-ed schools offer a number of social opportunities not present in single sex schools, although we also argued that single sex schools lead to closer, and better, same-sex friendships."

"But that means the key issue in the debate is whether the academic benefits of single sex junior high schools outweigh the cost of postponing the social skill building until senior high school."

"The negative team was unable to identify a single reason why those social skills could not take place in high school."

"Because we have shown you that same sex junior high offers academic benefits, and because the negative has not been able to show why the social benefits cannot wait til high school, you should have no trouble answering this question with a yes."