

Ten Basic Points on Refutation

“An argument is a connected series of statements, intended to establish a proposition. Contradiction is just the automatic gainsaying of anything the other person says.”

1. Don't just say “No, it isn't.” (however nicely)

“The government may feel that capital punishment is an appropriate punitive response in serious crime situations. We, however, must point out—most emphatically—that no civilized individual could possibly endorse such a preposterous position.”

Translation—“No, it isn't”.

Good refutation demonstrates careful planning and forethought, not inspired, spontaneous knee-jerk contradiction; not even eloquent contradictions.

“Two lovely black eyes / Oh what a surprise,
Only for telling / The man he was wrong,
Two lovely black eyes.”

British Music Hall Song

2. Do be polite.

Your honourable opponent on the other side of the floor is entitled to his opinion, no matter how mindlessly stupid it is.

Your opponent may be bigger than you are. (see quotation above) He/she may have a black belt in some form of exotic violence. Equally important, remember that debate is both a logical and a psychological contest. If you are rude to your opponents, the judges will sympathize with them instead of you. It is the judges you wish to impress. Don't grind you teeth. Don't sneer. Smile. Be nice. With you superior intellect, you can afford to be generous.

3. Pick no nits.

“Actually, it wasn't 3.23456 p.p.m. of hydrochloride, it was 3.23454 p.p.m.”. This is a good way of wasting time.

4. Do be prepared.

You need to do more thinking and research for your refutation than for your constructive remarks. You have to be ready to counter whatever the other side introduces—even arguments you rejected when you prepared the other side of the case. Brainstorm all likely arguments for the other team. Consider the resolution from a variety of viewpoints. How would it look to a retired, handicapped, communist, single parent, Albertan farmer? Have you looked at the resolution from social, economic, religious, moral and military points of view?

Most importantly, have adequate evidence to support you refutation. If necessary, prepare a refutation sheet.

5. Be organized.

This is not so hard as it seems. Use the other side's preparation. They put their arguments in order for you, so why not follow that order?

“The affirmative had three main points, #1..., #2..., #3.... Well, #1 is wrong because...”

6. Unless you have no idea what the other side said, do not use straw man arguments. i.e. argue against something the other side has not proposed.

7. Let them know you were awake during the last speech.

Your refutation should show that you were listening and that you understood. Your refutation should begin with a summary of your opponent's main arguments. It should be possible for someone arriving late to grasp the state of the arguments thus far.

8. State what you agree with.

You don't have to dispute everything. If you agree with the government's stated need for action, say so. You may simply dispute the plan of action that the government proposes. Or you may simply disagree with one word or phrase in the resolution. For example, "Pollution is the most serious problem facing Canada" does not require you to prove that pollution is not a serious problem facing Canada. 'Pulling out the rug' tends to throw your opponent off-balance. Agreeing with much of what your opponent said, but disagreeing with key points can be a most effective form of attack.

9. Be unified.

The resolution "Dogs make better pets than cats" can be defeated in two ways. Either cats are better, or dogs and cats are equally good pets. A debate should have two sides, not three. If both members of the Negative state contradictory views, confusion results.

10. Take advantage of all opportunities to refute.

Both constructive and rebuttal speeches can be used, as well as question and answer periods, heckling and points of order and personal privilege.

"A debate with no clash/is a puddle with no splash."

A third rate poet