

REBUTTAL

1. Introduction

Rebuttal involves refuting the case presented by the opposition. This guide provides advice on how to engage in rebuttal. This guide should be read in conjunction with the *SADA Guide to Adjudicating* and the *Australia-Asia Debating Guide*.

2. Structure and speaker roles

Every speaker except the first affirmative must rebut. Rebuttal should be clearly signposted and come at the beginning of a speaker's speech. Where appropriate, speakers can integrate their rebuttal with substantive, in that case it is critical that responsive material is adequately signposted. Equally, it is always useful to provide a brief (one or two sentence) summary of the opposition's point before rebutting it so that the audience and adjudicator know what the rebuttal is addressing.

First negatives should spend approximately a third of their speech on rebuttal. Second speakers should generally spend half of their speech on rebuttal. Third speakers should devote the overwhelming majority of their speech to rebuttal. No summary given by a third speaker, at any grade, should be longer than 30 seconds.

The first negative is responsible for rebutting the affirmative's definition where appropriate. This is known as 'challenging a definition' and is a rare occurrence in debating. There are particular conventions around this aspect of rebuttal, which are addressed in the *Guide to Definitions, Models and Tests*.

3. Responsiveness

Speakers must listen carefully in order to rebut effectively. Rebuttal must respond to the actual points raised by the opposition; speakers should avoid pre-prepared rebuttal that addresses points they thought the opposition would raise.

It is useful to chart the debate on a pad by dot pointing the opposition's arguments. This enables a speaker to see how the debate has developed, which in turn enables them to respond to the most relevant issues at that point in the debate when it is their turn to rebut. This also helps speakers to add new analysis to points, rather than repeat what their other speakers have said in rebuttal.

4. Analysis

There may be multiple reasons why a point is wrong. Just like substantive arguments, rebuttal should be explained in detail and examples should be used where appropriate.

Speakers should rebut the opposition's rebuttal, not just their case. Similarly, tests and models can be rebutted – usually by the first negative or second affirmative.

An argument can be rebutted for any number of reasons including that it is:

- an exaggeration or misleading;
- irrelevant;
- factually incorrect; and
- inconsistent with, or contradicts, another part of an opposing team's case.

There may be many other reasons why a point is flawed; speakers should not limit themselves to the list above. Speakers need to explain why a particular point is flawed, not just assert that it is irrelevant etc.

5. Thematic rebuttal

Once a speaker is confident doing rebuttal they should attempt thematic rebuttal. Thematic rebuttal involves responding to an opposition's case by grouping similar arguments into themes or questions rather than responding on a point by point or speaker by speaker basis. Thematic rebuttal should be used by all speakers, not just at third.

The themes should reflect the debate as it happened and not be pre-prepared. Speakers should look at all the points raised by each side (including rebuttal) and group them into categories according to their similarity. Themes should be posed as questions, whereby the rebuttal poses the answer to the questions raised in the debate. Speakers then need to evaluate which of those categories are the most important in the context of the debate. In this regard, speakers should consider:

- which themes have occupied the majority of the speaking time in the debate; and
- what each side needs to prove in order to win the debate.

Thematic rebuttal is difficult and takes practice. Each debate is different. Some debates will have one dominant theme and a couple of minor themes, others will have two large themes, etc. Speakers should weight and structure their themes according the considerations outlined above, there is no template for thematic rebuttal.

When done well, thematic rebuttal will encapsulate arguments raised by both sides. In a debate about nuclear power, the team arguing for nuclear power might argue that nuclear power is cheaper than renewable energy and better for the environment than fossil fuel. The negative team might propose funding renewable energy instead and argue that nuclear power is too expensive and dangerous, and that renewable energy is better for the environment. This might create the following themes:

- To what extent is the cost of nuclear power a significant and decisive issue in this debate? – this would deal with the arguments and rebuttal from each side about the cost of nuclear power.
- Under which side is there a greater safety risk? – this would deal with the argument about whether nuclear is safe.
- Is nuclear energy better than the alternatives? – evaluating whether nuclear power is better overall than fossil fuels or renewable energy.

However, those arguments could also be structured into the following two themes:

- Which side attains a more cost effective approach to energy? – evaluating the cost of nuclear energy compared to the alternatives.
- Under which side is the environment better protected? – dealing with the safety issue and the overall impact on the environment compared to the alternatives.

The first set of themes in this example facilitates a detailed discussion on nuclear power itself, with less weight given to comparative analysis – despite the comparative nature of the questions posed. The second set of themes addresses energy policy in a more holistic fashion. Teams would need to make a strategic decision on how to best structure their themes depending on how they view the debate developing. It might be that the second speaker would use the second set of themes to cover the material in

less time, while the third speaker would use the first set of themes to go into more detail on the key points.