



South Australian Debating Association Inc

Senior Rebuttal Masterclass

Rebuttal is, in many ways, the essence of debating. It provides a chance for speakers to demonstrate why the arguments put forward by the opposition are unsatisfactory in comparison with their own. Providing rebuttal which is responsive to an opposition's case is the hallmark of a good speaker; the best speakers are those who can spot the issues in contention and effectively communicate why they win those issues to the audience. Speakers who do not rebut, aside from first affirmatives, are not debating – so always have a go. In saying that, always remember that any rebuttal is preferable to none.

Whilst there is no exhaustive list of everything there is to say about rebuttal, there are a number of important things to bear in mind, which are covered below.

◆ How much rebuttal do you need to have?

At the higher intermediate and senior levels, there is an expectation that a greater part of your speech will be devoted to rebuttal than what was expected at the Junior stage. However, there is a fine line between maximising your rebuttal content in order to deconstruct the opposition's argument, and not jeopardising your team's case by still leaving enough time to deliver your substantive content, which your first speaker would have signposted.

As a general guide, first negatives should spend around one third of their speech on rebuttal. Second speakers should spend around half of their speech on rebuttal. Third speakers' entire speech should focus on rebuttal, and summaries which were adopted in the Junior levels are no longer required nor recommended at this stage.

◆ What do you need to rebut?

In short, everything the opposition presents needs to be rebutted. Speakers are often under the misconception that they do not need to rebut opposition points which were insignificant, either because they did not receive a lot of attention from the opposition's own speakers, or are clearly incorrect. Neither of these understandings are true, insignificant arguments can still win the debate for a team when all else is considered equal. Adjudicators cannot enter debates to determine the incorrectness of arguments, therefore it is your job to point it out to them.

The idea that everything needs to be rebutted can be broken down by considering the components of the opposition's case. Not all of these components must necessarily receive completely separate responses, but they should all be engaged with implicitly.

1. The opposition's framing or context

Debaters should make a conscious decision whether or not they accept the opposition's framing of a debate. Teams will, as a matter of good strategy, frame debates through the lens which is most sympathetic to their side, thus having a greater impact on their benefits. That does not mean, however, that the opposition must accept this framing. You should think about the framing of a debate *prior to entering the room*, as refuting framing is difficult to do at the bench without prior thought (although the framing of your case will at a minimum be implicit from your team's case).

The way you work out how the opposition is framing the debate is by looking at the examples they are using and the groups they are talking about. For example, in prison abolition debates, negative teams may wish to talk about mass murders and heinously violent criminals, whereas the more favourable framing from the affirmative are low-level possession offences and other non-violent crimes. As a

guiding principle, you will know you need to reframe the debate when the group that is most important to you is being sidelined or completely ignored in the opposition's discussion. In the aforementioned example, this would mean framing the type of criminal to one that favours your side of the debate.

As is discussed below, pre-strikes can be a good way to reframe debates. Equally, you can reframe debates by pointing out the opposition's unwillingness to engage with what you assert as the key stakeholder in the debate. After demonstrating why the opposition's argument is wrong, you can provide an "even if" argument to further strengthen your rebuttal. This means stating that even if the adjudicator does not accept the "wrongness" of the opposition's argument, the argument is insignificant compared to the significance of your stakeholder group, which you win and would like to reframe the debate in favour of.

2. The opposition's model

The first thing to say about rebutting opposition models is: be careful. Affirmative teams have fiat within debates. This means that they are not limited by funding constraints or technological feasibility in the same way that policy proponents in the real world are. Hence, it is not persuasive rebuttal in debating to say that the opposition's model is impossible because the government would never be able to afford to do it and that therefore it would never happen.

That does not mean there isn't persuasive rebuttal against models, there definitely is. Teams present models as mechanisms to achieve certain outcomes. Rebuttal should then demonstrate why that mechanism does not achieve that outcome. This rebuttal should consider the stakeholders' incentives and characterisations: is it true that they would respond in the way the opposition asserted they would? If you can demonstrate that this is not the case, you have pointed out a significant flaw in the opposition's practical argumentation. Remember, this response should still be followed up with an "even if" argument, such that if the adjudicator does not accept

your analysis about this mechanistic failure, you are still providing a response to the practical outcomes of your opposition.

3. The opposition's arguments

3.1 Principled arguments

Principled arguments should be responded to by demonstrating the clash between your principle and the opposition's, and then demonstrating why your principle is superior. Furthermore, principled arguments can be rebutted if you point out an inconsistency between the way the opposition achieves their outcome and their principle, so that the opposition is forced to abandon their principle to retain their practical benefits.

3.2 Practical arguments

Arguments should be rebutted with *analysis* and never assertions. That means picking apart the premises (reasons) and conclusions (outcomes) of your opposition and demonstrating why the outcomes are not flowing from the reasons. This analysis usually includes considering the stakeholder groups which the opposition is ignoring. This could mean breaking down the stakeholder groups into subgroups and demonstrating that the opposition's analysis only applies to one of those subgroups, or demonstrating that the stakeholder group as a whole is not incentivised to respond in the way being asserted.

There are a few general ways to look at rebutting individual aspects of arguments, on the basis of the following components:

1. Inaccuracy

- a. Arguments are inaccurate when they are based on a false premise or misinterpretation of evidence. When rebutting inaccurate arguments, a debater must make clear **why** the premise is false, or **how** the

evidence has been misinterpreted. Assertions are always insufficient, and therefore rebuttal is insufficient when it merely asserts the opposition's premises are false. The importance with this type of rebuttal is in providing a quality explanation as to why that is so.

2. Irrelevancy

- a. Irrelevant arguments are often accurate (in the sense they are true), but irrelevant in the sense they are not connected to the issue under discussion. As always in debating, it is important to explain **why** the argument is not relevant. The benefit of pointing out an argument's irrelevancy is to demonstrate that even though the opposition has made prima facie good arguments, those arguments do not establish their side of the motion. Those arguments were therefore immaterial to proving their case and were, in essence, a waste of everyone's time. If an opposition has spent a lengthy amount of time making irrelevant arguments while your side has made many more relevant arguments, this is a good thing for your success in the debate and something you should point out.

3. Insignificance

- a. Insignificant arguments are often accurate and relevant but are so minor in comparison to the main subject/stakeholder of the debate that they should be discounted in favour of arguments about the main subject/stakeholder. Therefore, rebuttal that seeks to establish an opposition's argument as insignificant must first explain **why** the argument is so, and then must compare back to your own significant argument and demonstrate **why that** argument should take precedence. The benefit of pointing out insignificant arguments is that it devalues arguments which are otherwise compelling. That benefit only accrues when you can demonstrate the value and significance of your own arguments. The key, therefore, to this type of rebuttal lies in making clear comparisons between yourself and the opposition through highlighting the important/main issues.

4. Inconsistency

- a. Inconsistent arguments are arguments which contradict what another speaker, or what that speaker themselves, has said earlier. Pointing out why an argument is inconsistent is a powerful tool in winning debates.

4. The opposition's rebuttal to your arguments

There is no definitive way to engage with the opposition's rebuttal to your own arguments. However, a responsive speaker – particularly from second negative onwards – needs to do so in order to engage with the debate as it is unfolding.

◆ How to structure your rebuttal

At this level, rebuttal needs to go beyond the shopping list responses which pick and choose points of your opposition's case to rebut.

A persuasive speech should begin with a pre-strike, particularly at the Senior A and B levels. Whilst pre-strikes aren't necessarily always rebuttal per se, it comes directly from your rebuttal, hence it is appropriate to talk about here.

Pre-strikes can serve many purposes. One function can be to reframe the debate. Prestrikes which are of reframing nature point out that the opposition only wanted to talk about X group (usually, the stakeholder which is prima facie most sympathetic for them) and characterise them as the most important, or sometimes the only group in the debate. The pre-strike should point that out, then make some comment about why the opposition's focus on that group demonstrates a problematic disengagement with the core of the debate, and then should tell the adjudicator what other groups are operating and need to be considered.

Another function can be to take a silly soundbite the opposition gave you, to demonstrate that they are potentially confused about their own case or making blatant assertions about the operation of the world which are untrue.

Finally, pre-strikes can take two contradictory statements the opposition has made to demonstrate that either the opposition is confused, or that the opposition is claiming two benefits which can't both be true and therefore are not viable, or some other fatal aspect resulting from the inconsistency.

This is not an exhaustive explanation of pre-strikes, but one thing that is true universally is that good pre-strikes are chosen based on strategic decisions, which consider what is specifically required at that point in time to win the debate, and refocus or centre the debate around that focus.

Next, speakers should outline the questions that they are going to unpack within the debate. Questions are just the grown up version of themes. For example, if previously you would have rebutted the "economic" theme in the debate, you should now phrase this as a question, e.g. "which side got greater economic benefits?" Correctly identifying and then clearly articulating the thematic questions of the debate contributes to speakers having good macro-structure.

At this point, it is appropriate to explain the idea of integrated rebuttal. Integrated rebuttal should be employed when the questions identified for the purposes of rebuttal are the same as or largely similar to the substantive questions which have been identified in your speech. Instead of then doing the rebuttal and substantive content separately, you can present the questions and implement the rebuttal together with the substantive content. If engaging with this form of rebuttal, you must be sure to signpost when the parts of your speech are responsive and when you are just presenting your point.

Moreover, it is important that you signpost the choice to undertake integrated rebuttal after stating the questions that you are exploring within the debate. If you are engaging with normal thematic rebuttal, then you just present the questions and then go through each one. In ordering the questions, usually the principle is dealt with first and then the practical arguments, in order from most to least important. However, the general principle is that the most important stuff in the debate should be dealt with first, so particularly at third speaker, the principle may be dealt with after practical outcomes. Above all else, questions should be dealt with in a logical order, such that

if something is contingent upon something else, even if the former is more important than the latter, they should be dealt with in the order which establishes the contingency.

In addition to good macro-structure, micro-structure is also critical to a persuasive speech. Good analysis that lacks micro-structure is as persuasive as less good analysis with excellent structure. That is because structure always affects the substantiation of arguments and the ease with which the adjudicator can understand the analysis. A good structure always makes a speech more persuasive than a speech without good structure.

The first thing to say about microstructure is that cue cards should be discarded in favour of paper, and having well-ordered paper that you can read clearly is key to having good micro-structure within your rebuttal (and your points as well).

Microstructure is developed by dealing with the overarching questions, and then by creating sub-questions, which in turn deal with all of the opposition's points. These sub-questions should be followed in a methodical manner and should substantiate the numerous responses an opposition's argument/theme receives. That is, there should be initial arguments and then "even if" arguments, all presented with respect to the same opposition material.

There is no way to prescribe exactly what these sub-questions should look like, as these will be incredibly debate specific. However, in general, sub-questions should firstly address why the argument is wrong and secondly, why even if the argument isn't wrong, it isn't important with respect to something else which is more important. Critically, dealing with the sub questions does not mean taking a shopping list approach by going through each statement that the opposition has said and refuting it. Rather, rebuttal needs to be global. The overarching theme questions should target the main things you need to prove within the debate and moving through the sub-questions should be the steps which establish why your side is correct with respect to the whole point, not just a few assertions within it. That is, the sub-questions should unpack the opposition's reasoning and demonstrate why their reasoning does not lead to their conclusion.

Your rebuttal under each broad thematic question should end with a statement that positively affirms the question in your favour. Then you should move onto the next question.

Please note that if you are undertaking thematic rebuttal rather than integrated rebuttal, there is no need to signpost when you are moving between the rebuttal questions to the substantive points (which should also be phrased as questions), just merely move through each question in order.

◆ The importance of working as a team

Working as a team is essential in all aspects of debating, and rebuttal is no exception. In particular, it is essential that when planning rebuttal, speakers talk to one another so the team case is kept in mind and speakers are not contradicting each other and their case.

Furthermore, working as a team is important in the sense that everyone needs to help out everyone else. No matter whether you're first, second or third speaker, your job in relation to rebuttal should begin when the first speaker stands up and shouldn't be over until your third speaker sits down. It can be very difficult to listen, think and write all at the same time – so having three people paying attention and coming up with arguments can make a real difference. Even if you can't think of an argument in response to something, just writing down each of the opposition's main arguments as they come up helps the third speaker in making sure they have all the opposition's points covered. Equally, second and third speakers should offer responses they have to the opposition's first speaker's points to their own first speaker, because the most effective rebuttal comes immediately after a point was made. Finally, when you are writing rebuttal for someone else, make sure you write legibly – or explain the point to the speaker so they can write it down.

◆ Things to avoid

1. Writing all your rebuttal out before the debate. It is much better to think about what the opposition is likely to argue and think of your team's response when preparing for the debate without writing it all out. That way, when you get to the debate, you can tailor your response to what they have actually said rather than reading out a completely pre-written response that might not be totally responsive to the opposition's points. At the very least, make sure that if you have prepared rebuttal you do not misuse it.
2. Unnecessary quibbling about the definition of the topic. Whenever possible, always agree with your opponent's definition. Unless you're defined out of the debate by the opposition (i.e. they suggest a definition of the topic that could not possibly be argued in the negative), or left with a definition that is so different from yours that you are arguing about completely different things, it is best to agree with the definition, even if you have to clarify some aspect of the definition or adjust it a little. If you do either of these things, you need to explain why. If you do disagree, you still need to rebut their case. For example, you might say *"We disagree with the opposition's definition because ... [give your reason], but even if we agreed with the opposition's definition, they are still wrong because ... [explain why]"*.
3. Unnecessary quibbling or nit-picking in general. That means avoid focusing on tiny, irrelevant mistakes made by the opposition and losing sight of the bigger picture. In a debate about whether Australia is an environmental criminal, don't waste time telling the adjudicator that the opposition's claim that 184 countries have signed the Paris Climate Agreement is wrong because it is actually 195 parties that have – it just does not matter. Debaters often find this confusing because they have learnt it is good to point out inaccuracies in the opposition's claims – which it is. However, the essence of rebuttal is showing why the opposition's main arguments are wrong. Your main focus when you rebut should be on the main themes of your opposition's arguments. In the aforementioned example, it makes no difference to the opposition's main argument if there are 195 countries versus 184, maybe if

the difference was that only 1 or 2 countries had signed the agreement rather than 184 that would be something worth discussing. That kind of inaccuracy would undercut one of their main arguments. The key: you won't get very far by poking tiny holes in things the opposition has said – you need good, solid reasons why their arguments are wrong. And you should be going for the big targets – their main points – first, and leaving less important things for later. You can even consider letting some points go if they are irrelevant and don't progress the opposition's argument.

4. Insulting the opposition. Not only is this rude, it isn't an effective argument.
5. Using general purpose statements such as “the opposition's point is wrong” without saying what the point is or why it is wrong. This adds nothing to your debate and is not effective rebuttal.
6. Beginning with “before I begin my debate, I'd like to point out a few flaws in the opposition's argument”. This both wastes your time as it does not add anything to your speech, but is also not the most effective way of delivering rebuttal. Instead, it is best to jump straight into your rebuttal and immediately get to the heart of the issue.
7. Spending too much time on rebuttal, so that you don't have enough time for your substantive case. This does not necessarily mean making less responsive arguments, instead focus on making them more succinct so you can get through everything you need to within time.