

Constructing a Case

◆ Different types of topics – Normative and Empirical:

At the junior and intermediate levels of debating there are a few different kinds of topics run. The below table outlines the different types of topics and how to recognise them.

That we should x	e.g. <i>That we should criminalise the publishing of fake news</i>	These are normative or model based topics. In these kinds of debates, you are advocating for a certain intervention, that we should do something, to achieve a certain outcome.
That a should x	e.g. <i>That the primary aim of education should be a career</i>	
That x does more harm than good	e.g. <i>That fast fashion does more harm than good</i>	These are empirical or test based topics. These debates imply a comparison between the world with some sort of scenario versus the world without it. Teams debate what the world would look like without that certain thing and consequently whether the world would be a better or worse place.
That we regret x	e.g. <i>That we regret the rise of technology in schools</i>	
That x is good for society	e.g. <i>That tiktok is good for society</i>	

◆ How to construct your case:

1. Definition and Context

The first step in structuring a case concerns defining the topic. As covered in our *Debating Fundamentals Take Home Resource*, a definition should take what a 'reasonable average person' would understand the topic to mean. However, when defining the topic, there should also be a discussion about the topic more generally. This discussion goes beyond what you present at the beginning of your teams' case.

Debaters should consider: what is the topic about? Why has the topic been set? I.e. has there been recent lengthy discussion about it in the media? Why would the SADA set a motion about this particular subject area? Considering these questions will help you make sure your definition isn't just factually correct but is also relevant. Moreover, it helps you come up with more persuasive arguments. This more general definition of the topic is referred to as the context.

2. Stakeholders

After your team understands **what** the topic means and **why** it is topical, it is important to consider the **who**. Different debates will involve discussions of different groups of people. Those different groups of people will all be affected differently in different debates. The reason it is important to understand 'who' you are talking about is so you can come up with persuasive arguments. Persuasive arguments will demonstrate that your side has greater benefits for more groups, or they might demonstrate that your side has the only benefits for the most important group in the debate. Regardless, your debate will concern the 'whos' – so you need to have a clear idea of what you do and who you do it for.

That is also why after you decide which groups the debate is about you consider how important they are. Is that group the biggest i.e. are they the most affected? Is that group the most 'vulnerable' i.e. the worst off under the status quo and therefore deserving of the benefits your side is offering. The key is that once you have worked

out who matters, you need to work out why they matter, you need to structure your speech so you give reasons why they matter and then you need to make sure your case argues in their favour.

Equally, the converse is true. When thinking about who matters, you must also think about who your opposition does more to help. Then you must think about how you will respond to it. Are the groups the opposition helps less important than the groups you help? Does the opposition not help the groups they do as much as you help the groups you do? It is all up for debate!

3. Models or tests

Next, you must determine if the topic requires a model or a test.

a. Models

Next you should present a model. A model is a set of policies your side is seeking to enact. Models should be specific, but not so specific that you set yourself up for the burden of writing the policies word for word. For example, models that enact 'education policies' should, at a minimum, explain *who* is being educated, *what* they are being educated about, and *how* that education is reaching them.

Models must always be consistent with your principle/moral arguments and achieve an outcome that helps the groups you want to.

b. Tests

Next, you should think about how you will test the contentious idea in the topic. A test is a set of criteria used to determine if a particular statement is true. For example, if you were debating the topic "That social media is good for democracy" you would need a test to show how you measure whether social media is good for democracy. You should then propose arguments that show how your test is met. For example, your test might be that social media is good for democracy if it promotes engagement of voters, ensures representation of voters' views in parliament, and

leads to constructive discussion about political issues. Your arguments would then focus on demonstrating that social media achieves all of these criteria.

A test is not a set of arguments, and should not favour one side. It should be a fair set of criteria that either side can use to win the debate.

The test is offered by the first affirmative speaker, and then either accepted or not accepted by the first negative speaker. First negative speakers should choose to not accept an affirmative team's test only if it is unfair, or does not accurately test the contentious issue in the debate. If a first negative speaker does not accept the affirmative team's test, they must propose their own. This is why it's important for negative teams to also devise a test in case they need to propose it.

4. Arguments:

a. Principled argument

Debates are not all about who is affected, they are also about why we should or should not, **in principle**, do certain things or live in certain types of society or advance a particular side of a motion. Especially when all outcomes seem otherwise equal, a case with a principle advantage will be a winning one.

Most debate topics have an obvious 'principle clash'. For example, there is often a clash about the right to civil liberties and the duty of the government to keep its citizens safe. We might value both of these things but to varying degrees, your job is to come up with a principled or a moral reason why your side of the motion is justified, irrespective of outcomes.

Your principled argument should be something that is broad, in the sense that it is generally true with a variety of arguments to support it. You should, then, provide reasons why it applies to the particular issue under the topic. That means, you should be providing reasons why the principle applies to the topic and why it is principally superior from your opposition's. The key here is to make sure your

reasons aren't just arguments in favour of your side of the case, but actually reasons directly supporting the principle.

b. Practical Arguments

Your team should then come up with practical arguments. Practical arguments explain why and how under your side of the topic a certain group is impacted. Your team should ensure that your practical arguments are not inconsistent with your moral justification and that your practical arguments discuss all the major stakeholders in the debate. Whilst practical arguments often focus on the benefits your side offers they can (and should) also concern the potential harms of *not doing* what your side is arguing for.

5. Grouping arguments

Once your team has brainstormed your arguments you should then sort them into your team split. Our debating fundamentals resource outlines how to do this based on grouping similar impacts together. For example, practical arguments concerning the same group should be framed as one 'argument' titled "How on side X we do more to help X" or "Benefits to X Group."

Junior and Intermediate Rebuttal Masterclass

Rebuttal is the essence of debating. It provides a chance for speakers to knock over the arguments put forward by the opposition at the beginning of their speech before putting forward their own. Unless speaking first affirmative, if you do not rebut you are not debating – so always have a go. Remember: any rebuttal is preferable to none.

Moreover, the best debaters are the ones who can spot real weaknesses in the opposition's arguments and effectively communicate those weaknesses to the audience. 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?

A first negative should aim to spend a quarter to a third of their speech on rebuttal. Second speakers should aim for a third to a half of their speech being rebuttal. Third speakers should spend the majority or totality of their speech on rebuttal. Always err on the side of more rebuttal rather than less – it is extremely rare to come across a flawless argument that does not have at least some problems. In most cases, debaters should be able to anticipate problems in the opposition's case before even arriving at the debate. So, there should not be any reason why the opposition's main points go unaddressed, particularly as a third speaker.

◆ What do you need to rebut?

Debaters need to respond to the opposition's arguments, the opposition's model and any of the opposition's assertions.

Rebutting Arguments

It is important to rebut all opposition arguments, at least once, as anything not rebutted will stand at the end of debate as an issue won by the opposition – even if the argument is not objectively true.

There are four main ways that arguments can be rebutted, on the basis of:

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 in the ability to devalue 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.

Rebutting Models

It is always important to engage with the opposition's model. If the opposing team has run a counter model, make sure you target your rebuttal towards that model. Furthermore, try and find flaws within that model – what are the implications and outcomes of that model do they line up with the outcomes the opposition is purporting to claim under their side?

Rebutting Assertions

Finally, if the opposition has not made arguments but merely assertions i.e. statements which are presented as arguments but lack the necessary premises or evidence to constitute as such, point that out.

◆ Structure and thematic rebuttal

All speakers, especially those at third, should have a go at thematic rebuttal. In thematic rebuttal, you paint a picture of the main arguments and themes in the debate so far, and then address the arguments in general groups.

Structuring thematic rebuttal involves looking at the arguments of the opposing team and putting them into major headings, then working out your responses. Rather than writing all this on to cards immediately, it can be useful to sort the opposition's arguments into themes during the debate on a piece of paper, and then putting the rebuttal onto cards in dot points.

In working out the themes/questions you should ask yourself: what are the essential issues that the opposition has raised? It is always important to write down the team split of your opposition which can sometimes help to structure your thematic rebuttal.

The classic opening is: The opposition's case has come down to X (no more than 3) main themes/questions, firstly secondly And finally Now to the first theme

For example, If the debate is on the topic that South Australia has been left behind, the third speaker may stand up and say "there have been three main issues in this debate so far – culture, provision of services and economic opportunities. The affirmative team have put forward arguments as to why South Australia has been left behind in all of these areas, but I'm going to show you that we have not." The speaker can then address the affirmative team's arguments under each of those headings, making it much easier for the audience to follow.

Even if you are not rebutting thematically, it is important to arrange your rebuttal so it makes sense. It is all well and good to have excellent responses to the opposition's arguments, but if they come in whichever order you happened to throw together your cue cards before you stood up to speak, then they won't be as effective as they could be. Good structure is as important as it is very easy, especially given the speed at which a lot of debaters speak, for the audience to get lost part way through your rebuttal if it is not organised well. Moreover, good structure helps the adjudicator understand what you are saying and therefore makes you more persuasive. At a minimum, you should at least make it clear which of the opposition's arguments you are addressing, deal with the most important arguments first. If you are unsure what the most important arguments are – they are usually the arguments which have been talked about the most in the debate.

◆ The importance of working as a team

Working as a team is essential in all aspects of debating, 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 oppositions' 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, make sure 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 on cards 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 prewritten card that might not be completely responsive to the opposition's points. At the very least, make sure that if you have prepared rebuttal, you ensure that it is directly responding to what the opposition has said, and is not rebutting an argument which they haven't made.

2. Unnecessary quibbling about the definition of the topic.

If 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 the 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, not picking up 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 and on their four or five main points. 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 idea is that 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, leaving less important things for later or letting them go if they wouldn’t convince anyone to accept your side of the topic.

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 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.