

6 Rebuttal

The 1992 comedy *My Cousin Vinny* is not perhaps the greatest movie ever made. It does, however, have one memorable scene. The main character, Vinny, is a lawyer, hired to represent his cousin, who has been falsely accused of involvement in an armed robbery. Vinnie isn't, it's fair to say, at the top of his profession; he's failed his law exams six times. However, he is cheap. So cheap that the only hotel he can afford is next to a railway line that keeps him awake all night. As a result, he falls asleep during the prosecution's opening submission. Prompted by the judge to respond on behalf of his client, Vinny stirs himself, strides confidently towards the bench, and says, 'Everything that guy just said is garbage.' (Actually, he doesn't say, 'garbage'. He says something else. You can search up the clip online to find out what he really says.) Vinny's response is a very good example of how not to do rebuttal. Unfortunately, the Vinny technique is still all too common, both in debating and in life.

So, how can we do rebuttal better than poor old Vinny?

Let's look at:

- **What rebuttal is.**
- **Why you should do rebuttal.**
- **When you should do rebuttal.**
- **How you should do rebuttal.**

What is rebuttal?

Rebuttal is when you challenge, criticise or find fault with your opponent's argument **with reason**. I'll say that again: **with reason**. It is different from simply saying someone is wrong. This is the Vinny approach, which itself is the mirror image of the argument known as 'simple assertion'. (We'll learn more about that argument and what's wrong with it in Chapter 7, Thirteen Bad Arguments.) No reason, no rebuttal; but the better your reason or reasons, the better your rebuttal.

Why do rebuttal?

Without rebuttal, a debate becomes a series of performances: one free standing speech after another, none of them having any connection with each other. No matter how well composed the speeches are, they might as well have been written down,

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photocopied and handed out to the audience. In fact, you might as well not even be in the same room. A debate without rebuttal is like someone who behaves as if there is no one else there. Have you ever met anyone like that? They're not much fun to be with. With rebuttal, however, a debate becomes a conversation; a conversation where people actually listen to each other. It becomes dynamic, unpredictable, unsafe. In other words, it comes to life. A debate with rebuttal is a lot harder, but it's also a lot more interesting and, ultimately, more fun.

When should you do rebuttal?

A. At the beginning of your speech

Unless you are first proposition, you are always speaking just after someone on the other side has spoken. You need to show you have actually listened to that speech by responding to what has been said, and by saying, **with reason**, why you disagree with it.

B. In points of information

Despite their name, points of information are essentially forms of rebuttal. They are your chance to engage with the other side's argument in a targeted way and to find fault with it.

C. When discussing the point of clash

Once you've identified the point of clash, you then have to show you have won the debate by rebutting the other side of the clash. What is 'the point of clash'? We'll find out later in this chapter.

How do you do rebuttal?

Rebuttal is the work of analysing an argument and finding its weaknesses. It's really hard work, and it doesn't get any easier. You just have to keep practising it. The more you practise it, the better you will get at it. This will have benefits not just in debating, but in life, as you are less likely to be fooled by people who look as they're talking sense but aren't really.

There is a whole section of philosophy, called 'critical thinking', dedicated to analysing arguments and their strengths and weaknesses. You may have studied it at school. For now, though, here are some very simple tools for understanding how arguments work.

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