

So, as you can see, there are many different ways you can rebut even a simple argument like the one above. We'll be learning more lines of attack in Chapter 7, Thirteen Bad Arguments, in which we'll learn how to spot flawed arguments and how to challenge them. But with five possible lines of attack just for that one simple argument we chose (often there will be more), you have to choose. You can't say all those things at once.

How do you choose? Challenge your opponent where her argument is weakest. Look through the rebuttals above, and decide for yourself which exposes the most weakness in the original argument.

To sum up:

- Rebuttal is essential for debate
- Do it at the beginning of your speech; in points of information; and when summing up.
- Simple denial is never enough.
- Break your opponent's argument down to premises and conclusion, and challenge it at its weakest point.

By the way, all the rebuttal arguments above can of course themselves be rebutted. Debating is not about finding a final definitive truth, nor is it an activity suited to people who need there to be one and only one answer to every question. This might be why North Korea have never done very well in the World Schools Debating Competition. In this respect debating teaches us something very profound, and something that would make the world a much better place if more people understood it. As the nineteenth century English writer John Henry Newman wisely advised:

'Never stop searching for the truth; never trust anyone who tells you they have found it.'

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7 The point of clash

Debating is a competitive activity. Two teams clash against each other, and one comes out the winner. But it isn't only the teams that are clashing. It's also the ideas. That's where 'the point of clash' comes from.

What is the 'point of clash'?

The 'point of clash' is the essence of the debate. It is where the fundamental disagreement between the two sides lies. All the other disagreements simply derive from that first disagreement.

You could think of it as the hinge of a debate. As with the hinge of a door or a window, it is the part that all the other parts are attached to. It is also the part that stays still to allow the other parts to move.

Let's go back to 'This house would make all schools co-educational', and see how the point of clash applies to that motion.

We saw in the last section on rebuttal that an argument often made for the motion is that co-educational schools teach children how to relate to the opposite gender better. This, it is argued, benefits girls as much as boys, because they will have to work with men for the rest of their lives, so they might as well get used to what they're like early on.

An argument often made against the motion is that girls perform better academically in girls' schools. To give an example, in a girls' school they are more likely to choose science subjects in the sixth form, as it will not be perceived as a 'boys' subject', and they are more likely to have women science teachers as role models.

Suppose the debaters choose to focus on those two arguments. Let's look at the principles behind them.

The argument for the motion assumes that **social** education is more important; that the best way to get on in life is to get on with other people. The argument against the motion assumes that the **academic** side of education is more important; that the best way to get on in life is to get good grades. So there you have the clash: **social vs academic**.

If you're debating this motion, you need to keep coming back to that point of clash, **social vs academic**, ensuring that everything you say builds up your side of the clash and exposes the flaws on the other side.

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