

skills, or will turn to crime. It is actually more likely that students will be more motivated, as lessons will be more interesting and stimulating once they no longer have to focus on boring, repetitive drilling for exams ...'

To sum up:

- If you're the opposition, don't exaggerate the harms that the action proposed by the motion will bring.
- Focus on likely harms which are easier to prove.
- If your opponent exaggerates harms, point out how unlikely they are and then return to the benefits of your proposed action.

13 False dichotomy

The motion is 'This house would make it compulsory for 50% of places on science courses at university to be offered to women.' The speaker for the proposition says:

'Either you support this motion, or you are saying that women are incapable of studying science.'

She is polarising. That is, she is trying to divide the argument into two extreme positions: on the one hand, heroic trailblazers like her, who will liberate women from their shackles and enable them to achieve dazzling new scientific discoveries, on the other, nasty misogynists who think that women should not be educated but should stay at home cooking, cleaning and looking after the children so that their husbands have more time to find a cure for cancer. In doing this, she is setting up a **false dichotomy**. A **dichotomy** is the division of a case into two mutually incompatible parts, with no possibility of compromise: either you're one thing, or you're the other - there's no middle ground.

It is very rare that a debate motion is as absolute as this. You will usually put yourself in a much stronger position if you concede that there is some common ground between you and your opponent. So, with this motion, better to say:

'The opposition says that the current system is fair and equal, and puts no barriers in the way of women scientists. We disagree, because ...'

**Heroic
trailblazers
versus
nasty
misogynists**

Here you are conceding that the opposition do share your intentions of encouraging women to study science; they're just going about it the wrong way. This makes you look much more reasonable, and makes your criticism of their plan for achieving the goal you share much more plausible.

If your opponent uses **false dichotomy**, don't get angry at the way in which you have implicitly been pushed to an extreme position. Instead, gently but firmly move the focus of the debate back to the middle ground, and show how you are on the right side of that middle ground:

'We do not think that women should not study science. We think women should be encouraged to study science, and that women scientists should be respected and celebrated. Our concern is that if women are seen to have only achieved their place on a course to fulfil a quota, then they will not inspire this respect in the same way as if they had achieved the place by their own merits ...'

To sum up:

- Don't divide the case into irreconcilable extremes. Very few cases divide in this way.
- Instead, aim for the middle ground and find the point of clash there.
- If your opponent uses false dichotomy, rebut the false division, and gently but firmly steer the debate back to the middle ground.

**Aim
for the
middle
ground**

Why is this chapter useful for life?

This skill of analysing arguments is (once again) a very useful skill for life, as you are constantly, every day, being presented with arguments, reasons why you should believe something or why you should do something. Some of these arguments are very good; some are very bad; some are downright dishonest. Once you are aware of these fallacies, you are much less likely to be fooled.