

Just as in the legal system, the key purpose of cross-examination is to undermine the credibility of the opposing side. The means for undermining credibility include the following:

- Exposing contradictions
- Questioning sources of support
- Showing that evidence fails to support claims
- Demonstrating unfamiliarity with relevant facts
- Illustrating an opponent's inability to clarify a position

Contradictory positions commonly occur in policy debate because of the sheer number of arguments that must be answered. Spotting contradictions simply requires careful listening skills and keen intelligence. There are, however, some natural places to look for contradictions. One such place is the intersection between topicality answers and answers to disadvantages. To demonstrate topicality, an affirmative team often has to characterize its plan as making a big change (“substantial” or “significant”), yet to avoid disadvantage links, the affirmative claims that its plan hardly makes any change at all. You can find an example of this type of potential contradiction in Appendix A, “Policy Debate in Final Round.” To defeat the topicality argument, the affirmative team says that it will more than double the number of persons serving in AmeriCorps. However, to avoid the spending disadvantage, the affirmative argues that the level of federal spending would barely change.

Affirmative debaters can often find contradictions between negative inherency arguments and disadvantages. Many poorly designed inherency arguments claim that the present system is already doing most of what the affirmative team proposes to do, yet disadvantages claim that if we were ever to do the affirmative proposal, the world as we know it would come to an end. Many inherency arguments undercut the uniqueness of disadvantages.

Some negative disadvantages are especially likely to contradict other arguments. Consider the growth bad disadvantage: this disadvantage claims that increased economic growth will cause environmental devastation, outweighing the temporary advantages of a stronger economy. What would happen if, in the same round, the negative team presented a spending disadvantage with the claim that increasing the federal deficit would cause economic recession or depression? This disadvantage is premised on the assumption that economic growth is a good thing.

Another potential purpose of cross-examination is undermining the source credibility of the other team's evidence. In a typical policy debate, both teams read evidence supporting their positions on nearly every argument. How is a judge to decide which evidence is the more persuasive? Cross-examination can provide assistance to the judge in this regard. Suppose you have read supporting evidence from a professor of