

government at Harvard University and your opponent has presented opposing evidence described only as “Smith in 2008.” You have looked at your opponent’s argument brief and, therefore, you know that Jim Smith is the creator of an Internet blog. Cross-examination offers a prime opportunity to weaken the credibility of your opponent’s position.

Cross-examination can also be used to highlight the gap between an opponent’s argumentative claims and the supporting evidence. Unfortunately, debaters seem to have a natural tendency to over-claim their evidence. The argument label for the disadvantage impact might say, “The next terrorist attack will trigger an all-out nuclear war,” but the supporting evidence just says that terrorists are trying to gain access to nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, debaters and judges often just write the argument labels on their flowsheets. Cross-examination offers an opportunity to expose this difference between an opponent’s claim and the evidence used to support the claim.

Another way to undermine the credibility of an opponent in cross-examination is by demonstrating unfamiliarity with relevant facts. Suppose that the negative team has presented a spending disadvantage with the claim that any additional federal spending will cause a collapse of confidence in financial markets, plunging the world into recession or depression. The negative brink evidence is from five months ago. Because you keep up with the news, you have evidence that just last week the president signed a multi-billion-dollar supplemental spending bill for disaster relief. You would set up this cross-examination sequence by asking your opponent whether he is aware of the recent supplemental spending bill. Then you would ask about the date of the brink evidence in the disadvantage. The question sequence would culminate with a leading question: “So are you willing to agree, then, that the disadvantage is nonunique?”

A final way to undermine the credibility of an opposing argument is by demonstrating the opponent’s inability to clarify her position. Sometimes debaters simply read briefs that have been handed to them, even though they do not themselves understand the argument they are making. With experience, you will be able to recognize these situations. Suppose your opponent has just read a summer institute brief on the biopower kritik from the introduction to Michel Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. One of the key quotations reads as follows: “We must renounce all those themes whose function is to ensure the infinite continuity of discourse and its secret presence to itself in the interplay of a constantly recurring absence.” A normal human being, having heard this sentence, could only respond with “huh?” Have your opponent slowly read the quotation and then explain in her own words the meaning of the statement.

Although the central purpose of cross-examination is to undermine the credibility of opposing arguments, it has a practical purpose as well—you want to provide