

What Do Debaters Do?

A debate can be thought of as a battle of ideas. It's those ideas that do the fighting, with the debaters acting as generals and directing them on a field of well-crafted language. In developing those ideas, a debater has three basic tools: arguments, cases, and rebuttal. In this section, we'll take a quick look at what these three are and how they work.

ARGUMENTS

When debaters refer to “an argument,” they don't mean a verbal fight between two people. Instead, they define an argument as a complete unit of thought offered in support of their case. An argument demonstrates that the motion is either a good or bad idea depending on whether the speaker is a member of the Affirmative or Negative.

An argument will usually contain three elements: a claim that something is true, evidence in support of that claim, and a method of linking the evidence and the claim, sometimes called a “warrant.”

Let's look at an example of an argument from a debate on using nuclear power. The speaker is a member of the Negative side and is arguing that the time taken in reprocessing nuclear fuels is immoral because it requires future generations to bear the risks and costs of a decision made by this generation:

According to the U.S. Department of Energy, there are “millions of gallons of radioactive waste” as well as “thousands of tons of spent nuclear fuel and material.” Some of this latter material, in particular, will remain dangerous to all known life-forms for millions of years [*evidence*]. It is an acknowledged that in the areas of both politics and law that one generation cannot obligate the next, we routinely hear concern expressed that we should not hand on debt to generations as yet unborn, and we are increasingly aware that our climate is also their climate, our natural resources are theirs, too, the biodiversity that gave to us so richly should also belong to our descendants. Despite this, we are bequeathing a waste product—toxic, deadly, and expensive to contain—to generations that will be born at a date many multiples of years hence than the entire period of human history to date [*warrant*]. It is deeply unjust that those who have not chosen to use this technology should shoulder the bulk of the risk and the cost in clearing it up [*claim*].

The speaker starts with evidence, presents a warrant by drawing analogies with other recognized social activities, and then makes her claim that these principles should also apply in this particular case.