

CHAPTER 4

Rebuttal

Debating is a two-way process that requires speakers not only to develop and refine their own arguments, but also, through rebuttal, to defend them and critique and disprove those of the other side. This interplay of promoting the strengths of one position and identifying the weaknesses of the alternatives gives debating its distinctive character.

The chapter begins by looking at what rebuttal is and what it is used for before examining some common types of rebuttal. Next, it explains when rebuttal should take place during a speech and how best to use it in support of your wider argument. Finally, it offers some practical considerations about the tone and spirit in which you should make rebuttal and discusses how rebuttal can add to the winnowing process of assessing the ideas under discussion.

What Is Rebuttal?

In plain terms, rebuttal is an exercise in which a debater explains why what the audience just heard from her opponent either won't or shouldn't work and why her side of the debate was right all along. Common forms of rebuttal involve indicating that a particular course of action is too expensive, is impractical, is immoral, is illegal, or has simply missed the point altogether. In rebutting her opponent, a debater might point out that her opponent's arguments are based on factually inaccurate evidence, logically inconsistent reasoning, or have reached conclusions that will not solve the problem under discussion. Effective rebuttal draws the audience back to the thread that the speaker's side of the debate wants them to follow. In doing so, it promotes the analysis put forward by her side as the dominant narrative running through the debate.

Ultimately, rebuttal is a defensive activity, although attack is a pretty good form of defense. The aim of rebuttal is to protect your arguments against both the criticisms leveled at