

already exists. The more powerful a point, the sooner you should get to it and the more time you should devote to it.

- *Watch tone and language.* Ad hominem (Latin for “to the man”) refers to attacking speakers rather than their arguments. Don’t do it. The purpose of debate is to discuss ideas, not the people presenting them. All rebuttals should focus on the ideas being put forward by the other side and be addressed either to the audience or to the person chairing the debate.

Remain polite! Debate is not a shouting match, and most rules require the use of parliamentary language—speakers must avoid swearing or using intemperate language. Thus, an argument is not “stupid,” it’s “misunderstood” or “misguided.” A point made by an opposing speaker is not “dumb,” it’s “unlikely” or “poorly conceived.” Never accuse a speaker of outright lying; euphemisms such as “Ms. X seems to be ignoring important data, such as . . .” work just as well as (or better than) “Ms. X is clearly inventing her facts as she goes along.” Everyone understands what’s being said, but no feathers are ruffled.

Polite discourse is integral to the philosophy of debate. Basic to debate is the concept that the other side might well be right—that’s important to remember while rebutting their ideas. Use of appropriate language demonstrates not only that you are aware of that fact but also that you accept it as a reality. Similarly, brash statements about the general “wrongness” of ideas—“nobody believes . . .” or “it’s clearly just wrong to say . . .”—suggest that you don’t have the evidence to support that claim. If you think that something is unlikely, prove it to be wrong.

Conclusion

Effective rebuttal is a vital part of the process of tempering not just the ideas under discussion in the debate but our approach to the world of ideas more generally. Like steel, arguments that have been tempered tend to be stronger and purer at the end of the process than they were at the start. It is quite rare for an argument that we hold to be true to be completely destroyed and utterly rejected; it’s simply not in our nature to say, “I see, my worldview is wrong. Hum ho.” However, the critical skills of argumentation and rebuttal can help us frame ideas for debate and for life that are, at least, logically consistent within themselves.