

- *Theories.* Theories explain facts or predict the results of those facts. Some theories may be very formal, as in the case of scientific theories. For example, scientists consider gravity to be a theory—it is the best available explanation of why objects act as they do but, because it is an explanation rather than a piece of data, it’s called a “theory.”

Other theories are less formal—mothers always love their children, education helps you get a better job, politicians lie. You could find exceptions to any of these statements, but they are all premises that an audience will accept. For our purposes, then, a theory, whether formal or informal, works as evidence if a reasonable audience accepts it as credible.

So, in a debate on capital punishment, the team arguing in favor of the death penalty might put forward the theory that the greater the punishment, the less likely someone is to commit a crime. It’s not a statement of fact but it sounds reasonable, and an audience is likely to accept it as evidence. Like many theories, it may well take some explanation and your opponents will have evidence of their own to challenge it. However, it provides a reasonable starting point for the speaker because the audience is likely to accept it as being believable and, as a result, probably true.

- *Presumptions.* Presumptions are statements that it’s sensible to accept as being true or that are commonly agreed to be true. Presumptions fill a gap between what we demonstrate as being true based on what we can observe and what we believe to be true because we consider it to be right or just. At one level, we can say with a fair degree of certainty that New York will be cold in February. We presume this because it always has been before. But what about the presumption that an uncle will be older than his niece? It’s probably true, but not always. Young grandparents can have second families after grandchildren from the first family have been born. However, generally we presume uncles will be older than their nieces. Then there are presumptions that we deliberately make knowing that they might well be wrong: the presumption of innocence being the most obvious. The fact that someone has been charged with a crime suggests that he is considerably more likely than the average citizen to be guilty, but we presume his innocence.

Presumptions are important because they remove the “But, what if . . .” from the debate. We can presume that democratic nations will still be democratic tomorrow and that dictatorships will still have a dictator tomorrow. Presumptions—essentially that extraordinary circumstances, by their nature, can’t be predicted—can be presented as evidence. So, in a debate on U.S. trade relations you could hear:

Let us presume that the growth of China isn’t going to stop any time soon . . .

or,