

- *Generalizations and Assumptions.* Is the speaker telling you something that has been demonstrated as true or something that is widely believed but has never been proved? At their most grotesque, generalizations descend into simple prejudice, but even apparently aspirational statements—“Everybody wishes to be free” or “Liberty is grounded in respect for the individual”—almost certainly try to disguise the fact that the speaker can’t prove her point. If she’s then drawing a conclusion based on that kind of reasoning, you might want to ask for evidence that is more clearly defined or open to verification.
- *Unfounded Claims and Assertions.* Is the speaker’s claim directly related to (or even remotely connected with) the argument he has just made? To take a common example, is the existence of bad practice in a particular industry an argument for banning the industry’s products? Not really, it’s an excellent argument for banning those practices or regulating that industry more tightly; it may have remarkably little to do with the end product.
- *Rhetorical Questions.* Rhetorical questions (the speaker asks herself a question and then either answers it or invites the audience to draw a particular and unavoidable conclusion) can be a useful way of bringing focus to a debate, but usually they are used to draw the focus away from the fact that the speaker doesn’t have an answer to a different question. Rather than allowing your brain to do what it naturally wants to and follow the tangent of the rhetorical question, impose some discipline on the situation and analyze whether the question has anything to do with the subject of the debate.
- *Contradictions and Disconnects.* Place the statement the speaker is making in the wider context of what he and his team have previously said on the subject. Does the proposed methodology promote its supposed goals or contradict or prevent their attainment? Will the course of action he has put forward actually achieve the goal, however virtuous, that he has set out?

WHY IS THIS BEING SAID?

The overwhelming—and obvious—answer to this section’s title should be, “He’s trying to win the debate.” However, taking this process a little further uncovers a more revealing question: “Why is he saying this rather than something else?”

The answer the speaker would hope to have to that question is: because it is the most accurate and incisive way of making a powerful and persuasive point. If that’s the answer you come to as well, it’s time to start thinking about how you or your teammates can rebut the argument with equal precision. If that’s not the answer, other contenders could be:

- He’s run out of material and is just filling time.