

- He can't prove it and is hoping I don't notice.
- He wants the adjudicator to ignore that this isn't what the debate is about.

If any of the above is the reason for what an opposing speaker is saying, then you're in a much stronger position—but only if you notice that it's happening. If he's foundering and obviously struggling to get to the end of his allotted time, just sit back and let him drown. If he's giving a good appearance of talking about the subject but clearly has no evidence, you might, format permitting, offer a Point of Information that contains a direct question requiring a factual answer. If he can't answer it, his speech will probably unravel.

Of course, a given argument is more likely to be neither the most incisive and forceful point possible nor over-padded, unsubstantiated nonsense but somewhere in between. Most debaters have a fairly clear idea of where their speeches are going and a reasonable amount of evidence to support the claims they make. However, it's almost inevitable that some parts of a speech will be stronger than others. Some arguments may be more relevant to the points of contention than others and some links between the evidence and the claim clearer. The effective listener is aware of this fact and strategically targets those parts of an opponent's speech that are the least well-protected and those of her colleagues that would benefit from more elaboration or explanation. In practice, this means not offering a Point of Information because you haven't said something for two minutes or picking a point for rebuttal just because it was the one being talked about when you were writing that part of your notes. It means thinking like the adjudicator and confirming her concerns about the other side's case in your own remarks or alleviating concerns about a weaker argument made by a teammate.

To understand how active listening might work in practice, let's take two fairly common examples:

- Why is a speaker spending more time on one particular point while barely mentioning another? Almost certainly because he knows a lot about the former but not the latter. Make this weakness a target in your rebuttal.
- Similarly, why is the speaker lurching between points without ever seeming to complete one? Chances are that his thoughts and/or notes are very disorganized, so don't do him a favor and clarify his points in the mind of the adjudicator when you address them. Just pick one weak point and focus on that.

There are as many answers to the question of why a speaker is saying a particular thing as there are situations in which it might be asked, but the key lesson is to resist the temptation to leap in and take advantage of what might seem like a mistake. Think it through a first: What is happening in the speaker's mind? What should your response be in terms of winning the debate?