

What Isn't Being Said?

What the speaker, either by accident or design, isn't saying can be vital in finding the weakness in his case. But determining what isn't being said is one of the hardest skills for the debater to acquire because she must concentrate on two unrelated issues simultaneously. The first of these issues is the point that an opposing speaker is putting forward, the second is whether he should have raised that point in the first place. If a speaker tells you that the debate revolves around a particular point, there is an understandable desire to evaluate what he goes on to say about that point. That's fine, but you also need to be thinking about whether it really is the focal issue of the debate and, if not, what is. The natural tendency is to focus on what is in front of us and look for the strengths and weaknesses of the points that are being made rather than "listening" for the points that aren't being made.

Let's take a simple, and entirely accurate, statement: nuclear power plants produce some of the cheapest energy available. Indeed they do. However, what is unsaid is that the costs of mining, transporting, refining, and then reprocessing nuclear fuel are enormous. It is surprising how many debates on nuclear energy carry on quite happily with nobody making that point. It remains unsaid by both sides because the initial statement, in and of itself, appears to be true and whoever makes the point can rattle off a list of statistics to demonstrate that truth.

In many debates, the point of clash is brushed over in a few seconds before both teams spend their time arguing over the minutiae of the issues raised. The active listener needs to be aware that just because a previous speaker hasn't devoted much time to a particular consideration doesn't make it unimportant—no matter how much he doesn't want to talk about it. The very way in which points are framed can contain assumptions that then dominate the debate. Let's take an example from a debate on the regulation of prostitution. As part of her definition, First Affirmative comments that, "By choosing this particular lifestyle, the women involved leave themselves open to great risks and then pose further risks to society in the form of STDs and the criminality associated with the lifestyle. This debate focuses on the extent to which legalization can mitigate those risks and where the interests of the state should reasonably lie between protecting the interests of the sex worker and those of the wider public." If the idea that this is a "lifestyle" that has been "chosen" is left unchallenged, Negative will almost certainly lose the debate. The point of contention in this debate is who has moral responsibility for the STDs, violence, and associated criminality. If Negative doesn't make clear that they see the men paying for and profiting from the situation as culpable, they'll lose.