

valid points, simply on the basis of the laws of big numbers. Yet, even if everything they have said makes no sense whatsoever, challenging everything they say is a bad idea. It brings you down to their level and makes it look as though you think they have a point. In that situation, pick their very worst points and attack those before setting out your own ideas, which should look dazzling and brilliant by contrast. Arguments that are simply wrong can often be dismissed with a single sentence “The proposition have based much of their case on the idea that the Red Cross should use the threat of preemptive nuclear strikes to compel leaders to feed their people; we feel that killing an entire population with nuclear war is a solution to world hunger that we cannot endorse.”

How should you identify which areas put forward by the other side are productive sources of clash?

- *Select major arguments, not minutiae or trivia.* Shy away from nitpicking and disagree with the other side in bold, declarative terms. If they have one big, bright, and shiny argument at the heart of their case, go after that. Resist the urge to be conciliatory or considerate. Although these are admirable qualities elsewhere in life, they have no place in a debate.
- *Prioritize those aspects that can be used to demonstrate both that they are wrong and that you are right.* Debate works in two directions, and you are looking for issues where your perspective and theirs directly contradict each other. You’re not looking to attack their arguments and then develop an entirely separate case for your own team. Look for areas where both teams have something significant to say and demonstrate that your ideas are better.
- *Pick areas in which the two sides are clearly and significantly different.* If they want to increase investment in an area by 1% and you think it should be 2%, there’s not a great deal of argument; you’re just squabbling about details. By contrast, if they want to increase expenditure by 1% and you want to cut it by 10%—or abolish it altogether—that’s a point worth pursuing.

In short, look for clear, meaningful, and significant points of disagreement. If proposed courses of action are mutually exclusive, so much the better. This is no place for mealy-mouthed policies that turn out to be the same idea by another name or pale imitations of the other teams proposals packaged in a more attractive sound bite. Debate requires disagreement on both what to do and how to do it. The best debates see two distinct worldviews clash over how to resolve a significant problem. If you avoid confrontation, if, in effect, you avoid or dilute clash, there’s not much point in being in a debate.