

Different Lines of Clash

You should not treat debate as a point-scoring exercise based on which side has the greater tonnage of data. Clash that is reduced to mere factual disagreement is, ultimately, unsatisfying. Instead, both sides are presenting different perspectives with different priorities. Let's take one of the subjects from the exercises in the last chapter: medical experimentation on animals. Neither side in that scenario is "wrong" in a factual sense; they simply have mutually exclusive interests. The researchers' objective is to cure disease, the antivivisectionists' goal is to prevent suffering; both admirable aims. The problem is that you can't have both within the confines of this debate. Your job is to make one of those positions more reasonable—more attractive—than the other. In doing so you should persuade the adjudicator that an ordinary, reasonable person should order their priorities accordingly.

Just as your team will set out a series of arguments to give breadth to your case, so your clash should engage with the other side in more than one area. It may be tempting to largely focus on the positive aspects of a case, engage in a little direct rebuttal, and hope that the adjudicator sees things your way, but it is far more effective to simply take up a position on the same ground as the other side and stake your claim to every inch of it. By doing this, you make clear in your speech that what you are saying and what they have to offer are not occasionally overlapping discussions of the same general area of policy or thought but are mutually exclusive, diametrically opposed interpretations of the same issue. In short, they are different answers to the same question, not differing answers to similar questions.

One last point on diversity of themes. It may seem like a good idea to present several ideas that are really the same idea but wrapped up slightly differently. For example, "X policy will reduce unemployment, increase revenues from payroll taxes and allow people to earn a salary they can then spend" is just saying the same thing three different ways. They are three excellent reasons for increasing employment, but they are all still reasons for increasing employment. The danger of trying such a trick is that if the other side can demonstrate that policy X will do absolutely nothing to increase employment, then your side of the debate is left with nothing. By contrast, if you demonstrate that a certain policy will increase employment, enhance the aesthetic feel of communities, and promote positive interaction between neighbors, you are better protected against the ensuing clash in the debate. You can afford to lose the argument in one area and still have a chance of carrying the day.