

Refutation and Rebuttals*

The first 10 chapters of this text have discussed debate as if it were simply a process of making arguments for and against propositions. Now we turn to the process of exchanging arguments in order to seek some resolution to fundamental questions. The direct exchange of arguments is called “refutation” and occurs primarily in speeches called “rebuttals.”

REFUTATION

Exchanging arguments is the essence of debate. Without the clash of arguments, debate would be nothing more than a series of persuasive speeches that might or might not have any relevance to one another. Thus, the most important component to the debate process is refutation, the process of “tearing down,”¹ or attacking and answering, an opponent’s arguments. Refutation is a vital process in debate because a team not only needs to present a strong case, but the team members must also criticize their opponent’s case and defend their own. When debaters contrast one case with another, a judge or audience will be more likely to make a fair decision.

When refuting an argument, the debater needs to offer a counterargument—a claim that rebuts an opponent’s argument while simultaneously supporting the debater’s position. To refute the argument that the U.N. has protected human rights, a debater should go beyond evidence that shows how the U.N. has not protected human rights where that was its mandate. The debater should also offer an alternative position, for example, one that shows how nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) offer a better protection against human rights abuses than does the U.N.²

The process of refutation involves five stages, four of which are always necessary, and a fifth that is only occasionally necessary.³ The process of refutation occurs in the following manner:

1. **Reference**—State and identify the argument so everyone is clear about what is about to be refuted.
2. **Response**—Answer opponent’s argument, particularly by revealing any fallacies, inconsistencies, or problems in the reasoning and evidence.

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