

ANSWER QUESTIONS CAREFULLY

Respondents need to be cautious but not cowardly. They must listen to a question carefully and be alert to its subtle implications so that they can avoid potential traps. They must think carefully before answering and answer questions fully, but they should not offer more information than required. Do not be afraid to take a strong stand. After all, you have entered the debate to argue a specific position—don't back away from it when challenged. Good debaters qualify answers in a way that reinforces their position. This tactic is especially productive when the questioner demands a “yes” or “no” answer; even if you expect the questioner to interrupt a more nuanced answer, try to establish a context for that “yes” or “no” response.

QUALIFY ANSWERS TO LEADING AND UNFAIR QUESTIONS

Respondents may qualify leading questions. The questioner may ask a question with two alternatives: “Do you think it is x? Or is it y?” You can certainly suggest a third answer—as long as you do not seem to be avoiding the question. You can also reject analogies (e.g., by saying, “I don't think that is a fair comparison”) and hypothetical scenarios (e.g., “I can't really say what I'd think if I lived on another planet...”).

Ask for clarification of unclear or poorly phrased questions. Do not, however, obfuscate or plead misunderstanding simply to avoid answering. You must answer all questions. When you are the respondent and refuse to answer a question, listeners assume that you think your position is weak and would be made weaker by answering. Avoid disagreeing for the sake of disagreeing. If, for example, the questioner were to say, “I think we can agree that it is dark at night,” you would be unwise to answer, “Well, I'm not sure about that—it all depends on what you mean by ‘dark.’”

ADMIT LACK OF UNDERSTANDING WHEN APPROPRIATE

Finally, don't be afraid to admit ignorance when appropriate. If the questioner asks if you know how many languages are spoken in India and you don't, do not fake it. Questions can be hostile but so can answers. Strive to give honest answers in a polite and respectful manner.

GENERAL ADVICE FOR THE CROSS-EXAMINATION

Both the questioner and the respondent should keep the following three points in mind.¹²

1. Be willing to commit the entire cross-examination time to a single issue. Strategically speaking, this means that either the questioner or the respondent could devote the entire three minutes to a single argument. This maneuver forces your opponent to be subjected to questioning or answering for the duration of the cross-examination. In so doing, you take command of the cross-examination time and clearly express confidence and knowledge about the particular issue.