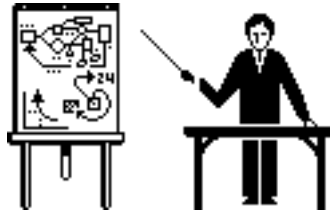


# Rules of Engagement for Classroom Debates

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## Introduction

Debate is an intellectual exercise in which two individuals or teams (one called Affirmative, the other called Negative) argue the merits of a proposition. The major purposes of debate are (1) to provide a focus for research on a controversial topic, (2) to identify and clarify the issues that attend such topics, and (3) to provide insight into effective and ineffective forms of argument.

Debate propositions allege the truth or falsity of a fact, advance a value, or advocate a significant change in policy. A policy statement asserts what should be done, what should be done differently, or what should not be done. Change is a departure from the current state of affairs, i.e., the *status quo*. Some examples of policy propositions are:

Resolved: The federal government should require employers to test all employees for AIDS.

Resolved: The elementary and secondary school year should be increased to twelve months.

Resolved: The University should establish a policy such that no student shall encounter an increase in tuition while continuously enrolled for an academic degree.

Resolved: The State of Wisconsin should establish regulations allowing teachers in the public schools to use corporal punishment.

This document discusses alternatives for organizing debates, guidelines for the conduct of debates, principles of logic underlying cause-effect relations pertinent to debate, and strategies and tactics of refutation.

## Debate Formats

Several formats are used in formal debates. These differ in the number of turns taken by the Affirmative and Negative teams, and the amount of audience participation. Two formats are noted here.

The first, modeled after the Lincoln-Douglas debates and courtroom procedures, employs a single constructive presentation by each side. Teams consist of two members each. Each constructive speech is followed by cross-examination by the opposing team. In this format, there are three rebuttals: Affirmative, Negative, Affirmative. Constructive speeches are allowed 10 minutes; cross-examination and rebuttals, 5 minutes each. A judge determines the formal outcome of the exercise. This format is common in debate contests.

A second format (here called the “meeting-house debate”) allows for audience participation and is well-suited to classroom debates. Two constructive speeches are presented, one for each team in the order Affirmative, then Negative. Following constructive speeches, a moderator (the judge) directs a group discussion during which the

audience may ask questions of the debaters, or offer comments about the cases offered up to this point. The moderator entertains questions so as to alternate between Affirmative and Negative teams. After the discussion, the Negative presents a single rebuttal speech, followed by a single Affirmative rebuttal. Each constructive speech is allowed 15 minutes. Discussion is allotted 15 minutes; rebuttals are allowed 5 minutes each. Other variations include political campaign debates in which news reporters “represent” the larger audience.

Time limits assigned to constructive speeches, rebuttals, cross-examination and discussion are arbitrary. They can be modified, but should retain the feature of allowing more time for constructive speeches than for rebuttals. It is important that allotted times be enforced accurately and uniformly and that the Affirmative team is the last to speak.

## General Guidelines and Terminology

This section presents technical terms (underlined) useful in describing debates and what debaters do. Guidelines are offered, not to curtail creativity, but to provide uniform expectations and to facilitate productive argument.

1. The burden of proving the debate proposition rests with Affirmative. Proof, in debate (as in law) need not be conclusive (i.e., beyond all doubt); it simply must be more probable than not. Affirmative must, as a minimum, offer a prima facie case, which (on the surface) appears to prove the Affirmative position. The prima facie case does not require compelling support or proof. If Negative can show that Affirmative failed to offer at least a prima facie case, then Negative should win.
2. Negative must refute Affirmative. Points of disagreement are called issues. If Negative fails to disagree successfully, and if Affirmative has presented a prima facie case, then Affirmative should win.
3. Both Affirmative and Negative presentations consist of contentions (claims) which should be supported by evidence. Contentions are designated as major and minor. Minor contentions support major contentions. Evidence consists of statements of fact (empirical evidence) or opinion (authoritative evidence) invoked to support contentions. To be persuasive, evidence must be relevant to the proposition, valid, and credible. Argument is the act of linking evidence to contentions through inference or deduction. Arguments should have probative value (proving, or tending to prove) and persuasive value (instilling belief). A debate case is the aggregate of arguments, evidence, and contentions offered by a team. Affirmative should have a case; Negative need not have a case in the same sense as Affirmative.
4. To promote full consideration of issues, and to avoid wasting time on insoluble matters, constitutionality is not a legitimate issue in debate.
5. Most forms of debate assign specific responsibilities to each team. The Affirmative team normally has the responsibility to do the following during the constructive speech.
  - a. Define important terms.
  - b. Identify common objectives.
  - c. Clearly state the contentions of the Affirmative.
  - d. Show the evils of the *status quo* (need argument).
  - e. Show that the causes of these evils are inherent in the *status quo* and, thus, that the *status quo* cannot meet the need posed by common objectives (change is needed).
  - f. Explain the Affirmative plan to meet the need.
  - g. Explain how the Affirmative plan will meet the need.
6. The Negative team has the responsibility to respond to the Affirmative case by doing one or more of the following.
  - a. Dispute definitions of important terms and show the implications of disputed definitions; define additional important terms and concepts.
  - b. Dispute common objectives offered by Affirmative; introduce alternative or supplemental objectives.

- c. Clearly state the contentions of the Negative.
- d. Minimize alleged evils of the *status quo* (need argument), perhaps showing that relatively minor changes in the *status quo* could resolve important needs.
- e. Identify causes for remaining evils not inherent in the *status quo*, or those not addressed by Affirmative's need argument.
- f. Attack the evidence and reasoning of the Affirmative's need argument.
- h. Attack the practicality and workability of the Affirmative Plan (ability of that plan to meet the need).
- g. Identify undesirable features of the Affirmative plan, independent of the ability of the plan to meet the need, showing how these features may worsen the *status quo*, compromise common objectives, or create significant new evils.

The Negative team has the option to offer an alternative to meet the need, in which case Negative essentially concedes the need issue and emphasizes the relative merits of their plan vs. that offered by the Affirmative.

- 7. Constructive speeches by the two teams cover the items noted above. Rebuttal presentations seek to refute the opponent's case (see below) and to reinforce matters raised during constructive presentations. No new issues may be raised during rebuttals. New evidence can be introduced, however.
- 8. Good debate propositions are complex enough to confound simple "right answers." Because propositions are complex, the evidence and arguments offered in debate vary in probative and persuasive value. Debates are won or lost on the balance of proof (evidence and argument) given to support cases.
- 9. Because debate presentations are oral, speakers should make liberal use of initial summaries (forecasts) and terminal summaries. Illustrations, narratives, examples, and quotations can add interest and variety to evidence. So can a lively and engaging speaking style. Language (word choice, grammar, sentence length) should be oral in style. Except for definitions, quotations, and the like, presentations should not be read to the audience. Indeed, the structure of debate requires extemporaneous presentation. Debate emphasizes the importance of logical proof and de-emphasizes the role of emotional appeals and speaker credibility. Therefore, debate requires strong listening skills, the ability to distinguish among arguments in terms of their importance, the ability to analyze and adapt to arguments as they are offered, fairness, composure, and the ability to separate personalities from issues. In particular, members of the Negative team must be adaptable because it is seldom possible to predict all of the contentions of the Affirmative team.

## Causality

Many issues in debate involve claims about the presence or lack of cause-effect relations among events--whether two factors are related such that one causes the other. For example, the Affirmative typically tries to show that the evils of the *status quo* are caused by factors which, if changed through the Affirmative plan, will result in some larger benefit or good. Negative may argue that Affirmative's claims of causality are invalid, or that the Affirmative plan will cause additional problems.

Assertion and proof are, of course, not the same. Thus, evidence is required to justify claims about cause-effect relations. Justification typically takes the form of statements about possible causes (antecedent factors or events) and effects (consequent factors or events). Causality is a complex issue, as much logical as empirical. Even when two factors are causally related, it may be difficult or impossible to determine which is the cause and which is the effect. Part of this difficulty is epistemological, i.e., related to how we gain knowledge about events. Even so, several important generalizations are possible about the nature of causality and about statements which assert cause-effect relationships.

- 1. Causes always precede effects, even if the time interval is very short. This is not the same as saying that if one factor precedes a second, the second was caused by the first (not all antecedent events are causes). Maybe it was, or perhaps both factors were caused by some other, unexamined event.
- 2. Causal relationships are presumably invariant (constant) in time and space. Assuming no significant change in conditions, if a cause produces an effect at one time, or in one place, it will do the same at other times and in other places. This is not the same as saying that a consistent relationship between two factors alone constitutes a cause-effect relationship. As above, both factors could have been caused by some other event.

3. For a statement about a cause-effect relationship to be logically valid, the antecedent must be sufficient to produce the consequent. In other words, no additional factors (other than the antecedent) are needed to produce the consequent. For example, if you strike your thumb with a hammer, you will feel pain.
4. For a statement about a cause-effect relationship to be logically valid, the consequent can occur only if the antecedent occurs. In other words, the antecedent is necessary for the consequent. For example, the engine of an automobile can operate only if it has fuel.
5. A statement about a cause-effect relationship need not be both necessary and sufficient for the statement to be valid. For example, taking poison may be sufficient to cause death, but other factors can produce the same result (poison is not necessary for death). Similarly, although food is necessary to sustain life, other conditions must exist for life to continue (food is not sufficient).
6. Some cause-effect relationships are, in fact, both sufficient and necessary. These relations usually are described with the phrase “if and only if” as in “You will go to jail after committing a crime, if and only if you get caught, are found guilty and sentenced.” The consequent (going to jail) will occur only if the antecedent (committing a crime, getting caught, being found guilty, and being sentenced) occurs. In this example, the antecedent is compound (four separable events). If the antecedent occurs, the consequent must follow (the relationship is necessary); no conditions other than those given in the antecedent are required for the consequent (the relationship is sufficient).
7. Given several candidate causes for a given effect, the simplest is the most likely to be true. This is known as the principle of parsimony.

The British philosopher John Stuart Mill formulated a set of principles or methods by which cause-effect relations can be discovered. These are the methods of agreement, difference, concomitant variations, and stabilization. All embrace the assumption that while a “cause” may consist of several factors which combine in simple or interactive ways, it can be treated as a unitary event. Using the terminology above (“antecedent” for possible cause and “consequent” for effect), Mill’s methods are summarized below. These differ in the certainty with which causes can be known.

#### 1. Method of Agreement

- a. Positive: If each and every time an antecedent is introduced, the consequent occurs, then that antecedent probably is the cause of the consequent.
- b. Negative: If the consequent occurs in the absence of an antecedent, then that antecedent cannot be the cause of the consequent.

#### 2. Method of Difference

- a. Positive: If a single antecedent is the only difference between a situation in which the consequent occurs and another in which it does not, then that antecedent probably is the cause of the consequent.
- b. Negative: If an antecedent is present and the consequent fails to appear then that antecedent cannot be the cause of the consequent.

#### 3. Method of Concomitant Variations

- a. Positive: If variation (increase or decrease) in the amount of an antecedent is associated with variation (direct or inverse) in a consequent, then that antecedent may be the cause of the consequent.
- b. Negative: If variation in the amount of an antecedent fails to produce associated variation in the consequent, then that antecedent is unlikely to be the cause of the consequent.

#### 4. Method of Stabilization

- a. Positive: If constraint of variation in the amount of an antecedent reduces variation in the consequent, then that antecedent may be the cause of the consequent.
- b. Negative: If constraint of variation in the amount of an antecedent fails to reduce variation in the consequent, then that antecedent is unlikely to be the cause of the consequent.

The methods of agreement and difference are, together, the essence of contemporary empirical methods in which the outcomes of experimental conditions (antecedent present) are compared to control conditions (antecedent absent). Of the four approaches noted above, these two are the most powerful. They are commonly used in medical research intended to determine whether a particular drug or other treatment is effective in combating a disease. Such work often employs placebos (e.g., substances or actions known to have no effect, i.e., controls), single-blind methods (the patient is not told whether a drug or a placebo was administered), and double-blind methods (neither the patient nor the physician is told whether the patient received a drug or a placebo).

The methods of concomitant variations and stabilization are the basis of correlation and regression research methods, including much medical research on epidemiology. Additional applications of the methods of concomitant variations and stabilization include studies of the effects of marketing campaigns, voter attitudes about political candidates, economic studies of the effects of (say) raising or lowering interest rates, and other issues for which experimental controls such as placebos and blind experiments are impossible, illegal, unethical or impractical. Although these two methods may reveal cause-effect relations, they are generally less effective than the first two at unambiguously identifying causes.

## Refutation: Strategies

Refutation is the process of attacking the case offered by the opposition. Two goals underpin refutation: (1) to identify flaws in the opponent's argument, and (2) by counter-argument, to show that the contentions, evidence, or arguments of the opponent untrue or unimportant. Strategies of refutation include the following.

Direct attack on evidence: showing that an opponent's evidence is outdated, oversimplified, distorted, misstated, misquoted, exaggerated, inconsistent or otherwise flawed.

Direct attack on argument: showing that an opponent's argument (the use of evidence to support a contention) is irrelevant, insignificant, inconsistent, insufficient, unnecessary, based upon false assumptions, or otherwise flawed.

Reducto ad absurdum: showing that an opponent's argument is based upon a false underlying premise which, if applied in other areas, would be patently absurd, foolish, wrong, or harmful. This is a form of argument by analogy.

Skewer on the horns of a dilemma: showing that an opponent's contention necessarily leads to one or the other of two outcomes, each of which is undesirable. This is a form of argument by analogy.

Admitting the opponent's argument: conceding a contention of the opponent, then going on to show that contention was insignificant, irrelevant, or inconsistent with other arguments offered by that opponent. This is an indirect attack.

Attacks on the opponent's case are based upon analyses of evidence and arguments (reasoning). Some arguments are field-free, i.e., the merit of the argument depends not upon subject matter, but upon formal structure (e.g., syllogistic deductive reasoning and statistical deductive-inferential reasoning). Other arguments appear to be field-specific, i.e., the information content of the issue in part determines which lines of argument are probative and persuasive.

## Refutation: Tactics

Examples of weak or false evidence, and of flawed arguments are given below. Many of these are classical, well recognized by logicians for thousands of years. These examples form the basis for tactics by which strategies of refutation may be pursued. Note that the examples are not mutually consistent or mutually exclusive. Determining whether they apply in a particular situation depends upon the lines of argument followed in a particular debate and upon the analytic skills of the debaters.

Ad hominem argument: “against the man;” pertaining to authoritative evidence; an irrelevant argument asserting that a person’s opinion is false because of the reputation, character, or demographic status of that person. Such an argument does not prove or disprove anything. A classic fallacy.

Ad ignorantiam argument: an irrelevant argument of the form, “A is true because it has not been (or cannot be) proven false.” Another example is, “Your plan can’t work because you haven’t shown that it has worked.” A classic fallacy.

Ad populum argument: a form of irrelevancy that appeals to strong emotion (fear, pride, sympathy, pity) through use of imagery or emotional language. A classic fallacy.

Analogy offered as proof: in many cases, analogies (alone) cannot prove very much because of differences in details between the analogy and its referent. See over-generalization.

Argument of the beard: arguing the lack of difference between two situations by showing that because no sharp line can be drawn, no line can be drawn at all. Argument based on a false assumption. A classic fallacy.

Begging the question: using emotionally loaded words or a biased style of phrasing instead of more valid evidence. See *ad populum* argument.

Biased source: (pertaining to authoritative evidence) a source motivated by clear self-interest, e.g., paid testimonials endorsing commercial products. A form of weak or false evidence.

Black-or-white argument: arbitrarily assuming that sharp distinctions can be drawn between two seeming opposites, when they really constitute differences of degree, e.g., bald vs. not bald; liberal vs. conservative. Argument based on a false assumption.

Circular argument: an irrelevant argument in which a conclusion is used to “prove” itself. For example, “We need new businesses because more businesses would produce more taxes. More taxes will let us develop supportive policies for business. And we need such supportive policies because we need more new businesses.”

Diversionsary argument: a tactical error in which material irrelevancies are intentionally introduced in an effort to obscure major issues. A form of false argument.

Error of the mean: ignoring dispersion; assuming that the arithmetic (or some other) average sufficiently describes and/or predicts reality. Argument based upon a false assumption.

False alternatives: confusing “different” with “opposite;” erroneously assuming that two alternatives are sufficient and that they are mutually exclusive. Argument based on a false assumption.

Gratuitous compromise: falsely assuming that the middle position between two extremes is always the best course of action. Argument based on a false assumption. See error of the mean.

Improperly defined terms: errors arising from inaccurate, imprecise, or incomplete definitions; also an error arising from using multiple meanings for the same words without acknowledging that multiple usage.

Inconsistency: a tactical error in which a debater separately asserts two (or more) contentions which are mutually incompatible.

Man of straw argument: a tactical error in which a false or weak argument is attributed to the opponent, then refuted for the purpose of discrediting the opponent or the opponent’s position. A form of false argument.

Non sequitur: an argument in which the relation between evidence and conclusion is so remote to be irrelevant, even though both may be true. For example, “He would make a good president; he’s very good looking.”

Over-generalization: inappropriately applying a generalization to cases not included in the set that originally formed the basis for the generalization.

Overlooking significant factors: ignoring material facts which, if presented, would change the meaning of the evidence cited. Also referred to as an error of sufficiency. A form of false evidence.

Passive credibility: (pertaining to authoritative evidence) assigning credibility to a source because of membership in an arbitrarily defined demographic category in the absence of qualifications--experience, education, ability, or accomplishment--relevant to the issue; in the obverse, denying credibility because of a lack of such membership in the presence of relevant qualifications. A form of weak or false evidence. See and stereotyping and *ad hominem* argument.

Poisoning the well: discrediting a source before it is used. A combination of *ad hominem* and man of straw arguments.

Populist argument: confusing commonalty or popularity with desirability. Examples include “everybody else is doing it,” “nine out of ten physicians agree . . .,” and the ploys you used as a teenager to get the family car. A contemporary variation reverses the argument by asserting that if a position is popular, it must be undesirable. Argument based on a false assumption.

Post hoc ergo propter hoc reasoning: “after this, therefore, because of this”; confusing causality with time sequence; assuming that because A preceded B, A must have caused B. A common form of the *post hoc* error is to present correlation data as evidence of causality. A classic fallacy of logic.

Quoting out of context: conveying a meaning not specifically intended by the original source, often by omitting conditional statements or qualifying terms. A form of false evidence.

Relativistic argument: given two (or more) categorically unacceptable actions, arguing that one is, in fact, acceptable because it is less onerous than the other. Argument based on a false assumption.

Simple inaccuracy: using evidence that does not reflect facts; often results from use of outdated information (i.e., more than a year old). A form of false evidence.

Stereotyping: confusing part-whole relationships; claiming that individual members of an arbitrarily defined group or category share attributes or characteristics other than those used to formally define the group. For example, “Blacks have better rhythm than whites,” and “Women are better cooks than men.” Also called the “sociologist’s error.” Argument based on a false assumption.

Tautology: a statement which is always true, but which may be irrelevant because it does not depend upon facts, e.g., “It is either Tuesday or some other day of the week”; a logical proposition whose subject and predicate are equivalent, as in “A is true because A is true.” Moralistic arguments often are tautologies. A classic fallacy of logic. See circular argument.

Undistributed middle term: in formal deductive reasoning, failing to distribute or quantify (e.g., “all,” “none”) a statement that appears in the middle expression, but does not appear in the conclusion. For example, in the syllogism, “All horses are mammals; all cows are mammals; therefore, all cows are horses,” the middle term (“mammals”) does not appear in the conclusion and is not quantified. Thus, the syllogism is false for structural reasons. A classic fallacy of logic.

Unqualified source: (pertaining to authoritative evidence) a source whose lack of qualifications--education, experience, ability, or accomplishment--renders the source’s opinions suspect or valueless; also, a source whose inconsistency renders that source’s opinions suspect or valueless. A form of weak or false evidence.

Unsupported assertion: except for *prima facie* evidence, assertions offered without evidence or reasoning. Unsupported assertions frequently are “supported” through repetition (more of the same) restatement (more of the same, but stated another way), or shouting (more of the same, but louder).