As with the ordering of substantive arguments, rebuttal arguments can essentially be ordered on two bases. The simplest approach is to order your groupings (and your individual points within those groupings) on the basis of importance: the more important issues go before the less important ones. Alternatively, you might find some logical sequence that matches your groupings—that is an equally strategic way of ordering your points. Ultimately, you should order and group your points in order to best “take your audience and adjudicator by the hand,” to lead them through the issues of the debate in a clear and logical way.

### Advanced

#### Key Grounds for Rebuttal

Rebuttal, like debating itself, is a part of everyday life. All of us, whether we realize it or not, have experience in finding reasons to oppose other peoples’ arguments and perspectives. In this section, we examine some of the common grounds on which to rebut an argument. This is certainly not an exhaustive list of the reasons that an argument might be flawed, nor the grounds on which it can be rebutted. However, your rebuttal should improve greatly if you bear these grounds in mind while listening carefully to your opponents’ speeches and while preparing your rebuttal.
Logical Irrelevance

Logical irrelevance is one of the simplest problems that a case can suffer: even at its most convincing, your opposition’s case may simply not be proving your opposition’s side of the motion.

For example, suppose the motion is “This House believes that junk food should be banned from school vending machines.” The proposition can argue with all the passion in the world about how junk food is unhealthy, but that in itself does not show why it should be banned from school vending machines—to make that link, the proposition would need to discuss why schools (not merely parents or students) have a responsibility to ensure that students eat healthy food.

Similarly, consider again the motion “This House believes that there is too much money in sports.” As we have already discussed, it does not matter how many arguments or examples your opposition provides to show that there is a lot of money in sports: they also need to show how the amount of money is causing overall harm.

Although somewhat rare, this ground for rebuttal is a debate winner! If you can convince your adjudicator that your opposition’s case does not fulfill the logical requirements of the motion, you will stand an excellent chance of winning the debate (assuming, of course, that your own case does not suffer similar problems!). In some cases of logical irrelevance, concession itself can be an effective rebuttal technique.

For example, in the debate about junk food, an opposition team can argue, “We completely agree that junk food is unhealthy; after all, that’s why it’s called junk food. But that’s not the issue of this debate. The issue of this debate is whether it is right for schools to make choices about healthy eating on behalf of their students. . . .”

Don’t get too excited! It can be very easy to overlook logical irrelevance. Often, debaters concentrate so hard on rebutting what their opposition says that they forget to think about what their opposition is not saying. In the first example earlier, an opposition team might spend
their rebuttal arguing, “Junk food is not that bad!” simply because this is the direct opposite to what the proposition argued.

The message here should be clear: rebuttal is not merely about repeating your opposition’s arguments with the word “not” inserted! You should spend time, both before and during the debate, considering exactly what your opposition is required to prove, and whether in fact they are proving it. This is the best way to identify logical irrelevance.

**Insignificance**

When we considered testing your arguments, we examined insignificance as a potential weakness of an argument: although valid, an argument or example may not represent the general norm that you are arguing about. This is a reason for rebuttal. The rebuttal technique that best deals with this situation is *marginalization*.

Marginalization is a common form of rebuttal but, unfortunately, marginalization by distinction is much less common. Too often, debaters dismiss opposing examples or even arguments with responses like, “Our opposition’s example is just one isolated case. We have given you many more examples supporting our side of the motion.” Perhaps the worst possible response is, “That example is just the exception that proves the rule.” The reason that these approaches are so weak is because they lack any explanation as to why a perfectly good example or argument should merely be cast aside.

We need to draw a distinction in order to marginalize an example or argument. But what kind of distinction should we draw? On what basis should we set aside our opposition’s arguments or examples? The only guidance is very general: the distinction must be on a relevant ground in the context of the issue being debated. It is very easy to distinguish examples on irrelevant grounds. Consider a debate about the benefits of nuclear power, where a speaker has used the example of Chernobyl to argue that nuclear power is dangerously unsafe. An opposing speaker could try to distinguish Chernobyl by arguing,
“Chernobyl occurred in the Soviet Union, and we are talking about using nuclear power in the United States.” Although this is a distinction, it is not a relevant difference between Chernobyl and modern American nuclear plants in the context of a debate about the overall safety of nuclear power. The better response is that given earlier—draw a distinction on the very basis of the disasters: the technology and safety measures themselves.

Therefore, marginalization by distinction reduces to three important points:

1. Marginalization is an effective way of rebutting an argument or its example.
2. To marginalize an argument or example, you need to provide a basis on which to distinguish that argument or example from the direct issue being debated.
3. You can distinguish arguments and examples on any ground. However, it is important to choose the most relevant distinction possible in order to make your marginalization effective.

**Factual Inaccuracy**

It is inevitable in the rustle of newsprint, the tangled web of Internet searches, and the dusty recesses of a debater’s memory that, sometimes, your opposition will just get things plain wrong!

The ability to correct your opposition’s factual inaccuracy does not mean that you have found a legitimate ground for rebuttal. For example, suppose that you are debating the issue of terrorism generally, and your opposition refers to “the bombing of the USS Cole on October 12, 2001.” Pointing out that the USS Cole was bombed on October 12, 2000, not 2001, may make you look intelligent, but it is not itself a good rebuttal point. An adjudicator would be entitled to think, “Okay, so they got the date wrong—but the argument itself was solid, and the opposition didn’t touch it.”
Consider, in contrast, that the debate was about the Bush administration and its response to terrorism, and suppose that your opposition argued, “The Bush administration did next to nothing in response to the bombing of the USS Cole on October 12, 2001.” This is the same factual inaccuracy but, in this case, it has very different consequences. In this case, you can argue, “The USS Cole was not bombed on October 12, 2001—it was bombed on October 12, 2000, during the Clinton administration! Therefore, our opposition’s best criticism of the Bush administration in fact doesn’t apply to the Bush administration at all!” This would be a very effective rebuttal point—in fact, it would deservedly destroy the value of the example completely.

The point here should be clear: factual inaccuracies are not automatically grounds for rebuttal. However, they can be grounds for rebuttal if they substantially affect the argument being made.

One final point deserves a mention. Even if a factual inaccuracy does not substantially affect the argument (and hence is not a ground for rebuttal), it can still be used as an effective one-line attack on the credibility of your opposition’s case. For example, in one debate a speaker claimed that, on the eve of the 1991 Gulf War, “Saddam Hussein phoned Bill Clinton and begged for peace.” Whether or not this is true, the speaker clearly meant to say “President George Bush,” not “Bill Clinton.” This factual inaccuracy did not change the essence of the argument, so it could not ground a rebuttal point itself. However, it did make for an effective ethos attack: an opposing speaker responded with, “And, ladies and gentlemen, our opposition would even have us believe that, on the eve of the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein phoned Bill Clinton, the Governor of Arkansas, to beg for peace!” That debater realized that even a trite factual inaccuracy, if used effectively, can devastate a speaker’s overall credibility.

---

5 We discussed “ethos attack” earlier as a way of starting your rebuttal. This is essentially a form of ethos attack, although it does not necessarily need to be used to start your rebuttal—it can simply be added to a rebuttal point.
Unsubstantiated Assertions

We learned in Chapter One that it is vital to substantiate your arguments, either with examples, statistics, or some other accepted form of substantiation. If you fail to substantiate an argument or any other proposition, you are left with a mere assertion—a bald statement without any effective substantiation. This is a ground for rebuttal.

Pointing out that your opposition has merely asserted something, without substantiation, is a good start. However, rebuttal is about opposing your opposition’s case, not merely criticizing or adjudicating it. Therefore, you need to show why your opposition’s assertion is false, rather than merely unsubstantiated. For example, consider that you are debating the merits of censorship, and suppose that your opposition (without further substantiation) says, “The government has an obligation to censor violence in the media, because media violence causes significant harm to people, particularly to young people.” You could start by pointing out, “Our opposition has merely asserted that media violence causes harm to people, particularly children. However, they have not given us any supporting proof of this!” This is a valid criticism, but not one that impacts on the issue. To rebut the point effectively, you would need to oppose the assertion itself. For example, you could continue, “The Guardian Weekly claims that, over the past 70 years, over 10,000 studies have been done on this issue in the United States alone, yet none has convincingly found a clear causal link between media violence and violent actions. As for young people—in 1982, Milavsky, Stipp, Kessler and Rubens studied the lifestyle and behavioral patterns of 2,400 primary school students and 800 adolescents. They found that there was ‘no significant association’ between television violence and behavioral patterns.”

Whether the argument is actually correct or not, this would be an effective rebuttal response. You would have rightly criticized your opposition for not substantiating its argument, but carefully avoided
falling into the same trap yourself—by providing convincing evidence to the contrary.

**Underlying Assumptions**

Whether we realize it or not, every opinion we hold—as well as every case and argument that we as debaters present—rests on numerous underlying and often unexpressed assumptions. Why do events like the Tiananmen Square massacre or the killings in Kosovo shock us? Because, as a general rule, we believe that killing our fellow human beings is wrong. Why were allegations of voting irregularities in the 2000 U.S. presidential election so emotive? Because, as a general rule, we believe that democracy is a good thing, and that it is important to respect the principles of a fair election.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with resting opinions, cases, or arguments on underlying assumptions. Similarly, there is no automatic need to identify these assumptions, nor to justify them. Earlier, we examined the strategic weakness of spending significant time justifying propositions that may not be controversial in your debate (for example, the proposition that “human rights are good”). However, although they are not inherently wrong, these underlying assumptions can become a ground for rebuttal if a rebuttal speaker makes them such.

This is an important point. Many speakers proudly identify the assumptions underlying their opponents’ arguments, but do not conclusively adopt any stance on those assumptions. For example, it is not unusual to hear a rebuttal speaker declare, “Our opposition has assumed that democracy is a good thing! However, it may not be. . . .” This is a very weak approach—unless you are going to argue that democracy is not always good, you cannot complain that your opposition has assumed it to be good!

The key to this ground for rebuttal, therefore, is a strategic choice: whether or not your team wants to challenge the assumptions that underlie your opposition’s case. In some cases, it will be eminently
strategic to challenge those assumptions. For example, we have already considered the example of the opposition team that successfully challenged a proposition team’s assumption that performance-enhancing drugs in sports are necessarily a bad thing. In other cases, challenging those assumptions would be a very weak approach. For example, a debate about the NATO intervention in Kosovo can be a straightforward debate on a simple (although not easy) issue. There is no strategic need to challenge the assumption that human rights are good—even if done well, this would make the debate very abstract, philosophical, and complex. A team that tried it would probably suffer as a result.

A final reminder about challenging underlying assumptions: when we discussed playing hardball, we discussed a simple mantra: Be fundamentally controversial, or not controversial at all! If you are going to make a particularly controversial challenge to an assumption underlying your opposition’s case, you need to incorporate it as a fundamental part of your entire case approach.

What if you find yourself on the receiving end of such a challenge? What is the best way to deal with an attack on the key assumptions that underpin your entire case? The answer is simple: you need to return to the core values that are being challenged and explain very carefully just why you support them. For example, if your opposition is challenging your assumption that democracy is good, don’t scoff incredulously—go back and explain precisely how democracy is so good, and why we should support it. In many respects, the strategy of challenging underlying assumptions is useful as an effective surprise tactic. However, it need not be—any team can respond to such a challenge by carefully justifying any assumptions under attack.

Causation

Many debates and arguments involve the issue of whether one thing causes another—that is, whether there is causation. We have already
considered one example: the issue of whether media violence causes violence in society.

Arguments about causation tend to have a typical pattern. There will usually be some evidence that two trends move together (for example, it might be claimed that violent people are more likely to watch violent media). This is called correlation. One team (your opposition, say) will claim that one trend (for example, the trend to watch violent media) causes the other trend (for example, the trend to be a violent person). This is called causation—so the issue essentially is whether there is causation and correlation, or merely correlation.

It is easy to overlook an important issue of causation—essentially, to listen to your opposition’s argument and think, “Well, those trends move together, so it makes sense that one causes the other.” However, this is often not the case, and challenging an assertion of causation can be a useful rebuttal strategy.

Simply identifying an issue of causation is not particularly effective. The strongest way of expressing this in a rebuttal point is to provide and support some other explanation for why the trends move together. For example, your opposition may argue, “Violent media causes people to be violent. We know this because of the large number of violent crimes that are committed by people who had been watching violent movies and playing violent video games.” You could respond to this by arguing, “It is true that many violent people watch violent media. However, many nonviolent people also watch violent media as a form of entertainment, but suffer no harmful effects. The more logical conclusion is that there are many other causes for violence—violent people watch violent media because they are violent.”

Contradictions

Contradictions are obviously grounds for rebuttal, and we have considered them earlier—when we examined the importance of testing your
arguments. Let’s consider three important points about effectively rebutting contradictions.

First, many contradictions will be clear and explicit. For example, we have already considered a situation where one speaker concedes a point, but another speaker on the same team tries to oppose the same point. This is a clear contradiction, and you should refer to it as such.

Second, many contradictions are indirect or implicit. For example, we have examined the case of a debate about AIDS drugs, where one speaker argued that the drugs were as bad as generics, while another speaker on the same team argued that they were worse than generics. This form of contradiction is clearly not as damaging as a direct or explicit contradiction—in this case, unlike in the earlier example, one argument does not completely destroy the other. However, this is an inconsistency nonetheless, and it is worth pointing out. At the least, it will damage the credibility of your opposition’s case (for example, “Our opposition could not even decide among themselves how bad these drugs are supposed to be!”).

Third, it is often not enough merely to point a contradiction out. It is often necessary to state clearly your team’s stance on the issue. For example, in the AIDS drugs example, you could explain, “Of course, our team disagrees with both of those inconsistent assertions—we have already shown you that AIDS drugs can be very effective in suppressing a patient’s symptoms.” Sometimes, you need to agree with one of your opposition speakers. For example, in the case of the clear contradiction earlier, you could respond, “The opposition’s first speaker said that this argument was irrelevant. However, our opposition’s second speaker rebutted this argument at length, and called it an important issue of the debate. Although we disagree with her rebuttal, we agree with her concession that this is indeed an important and relevant issue.”
Misrepresentation

Misrepresentation is an easy form of rebuttal—simply reduce or contort your opposition’s arguments until they are unrecognizable and feeble, then treat them as though they are self-evidently wrong. There is only one problem with this approach: it is extraordinarily weak!

The aim of rebuttal is to attack your opposition’s arguments, meaning your opposition’s actual arguments. If you twist or misrepresent your opposition’s arguments, you will find yourself refuting the wrong argument—and your rebuttal will be rendered almost completely meaningless if your adjudicator realizes the fact or your opposition points it out.

Most debaters recognize and avoid blatant misrepresentation. However, it is equally important to avoid even subtle misrepresentation—for example, by suggesting that your opposition was implying something that they were not. As a rule of thumb, your opposition should not listen to your rebuttal and say, “We definitely didn’t say that!”—this would indicate blatant misrepresentation on your part. However, you should not even give your opposition reason to say, “That’s not what we meant when we said that!”—this would indicate subtle misrepresentation, but it would still be wrong. Ideally, your opposition should think, “That’s exactly our argument—and we didn’t spot all these problems with it!”

At the lower levels of debating, misrepresentation is often regarded as unsporting. Teams are likely to be offended to hear their arguments misrepresented, and speakers are taught not to misrepresent because “that’s not what debating is all about.” This approach is not wrong. However, at the higher levels of debating, misrepresentation is usually considered a significant technical and strategic flaw—teams often don’t mind being misrepresented, because they can be confident that their opposition’s rebuttal is much weaker as a result.

The word on misrepresentation, therefore, is simple: don’t! This means that you should not deliberately misrepresent your opposition,
but it also means that you must be careful not to accidentally do so. Often, misrepresentation is the result of lazy listening as much as it is a symptom of some nefarious plan. Either way, it will not help a team that does it!

**Cumulative Rebuttal**

So far, we have considered individual grounds for rebuttal in isolation. We also have some understanding that those grounds fit into the “why it’s wrong” section of a simple rebuttal structure. However, we have not considered the use of more than one ground for rebuttal—that is, what if your opposition’s arguments are wrong for a number of reasons?

This is not a problem—in fact, from your perspective, it’s a very good thing! The simplest approach is to move through the various reasons one at a time. There is no need to outline the various reasons—it is enough to move through and explain (for example) that your opposition’s argument depends on a factual inaccuracy, is contradictory, and rests on an assumption that you are willing to challenge.

This approach works well if you have a number of separate and independent grounds on which to rebut your opposition’s case. However, often your grounds for rebuttal are not independent—they stand behind each other, in a *retreating line of defense*. Earlier, we discussed the definitional “even if.” The approach we are now considering is essentially a general argumentative “even if”—you can provide a number of responses to an opposition argument, each becoming relevant only if the previous response fails. To return to the military analogy, you present a second line of rebuttal in case your front line fails; perhaps a third line in case your second line fails, and perhaps further still.

Let’s consider this with a tangible example. Suppose that the debate is about whether the war on Iraq was justified, and the proposition team argues that, from the perspective of the United States and her allies, Iraq posed a threat to the peace and stability of the world—
essentially, because there was a real risk that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. Whether this argument is correct or not, you could effectively rebut it with the following retreating line of defense. This diagram shows only the essence of each response—naturally, each assertion would need to be substantiated with some explanation and substantiation.

| Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction, and posed no tangible threat to any other nation. Moreover, significant evidence showed this at the time that the decision was made to invade . . . |
|---|---|
| **However, even if** we accept that Iraq appeared to have such weapons, or may have been pursuing such weapons . . . |
| **Attacking Iraq was unprincipled and inconsistent given the global response to weapons of mass destruction programs in North Korea, Pakistan, India, and Israel . . .** |
| **However, even if** we take a purely pragmatic approach . . . |
| The war has succeeded only in destabilizing Iraq, providing increased opportunities for Al-Qaeda, and inflaming radical sentiments around the world, and this should have been evident beforehand. |
Conclusion

Rebuttal is undoubtedly one of the most exciting parts of debating, both for the audience and for the debaters themselves. Unfortunately, for many debaters, rebuttal appears quite daunting, because it involves limited preparation. In this chapter, we have covered a number of techniques to make rebuttal clearer and simpler. We have also recognized that rebuttal is a vital part of good debating. Most importantly, we saw that rebuttal can be quite straightforward—ultimately, there are two cases in the debate, and you need to show why yours is right and theirs is wrong!

It is rebuttal that distinguishes debating from ordinary public speaking, by giving participants a chance to openly criticize their opponents’ arguments. As a debater, you should grab this opportunity with both hands. Not only will your debating improve—it will be a lot more fun!