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About the Product

This concise text is designed for the instructor who wants to maximize student participation in actual debate situations. No other book will have student debaters on their feet as quickly.

This book is the only text needed to teach introductory debate.

The textbook leads the student through all the basics of debate — format, analysis, evidence, reasoning, refutation, strategy and cross exam.

Special Features

The text is written in lay terms by two experienced debate coaches and has been used successfully by hundreds of students and coaches.

The text is published in an easy-to-read format and its length (161 pages) makes even the reluctant student feel he/she can master this complex activity.

The Scholastic Debater

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Alistair Press
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CHAPTER

Refutation and Strategy

Refutation is the process of building up your own case and tearing down that of the opponent. In reality this is a singular process since the accomplishment of one of these tasks automatically achieves the other. The process of refutation is one of the most difficult debate skills to learn, involving as it does critical listening, rapid thinking, and fluent communication. Only diligent practice will create an accomplished rebuttalist.

Flowing

The first step in good refutation is an accurate and detailed knowledge of what the opposition has said; this, in turn, is composed of two other skills– careful listening and detailed recording. You need to develop the ability to listen carefully and critically, noting the strengths and weaknesses of opposing arguments as they are presented. It is impossible to remember, especially in a complex debate, all that has transpired; therefore, you must develop the ability to flow the round. To flow is to record in outline form what each speaker has said.

The flow is kept, logically enough, on a flowsheet, usually a legal pad turned sideways or a medium-sized art pad. The first affirmative speech, in outline form but with as much detail as possible, is then recorded down the left-hand margin. Opposite each of the contentions and issues is then recorded what the first negative has said against it; if nothing is said against a particular argument, the space next to it is left blank. This procedure is continued throughout the debate. Naturally, you will prepare your own column on the flowsheet before getting up to speak. It has become common for debaters to use colored pens (red and blue, for instance) to designate which column represents which side.

Several techniques may be helpful in learning to flow. You should not try to crowd everything on one sheet of paper. If it fits

there, fine; if it does not, then as many sheets as necessary should be used. Since the first negative and the second affirmative will often have more to say on specific points than the first affirmative, it is a good idea to leave plenty of space between contentions of the original affirmative case. This will prevent overcrowding and allow one to flow arguments opposite those which they are intended to refute. The plan is usually flowed separately, either on the back of the sheet containing the case or on a different sheet of paper. The plan objections and their answers and extensions may then be flowed next to the plan.

When recording what is being said, every effort should be made to get down as much detail as possible. At a very minimum the organizational pattern should be recorded, the major headings and their subordinate arguments listed, and evidence noted. As you become more skilled, more detail should appear. Instead of just indicating evidence, try to get down who said it, what they said, and the date on which it was said. All of these will be useful in refutation techniques discussed below. The use of symbols and a personal version of shorthand will speed up the process. Usually only you and your partner will need to read the flow; as long as you can do so, it matters little if the sheet is illegible to others. A few examples of such symbols are:

= and its opposite =

> for greater than, or

< for less than

↑ for increasing, or

↓ for decreasing.

Some symbols and abbreviations will come from the logic of the topic itself as certain issues, ideas, or words become common during the year. The more you get down accurately, the better job you can do in refutation.

Refutation Techniques

The process of refutation itself almost always involves one or more of these three activities: countering the opposition's evidence, destroying the link between the evidence and the argument, and tearing apart the reasoning used.

Dealing with the opposition's evidence may take either of two forms: discovering something faulty with the evidence itself or countering it with other evidence. Both, of course, may be em-

ployed on one argument. First, the opposing evidence should be tested to discover if it has any serious flaws; refer here to the tests for evidence discussed in Chapter Five. If the opposition's proof is deficient, it may be exposed for what it is and any impact it may have had quickly dies. In such a case it may not be necessary to bring up any evidence against that presented. In many instances, however, the other team's evidence will not have any particular problems; it will conform to generally accepted standards for proof. In such a case it must be countered with opposing evidence; there are four ways in which this may be done.

First, you may match the opposition citation for citation, presenting a piece of evidence for each piece they bring up. This is a legitimate method of refutation when the opposition needs merely to be neutralized since they have the greater burden of proof; thus, it may be employed by the negative in responding to a requirement of an affirmative case, such as significance or by the affirmative when replying to a plan objection. In either of these cases neutralization, which equals a tie, is sufficient to win the point. It is an inadequate response in those instances when you must establish superiority of position, such as inherency on the affirmative case.

Secondly, you may overwhelm the opposition with the amount of your evidence, presenting several citations to each one of theirs. This is recommended as a reasonable method if you have the greater burden on the particular issue or if the opponent's one source is particularly strong. Here you are saying, in essence, that although the opposition has one person who contends yes, our team has half a dozen who say no; the preponderance of evidence is on our side.

Thirdly, you may present a superior source. The affirmative cites a Congressman who gives his opinion in favor of their position; you, in return, cite an expert who has thirty years experience in the field and who is the author of ten books on the subject. Clearly, you have the more competent authority; and when the evidence on the point is weighed, the balance should come down on your side. In making use of this method, you should be sure to point out explicitly the superiority of your authority.

Finally, you may counter evidence by bringing up a more recent source, or updating. This technique is frequently used in debates and not always legitimately, for greater recency does not always mean a better source; it all depends on the issue being contested. If an historical fact is in doubt, for example the date of a certain event of the last century, it usually makes little difference whether an historian from 1900 is cited or one from 1975; the facts probably will not have changed. On the other hand, if the issue being contested concerns the current status of a Supreme Court ruling, recency may be all important. Therefore, you must make sure when using this technique or when it is used by the opposition, that recency is a legitimate response. As with superior source, you should indicate when presenting the material how recency places

the greater strength with your side of the argument.

The second major means of refutation after examination of evidence is exploration of the link between the opposition's evidence and their argument. Here one simple question is the basis of analysis: Does the evidence say what the opposition claims it says? In many instances teams will claim a strong position on an issue basic to their case, read a piece of evidence, and then conclude that they have substantiated their point. Careful examination of the evidence, however, reveals that it comes nowhere close to proving what has been claimed in the argument. You should listen carefully to the evidence, especially when what is claimed seems too good to be true; it often is. A debater not certain what the evidence said should ask to see the card. You should not let an opponent get away with basing analysis on evidence which does not really support the position taken.

Finally, refutation may be directed at the opposition's reasoning. All too often, even if the evidence is valid and it is linked to the argument, the reasoning process itself is faulty. A claimed causal link may be only correlational; an analogy may lack similarity in the vital aspects; a generalization may be based on an inadequate sample; and so forth. Essential to successful analysis of the opposition's reasoning is familiarity with the tests for the important forms of reasoning.

Organizing Refutation

In conducting refutation you need to be certain the judge understands four items: Where you are in the organizational pattern; what the specific argument being refuted is; what the exact nature of the refutation is; and how this response defeats the original position. A debater who omits any of these steps risks losing the effect of the refutation.

Usually your position on the flow will be clear, since most debaters go straight down the arguments. Nevertheless, it is usually a good idea to indicate by number and letter where you are, such as "II B 2." Secondly, a brief label should be given to the argument being contested; if possible, this should be the same as that originally presented by whomever introduced the point into the debate, since this is more than likely what the judge has written down. An example might be "states lack the authority." Thirdly, the point being made should be announced and then evidenced. Many debaters make the mistake of announcing what argument is being refuted and then immediately launching into their evidence. This misses the crucial step of indicating exactly what point they are offering in refutation. You should pre-sent the heading first and then read the card, as "no, the states do have statutory authority, as the Harvard Law Review indicates, etc." This gives the

judge something to write down on the flow and then supports the position.

Finally, in a step most debaters neglect, the argument should be clinched by showing how this position defeats the opponent. For example, “we have an evidenced update of the affirmative position” indicates exactly what has been done. Only when you have mastered this four step process can you be reasonably sure that your refutation is effective.

The advancing of one’s own position, after it has been presented and then attacked is called extending the argument. An extension is the moving forward of an original argument in such a way that it takes into account or neutralizes the opposition’s response. An extension is not a shift in position; such a shift is almost universally held to be an illegitimate debate tactic. Rather, it clarifies the full implications of the original stance and explains with logic and evidence how the opposition’s intervening remarks fail to undermine the truth of this position. Learning to extend effectively is another of the difficult facets of debate and is best discovered by listening to those who are skilled in its use and then by practicing until you gain the ability for yourself.

Refutation Strategies

As with many competitive activities, debate often becomes a contest of strategies in which outwitting opponents becomes as important as outplaying them. Knowledge of some of the basic strategies is important to debaters not only in the offensive sense (using them), but from a defensive posture (protecting against them) as well. There is not space here to present all the strategies possible in a debate, but a few of the major ones will be discussed.

There are two important points to remember when considering the use of these or any other strategies. First, they should not be used just for the sake of using them; there must be a definite purpose in their employment. Debaters who use a technique simply because it sounds clever, rather than because it fits their particular skills, may be working with their own weaknesses and opening themselves to their opponent’s strengths. Secondly, many judges are suspicious of devices which smack of strategy or cleverness, even going so far as to vote against them out of prejudice. Prudent debaters become aware of judges’ biases and are careful when employing such strategies in front of them.

The first, the most elementary, and the most important strategy is actually a form of audience analysis. In keeping with the above paragraph, it is the basis of all decisions, strategic or otherwise. It is this: KNOW YOUR JUDGE. Knowing who the judge is, what case his team employs, what he likes or will permit, and what he will not allow may save numerous difficulties and

assist you in achieving more than might be done by simple skill in the round. A debate does not take place in the verbalizing of the speakers; it certainly does not take place on their flowsheets; and it does not even take place on the judge's flow. If there is a cardinal precept which should be indelibly engraved in the mind of every debater, it is that the debate takes place in the mind of the judge. It does not matter what you think happened in the round, and to some extent it does not matter what the judge has written down. What he or she perceives to have happened, did—at least as far as victory or defeat is concerned.

Just as an effective public speaker analyzes the audience and then adapts the speech to the analysis, so does the wise debater analyze the judge and make use of that analysis. If you know, for example, that a particular judge does not understand the most basic of economic concepts, it would be silly to employ economic arguments in front of that critic; if you are aware that a judge detests the spread, you should slow down; and if it becomes clear during a speech that the judge is thoroughly lost, you should make an effort to clarify. You must adapt, be observant, use feedback, and, insofar as possible, make sure the judge understands your position on the crucial issues in the debate. By knowing the judge and being aware of his likes and dislikes, you can from time to time add a debate to the victory column which otherwise might not have been there; and that, after all, is what the competitive aspect of this activity is all about.

Some squads go so far as to keep a judge file, a series of cards on which are listed the proclivities and quirks of various judges frequently encountered. Before a round in which a particular individual is scheduled to judge, the team can refresh their memories about which techniques are liable to be most successful. The best method of obtaining the necessary information about judges is from previous ballots. All too many teams simply skim over their decisions, accepting any praise and laughing off critical comments before consigning the ballots to the trash. A more fruitful activity is to analyze carefully the reasons for decision and glean from them what a given judge wants. You may disagree violently with what a particular judge expects, but if you hope to win a decision, it is best to present the material that judge desires. The wise debate team, like the good public speaker, adapts to the audience.

This knowledge of judges may be most helpful when an opportunity arises to accept or reject certain critics, such as in an elimination round. If little is known or remembered about the individuals in question, no rational decision can be made on whether to retain them or not.

Just as the judge should be known, so also should the opposing team. During the course of a season, you are likely to encounter the same team several times. By learning early in the season what their strengths and weaknesses are and what type of case or attacks they are likely to use, you will be better prepared to meet them. Some individuals hold that attempting to find out

what type of case another team is running is a highly questionable tactic. Many, however, see nothing immoral in this practice, considering it, as do athletic teams and coaches, good strategy.

Debate is very much a team activity. Although this fact may seem obvious, it often appears that some of the participants forget it during the heat of a round. Not only do colleagues contradict, but they seem not to have listened to each other's speeches and often fail to extend crucial arguments originated by their partner. The best way to avoid such disasters is to confer strategically during the debate. This does not mean talking constantly to your partner; some teams do this to such an extent that they miss what the opponents are saying. Rather, it is careful consultation at crucial points in the round. The most helpful times are before each of the last three rebuttals. The old saying that two heads are better than one is often valid before the first affirmative rebuttal, as both debaters contribute to what will appear in that vital presentation. The second affirmative is especially helpful here, since that person is probably more familiar with the case extensions. Perhaps the most important conference is held before the 2NR when the second negative is briefed by his partner concerning the crucial arguments on the case side of the flow. The last talismans will also benefit from consultation on the meaning of some of the plan objection answers.

In each of these situations the preparation is best handled as follows: the debater about to speak concentrates first on his own area of expertise; then when finished, he so indicates to his partner, who briefs him on the other areas of importance. It is vital that both individuals not try to think, talk, and write at the same time. A rapid, but organized procedure is essential, given the limited time usually available at that point in the debate.

As mentioned in previous chapters, it is a good idea to think in advance concerning the possible arguments which an opponent might raise and then to prepare responses to those arguments. Such prepared arguments are called blocks or briefs; they are arguments written out, complete with evidence, transitions, and headings, so that the speaker may be precise in his wording and may save valuable time. The use of such blocks is a most helpful device.

A couple of warnings should be issued about their use, however. Some judges do not care at all for blocks, believing that "plastic sheets" indicate a lack of thought in the round and an inflexibility which destroys the quick thinking that debate should produce. You should learn which judges in your area hold such views and be sparing in the use of blocks in their rounds.

Secondly, the fears of such judges are sometimes accurate. Debaters often get so involved in reading multiple responses to opposing arguments that they miss the crux of what has been said. Consequently, speakers should not make the mistake of depending so much on their prepared arguments that they fail to think about what the opposition is doing. Blocks are an aid to refutation, not

a substitute for clear thinking in the round.

Finally, comments should be made about the spread, which has become almost a universal in modern debate. Unfortunately, not all debaters who use the device are good at it; they use it only because they think it is chic or because they are told that they must spread in order to win. Both approaches are wrong. Like any other device, it should be used strategically to gain the best effect from it. In addition to being overused, spreading is also misunderstood. Most debaters believe that it is talking as fast as one can. While it is true that a good spread often necessitates rapid speech, the two are not at all the same thing. A spread is the presentation of multiple independent arguments in response to the opposition's points. For example, if the affirmative presents an inherency position, the negative may respond with four separate reasons why the inherency is not true. Each of these is a reason to reject the inherency, and all four must be defeated in order for the affirmative to carry their position. The affirmative might then respond multiply to each of the negative's arguments, presenting three responses to the first, two to the second, etc., by way of a counterspread. Thus, by the last two rebuttals, the entire debate may hinge on one seemingly minor point, say the second affirmative response to the negative's third response to the original inherency position. Such a complex situation has vast potential for disaster and confusion; to prevent both, several techniques are desirable.

First, clear organization is imperative; the smart speaker signposts an argument thus making sure the judge knows what is going on. Secondly, clear articulation is necessary; the best speakers are not those who speak the most rapidly, but those who can be most clearly understood at high speed. It does little good to mushmouth your way through an argument in which only one word in ten is comprehended. Thirdly, variety should be employed in order to emphasize crucial issues. Changes in rate (yes, actually slowing down for a moment), pitch, and volume can be used to tell the judge that something vital is about to be said. Lastly, the judge should be told when an argument is important. However, you should learn not to overuse this technique or, as with the boy who cried "wolf," it will lose its impact. Some debaters call every minor subpoint "crucial" so that when they reach a truly important argument they have nothing left to say.

Finally, you should remember that the spread is only one way to approach a debate. It does not have to be employed in order to win nor does its use automatically guarantee success. If it fits your skills, utilize it. If you lack some needed ability, it is probably better not to attempt the technique than to use it in mediocre fashion.

Again, the effective use of refutation and strategy is among the most difficult of debate skills to master, involving as it does critical listening; rapid thinking; solid understanding of the rules of evidence and reasoning; correct knowledge of judges and opponents; and fluent communication. Only diligent practice will create

an accomplished rebuttalist.

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