

# *Middle School Public Debate Program*

## *Refutation*

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### ***Introduction to Refutation***

**In debate, there are really only two categories of arguments, separated by their strategic function: *offensive* and *defensive* arguments.**

Offensive arguments are arguments *for your side*, or case, or position. When you argue offensively, you establish affirmative reasons for why your side should win the debate. Debates are won or lost based on the power of offensive arguments. To win debates consistently, you must establish *why you win* early and often.

That said, debates are also won or lost based on defensive arguments. As you might imagine, a defensive argument is an argument that plays defense against the other team's arguments. Defensive arguments show why you should not lose the debate. When the opposition argues that there is no need for the proposition's proposed solution, they are arguing defensively. When the proposition argues that the opposition's arguments do not apply to their case, they are arguing defensively.

The distinctions between offensive and defensive arguments may seem hard to grasp. If you feel that way, you're not alone. In fact, the two kinds of arguments blur into each other quite a bit, but understanding the difference still serves an important functional purpose: *To win a debate, you must show both why you win and why the other team's arguments don't mean that you lose.* That is, you must argue both offensively and defensively to win a debate, particularly in the rebuttal speeches.

Another way to understand the concepts of argument offense and defense is to think of them as arguments of *advancement* and *refutation*. When you advance an argument, you are making an assertion, hopefully (if you're doing it right) with reasoning and some evidence (if it is available). Remember: Arguments are not just assertions. Arguments explain *why* something is so. So an argument of advancement is just what it sounds like: the opening of a debate, where a speaker advances an assertion and reasoning. But debates can't be composed just of arguments of advancement; if they were, they wouldn't be debates, but rather exchanges of unrelated ideas:

**Speaker 1: Bananas are better than apples because they contain more potassium.**

**Speaker 2: Circles are better than squares because their shape is more pleasing to the eye.**

What this "discussion" is missing is what in debate we call *clash*. Both speakers are advancing arguments, but their statements are unrelated to each other. Clash is one of the fundamental principles of good debate; in fact, it is fundamental to any debate. Unless arguments clash,

there is no way to compare and adjudicate them. Debate deals with arguments that are in dispute.

To dispute an argument effectively, you must master the skill of *refutation*. Arguments of refutation answer arguments that are already in play. Refutation is necessary in debates because it promotes direct clash between arguments. You already know how to advance arguments; now, you need to learn how to refute arguments.

There are many ways to answer an argument that has been advanced. Of course, some methods are better than others. The first, and unfortunately most common, way of refuting an argument is simply to provide a counterclaim:

**Speaker 1: Bananas are better than oranges because they contain more potassium.**  
**Speaker 2: Speaker 1 says that bananas are better than oranges, but I disagree. Oranges are better than bananas.**

Speaker 2 has simply provided an assertion to counter the assertion of the first speaker. Who wins this debate? Clearly, Speaker 1 has the edge, since she is the only debater to have actually provided reasoning for her claim (“because they contain more potassium”). Good reasoning always trumps no reasoning at all.

A more advanced method of refutation is to provide reasoning for your counter-assertion:

**Speaker 1: Bananas are better than oranges because they contain more potassium.**  
**Speaker 2: Speaker 1 says that bananas are better than oranges, but I disagree. Oranges are better than bananas because they contain more vitamin C.**

What makes this better than Speaker 2’s previous attempt? Here, she is providing reasoning for her claim: “because they contain more vitamin C.” Imagine that you are asked to judge this debate. How will you decide who wins? You find that Speaker 1 has proven conclusively that bananas contain more potassium than oranges. You also find that Speaker 2 has proven that oranges contain more vitamin C than bananas. Neither debater really has the edge here, do they? Notice that while there is direct clash between the assertion and the counter-assertion, there is no direct clash between the reasoning for each claim. Speaker 2 has not yet succeeded in completely refuting her opponent’s argument.

*Complete refutation is important to win decisively when arguments clash against each other in debates.* In order to refute an argument, you must include what we call a “therefore” component. The “therefore” component of an argument of refutation is where you explain *why* your argument trumps the argument of your opponent. Observe:

**Speaker 1: Bananas are better than oranges because they contain more potassium.**  
**Speaker 2: Speaker 1 says that bananas are better than oranges, but I disagree. Oranges are better than bananas because they contain more vitamin C. Therefore, you should prefer oranges because while many foods in an**

**ordinary diet contain potassium, few contain an appreciable amount of vitamin C. It is more important to eat oranges whenever possible than it is to eat bananas.**

Speaker 2 wins. She has completed the process of refutation by including a “therefore” component in her rejoinder. Notice how this last part of her argument works. She compares her reasoning to Speaker 1’s reasoning to show why her argument is better than her opponent’s. Almost all refutation can follow the basic four-step method demonstrated above. As you practice your refutation skills, consider starting with this model:

**Step 1: “They say....”** It is important to reference the argument you are about to refute so that your audience and judges can easily follow your line of thought. Unlike the bananas/oranges example above, debates contain many different arguments. Unless you directly reference which of these arguments you are dealing with, you risk confusion on the part of your audience and judge, and confusion is seldom a good technique for winning debates. Good note-taking skills, will help you track individual arguments and the progression of their refutation.

One important thing to remember here is that when you refer to your opponent’s argument, you should do so in shorthand. If you were to repeat all of your opponent’s arguments, you wouldn’t have any speech time to advance arguments of your own. So try and rephrase the argument you’re about to refute in just three to seven words to maximize your speech time: “They say that reducing welfare benefits helps the economy, but...;” or “They say Batman is better than Superman, but...”

**Step 2: “But I disagree....”** In this part of your refutation, you state the basics of your counter-argument. This can be, in the case of the banana/orange controversy, simply the opposite of your opponent’s claim. It can also be an attack on the reasoning or evidence offered for your opponent’s claim. The important thing is to state clearly and concisely the counter-argument you want the judge to endorse. You can elaborate on it later. For now, it is important to phrase your argument as concisely as possible. This tactic helps your judge, audience, and opponents to remember it and get it in their notes.

**Step 3: “Because ....”** Having advanced your counter-argument, you need to proceed to offer reasoning. Arguments of refutation need to be complete, just like arguments of advancement. Your reasoning can be independent support for your counter-claim, as in the case above. It can also be a reasoned criticism of the opposition’s argument.

**Step 4: “Therefore....”** Finally, you need to draw a conclusion that compares your refutation to your opponent’s argument and shows why yours effectively defeats theirs. This conclusion is usually done by means of comparison, either of reasons or evidence or both. You need to develop a variety of strategies for argument comparison and evaluation, as this is a critical skill for success in competitive debate. What you need to accomplish here is to show that your argument is better than their argument because....



- **It's better reasoned.** Perhaps their argument makes some kind of error in logic or reasoning, of the kind discussed in the unit on logical fallacies.
- **It's better evidenced.** Maybe your argument makes use of more or better evidence. Perhaps your sources are better qualified than theirs, or your evidence is more recent than theirs.
- **It's empirical.** When we say that an argument is *empirically proven*, we mean that it is demonstrated by past examples. Perhaps your argument relies on empirics, while theirs relies on speculation.
- **It takes theirs into account.** Sometimes your argument may take theirs into account and go a step further: "Even if they're right about the recreational benefits of crossbows, they're still too dangerous for elementary school physical education classes."
- **It has a greater expressed significance.** You can state that your argument has more significance than their argument because (for example) it matters more to any given individual or applies more to a larger number of individuals.
- **It's consistent with experience.** Perhaps your argument is consistent with experience over time, a in different place, or in different circumstances. This technique is particularly effective with audiences: "Hey, this is something we can all relate to, right?"

### Suggested Exercises:

1. Play a game of "I disagree." Generate a series of assertions of various types. Then refute each assertion using the four-step method. Try this exercise with a partner. Have one person make assertions while the other person refutes them. After ten repetitions, switch roles.
2. Using the four-step refutation model, refute each of the following simple claims:
  - The proposition should increase regulation of the mass media.
  - The USA should lift its sanctions against the nation of Cuba.
  - Sunbathing causes cancer.
  - Drug testing violates individual privacy.
  - Environmental protection is more important than economic growth.
  - Nations should open their borders to immigration.
  - Military spending is detrimental to society.
  - You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.

- The debt of the third world should be forgiven.
- Silence means consent.
- Science is more dangerous than religion.
- NATO intervention in Kosovo was misguided.