

How to refute an argument

Step 1: Understand the argument.

In order to refute an argument, you first have to understand it. Otherwise, you're going to look pretty foolish, when the other side stands up and explains how you've totally missed the point. That's why we've been practicing "argument analysis" since the beginning of the semester.

Listen to the argument carefully. Identify the position it's taking. Identify the reasons it offers for that position. Note what sources it's relying on.

Step 2: Find the weak points.

The first thing beginning arguers do when refuting is to focus on the argument's conclusion and argue the opposite. For example, if one side argues that national service will increase patriotism, the other side says that national service will *not* increase patriotism. If one side argues that violent video games cause young people to become violent, the other side argues that violent video games will *not* cause violence.

This is an important and often effective strategy. But I want to encourage you to try something more advanced, and often more effective. In refuting, don't just look at the conclusion. Look beyond the conclusion and examine the *reasons* the other side is giving. See if they really hold up under questioning. For example:

Is the source the other side is relying on *biased*?

Is the correlation the other side is asserting really explained by *another cause*?

Is the analogy the other side is making really *similar*?

Are the statistics the other side is using *misleading*?

Is the evidence the other side is citing really *relevant*?

Attacking the other side's reasons is harder than attacking their conclusion, because you have to listen much, much harder and really understand what the other side is saying. But attacking the other side's reasons is also often more effective.

If all you do is attack their conclusion, then the whole debate just turns into a shoving match. They push against you, you push back. Probably you just get stuck in the middle.

But if you attack their reasons, it's like digging a hole under their argument, or sawing the legs off of their argument. Instead of *pushing* it over, it just *falls down*. Cool!

What kinds of attacks can you make on the other side's evidence? Use all the lists of questions we have been building all semester to locate weaknesses. Chapters 12 - 14 of *Asking the Right Questions* also reviews many useful questions you should be asking.

A final technique for refuting is to *point out a fallacy*. Sometimes, the other side's argument isn't really an argument at all—it looks like an argument, but it's really a *fallacy* (fake argument). Chapter 7 in *Asking the Right Questions* talks about fallacies; here's the ones you need to know:

- ad hominem
- slippery slope
- searching for the perfect solution
- appeal to popularity (ad populum)
- straw person (straw man)
- either-or (false dilemma)
- glittering generality
- red herring

(NOTE: The quiz on Wednesday will specify one of these fallacies and ask you to give an example of it.)

If you're sure that the other side is just making a personal attack (ad hominem) or glittering generality (etc.), then they're not really arguing. And if they're not arguing, you shouldn't waste a lot of time arguing back. But you should point out to that the supposed "argument" really is just a fallacy.

Step 3: Build *arguments* against the argument.

Here's the most important rule:

To refute an argument, you must argue against it. Asking questions is not enough. You must present good reasons why its conclusions or reasons are wrong.

Here's one way to think of this rule: If you ask questions, it's likely that your opponent will answer them. That will make their argument better! But you want to show how it's *bad*. You need to go beyond just asking questions, to present reasons of your own.

For example, if someone says that "going to class will lead to success," you might *question* this argument by asking "how do you know that?" But to *refute* the argument, you need to generate evidence that, in fact, going to class does *not* lead to success. Just asking the question is not enough.

So: If you are attacking the other side's *conclusion*, give reasons why that conclusion is wrong. If you are attacking the other side's *reasons*, give reasons why those reasons are wrong. And if you are saying that the other side committed a *fallacy*, explain why what they said is fallacious.

Step 4: Make your refutation.

As you've repeatedly experienced in this class, it is *very* hard to understand others' arguments. That's why when you argue yourself, you know it's vital to be CLEAR.

Refutations are even harder for audiences to understand. Your audience needs both to understand the argument you're refuting, *and* to understand your problem with it. So it's even more vital to be CLEAR. Here are the basic steps you should take when presenting your refutation:

1. **Name**: Identify the argument you are refuting; otherwise no one will know what you are talking about. But do it briefly, since you don't want to be making your opponents' arguments for her.
2. **Explain**. State in one sentence what your main objection to the argument is.
3. **Support**. Support what you said in #2. Make clear precisely why the argument is weak, or lay out in full form your counterargument. This is where the real work of refutation is done.
4. **Conclude**. Restate your main point, to make sure it sticks in your audience's mind. Tie this refutation back into the refutation of the opponent's whole case.

For example, a good refutation might look like this:

[Name:] The other side said that Dr. Smith's study clearly shows that video games do not lead to violence. [Explain:] But Dr. Smith is biased. [Support:] His research is entirely funded by the video game industry. That's what the 2001 investigation by the Parent's Defense League demonstrates. [Conclude:] So you can see that the other side has no credible evidence linking video games to violence, and they haven't established any need for their proposal.