

COACHING THE BASICS: WHAT IS AN ARGUMENT?

Some people think that “engaging in argument” means being mad at someone. That’s one use of the word “argument.” In debate we use a far different meaning of the term. In some ways though, making an argument in debate is the opposite of being mad at someone. It means making claims based on logical reasoning and proof.

There are three parts to an argument in debate: the claim, the data, and the warrant. These terms seem kind of formal, and they are. But whether you know it or not, solid arguments that you make every day are based on these concepts.

Here is an example of an argument: “Team X will win the basketball game against Team Y because Team X has taller players than Team Y.”

The “**claim**” is the bottom line conclusion of the argument – namely in this example that “Team X will win the basketball game.” The “**warrant**” is the reasoning behind the claim. In this example the reasoning is that the taller team will win the basketball game. The “**data**” are the facts used to support the warrant. In this example the data is that Team X is taller than Team Y.

Here is another example of an argument. “The death penalty should be abolished because innocent people are killed.” The claim is that “the death penalty should be abolished.” The warrant is that any policy that results in innocent people being killed should be ended. The data is that innocent people are killed by the death penalty.

Claims without reasoning are very weak arguments. Some might say it isn’t even an argument at all. The more warrants, or reasoning, that a claim has the stronger it is generally speaking. Sometimes the data might be statistics sometimes it might be an expert opinion.

For example, the argument “I saw that movie got ‘two thumbs up’ so we should go and see it” uses the expert opinion as the data for the claim. The claim is that we should go see the movie. The warrant is that movies that receive two thumbs up are worth seeing. The data would be that the movie did, in fact, receive a review of “two thumbs up.” This reasoning is based on an appeal to the expertise of the reviewers, and little more.

So, that’s an argument. Claim-Warrant-Data. Debate is based on competing arguments. Each team offers arguments that they defend, and they attack the arguments of their opponents. Research provides the data and warrants for defending and attacking arguments.

There are many ways to attack an argument. You could challenge the factual basis of the claim. In the first example, perhaps Team Y was in fact taller than Team X. In the second example you could prove that there has never been an innocent person executed in the U.S.

Another way to go would be to attack the reasoning/warrant. In the first example you could point out that the taller team does not always win basketball games. You could find examples of games that were not won by the taller team. You could say that other factors such as shooting ability, experience, effort, and coaching might be equally or more important factors in winning.

In the second example you could argue that just because an innocent person might be killed is not sufficient reason to ban a public policy. For example, innocent people die in traffic accidents, does that mean we should ban driving automobiles?

COACHING: WINNING CLASH BATTLES

Every debate turns on a handful of arguments where both sides have a valid point. Usually, most of the time spent in the debate falls in these areas. To be a champion debater you must learn how to win these crucial “clash battles.” There is a reliable, five-step extension technique that you can use to help you win clash battles. The 5 steps are:

(1) Refer back to the tag of your argument. This step is where you indicate to the judge what argument you want to extend. Make a specific reference to an earlier speech by your team where the argument was initiated. This could include a piece of evidence. This technique is often called “signposting.”

(2) Explain your argument. In this stage you comprehensively explain your argument. This step may take one sentence or several, depending on the time pressure in the speech and the importance of the argument. Explanations should include a statement of the underlying reasoning and proof for your claim.

(3) Characterize your opponent’s response to your argument. Your description should be fair. Do not be critical of the other side’s argument. Don’t call it “stupid” or “silly”. You will lose credibility with the judge if you do that. This part should also be brief, but you do want to develop an understanding in the judge’s mind.

(4) Resolve the issue. At this stage you explain why you are right and they are wrong. It could be something as simple as pointing out that your evidence is more recent or qualified. Other ways to resolve the issue include: use of historical example, a claim of a consensus viewpoint. The most common way to resolve an argument is to prove that your side contains internal logic that is not assumed by the other side’s argument.

(5) Impact the importance of winning the argument. The final step involves providing an impact assessment. You want to get maximum credit for winning the particular clash battle so tell the judge what it is exactly that you win if they do resolve the issue in your favor.

Here is a complete example with the steps indicated along the way (you wouldn’t use the numbers, they are just to flag the different stages for this example):

“(1) Our third argument in the 1AR is that ‘schools are getting worse.’ (2) Statistics from all parts of the country indicate test scores are declining, and schools are literally falling apart. (3) They say “schools are getting better.” (4) Our evidence is more recent than their evidence and comes from studies whereas their evidence is just one person’s opinion. (5) If we win this it proves we win inherency, that status quo efforts are failing.”

This technique has a number of benefits. It encourages you to actually extend your original argument, not simply repeat it. If all you do is repeat your argument it does not help the judge resolve the debate at all. The team that resolves the argument – taking it to the next level – will have a big advantage with the judge.

Second, the 5-step technique helps the judge follow along with the development of the argument. In a way it creates a conversation back-and-forth in the judge’s mind. By making a word-for-word reference to the other team’s argument you help the judge recognize that you are indeed answering the other side.

COACHING THE MECHANICS OF HAVING A DEBATE: FLOWING

Debates will become complicated. Even in relatively simple rounds there are often 20 or 30 claims that must be addressed. Keeping these arguments organized is crucial for success and to make sure you don't miss anything. If you miss something you will likely lose.

As a way to keep track of both teams' arguments debate has developed a convention known as "flowing." Flowing is basically a system for organizing and following along the details of the debate. While most young debaters view flowing as a chore, more experienced debaters quickly understand that having a good flow makes winning debates much easier.

Flowing is keeping a record of the speech-by-speech course of each argument. There is a standardized way to do it, but each person tends to develop her or his own variations. Learning how to flow may be one of the most difficult and boring tasks in learning how to debate, but it is among the most important. Some people flow on paper, and some flow using a computer spreadsheet program. Here are some basic steps to get started.

Step 1: Divide each sheet (paper or computer) into seven columns. Each column represents one speech in the debate. There are eight speeches in the debate but the two Negative Block speeches can be put in one column. Seven is the most columns you will ever need. Start in the left-most column then keep moving one column to the right for each later speech. At first, you'll find it helpful to write the speech abbreviations (1AC, 1NC etc.) at the top of each column.

Step 2: Start with the Case Flow. Do this by writing the details of the 1AC Case in the left-most column, from top-to-bottom. Try to write down the numbers or letters, the tags, the main point of the argument, and any details you can of the evidence that is read. You can use several sheets for the Case Flow to keep the major points of the 1AC separated.

Step 3: The 1NC speech will be flowed partly on new sheets and partly on the Case Flow sheets. When the 1NC presents Off-Case arguments they should start on their own new sheets (the Off-Case Flows) in the left-most column. Each Off-Case argument should be on its own sheet. When the 1NC starts to attack the affirmative Case, the flowing should switch over to the Case Flow where you would write in the second column, next to the related parts of the 1AC.

Step 4: The 2AC (and subsequent speeches) responses should be written down on their appropriate sheet, depending on whether they are answering the Off-Case arguments or rebuilding their Case. Off-Case arguments stay on the Off-Case Flows, and all the Case arguments stay on the Case Flow. Keep the Off-Case Flows separate from each other.

Step 5: When it is your own turn to speak, prepare by writing out your arguments in the columns that belong to you. Try to keep your writing in those columns. You might want to make your columns wider so you'll have more space to write things out in detail.

Step 6: Develop shorthand abbreviations. You'll quickly learn that you don't have time to write out words all the way otherwise you'll miss too much. Come up with a shorthand that you (and your partner) can recognize. You can use "AF" to abbreviate "Africa". You can use the letter "T" to abbreviate "Topicality". You can use symbols, like an up-arrow to stand-in for "increase". Even words that aren't jargon can be shortened. In the place of the word "engagement" you could write "eng".

Step 7: Practice, practice, practice. This is really the only way to learn how to flow and to improve. Flow practice debates and any other debates you see, even if you are just an observer. Practice abbreviations when you are taking notes in school.

COACHING THE LIFE BLOOD OF DEBATE: EVIDENCE

The way to support your arguments is to have evidence. Evidence might come from your own experience, common knowledge, or based on a story that someone told you. Most evidence for debate rounds comes from research done in the library or on the internet. Generally you look for examples, statistics or testimony that supports the claims you want to make. Evidence comes from books, magazines, journals, newspapers, and web sites. A number of debates are won because one team has better evidence. So what makes evidence “better”?

The Qualities of “Good” Evidence

You want evidence that is full of solid reasoning and warrants, not just claims. Evidence that has reasoning is more persuasive and credible than evidence without it. If someone told you to do something and you asked why and all they said was “because I said so” they would not be providing a warrant and you wouldn’t find their request very persuasive.

Suppose you wanted to prove that Senator Obama will be elected President of the U.S. You might find a quote that says “Senator Obama will be elected because he opposed the Iraq War from the beginning” it implicitly has a warrant that politicians who opposed the war have a better chance of winning. That warrant makes it stronger than if it said simply “Obama will win.” Evidence can have more than one warrant, which would make it even stronger.

You want evidence that is recent. Some claims are true at certain times but proven false over the course of time. The more recent your evidence is the greater chance it might remain true, other factors equal. You wouldn’t want evidence from 1998 for a prediction of who was going to win the Super Bowl this year. You might not even want evidence from three months ago.

You want evidence that comes from qualified sources. Qualifications refer to the credentials or experience of the author of your evidence. Other things equal it is assumed that sources who are more experienced or credentialed are more likely to be right.

You want evidence that comes from unbiased sources. Some sources, while they may be very experienced and credentialed, might have questionable credibility because they are “biased”. Being “biased” means that the source has a motivation that could override their interest in telling the truth. A politician might be more concerned about the political effects on their campaign than they are about the truth. A business leader might have strong economic interest in saying something that isn’t the truth. A friend or relative might be motivated by loyalty or love more than the desire to tell the truth.

When you find your evidence you are required to have a complete citation before you can use it in a debate round. What makes for a complete citation?

The Parts of a Complete Citation

When you find a piece of evidence it is essential that you provide a complete citation for it so that someone can look it up if they want to. Think of it like a bibliography. Getting the source citation correct is often boring and detailed, but it is very important to be done accurately.

A full and complete citation includes: the author, the qualification, the source, the complete date, and the URL or page number. Here is an example:

Michael O’Hanlon, Senior Fellow, The Brookings Institute, Brookings Web Site, November 18, 2007 http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2007/1118_pakistan_ohanlon.aspx

COACHING HOW TO FIND EVIDENCE: RESEARCH STRATEGIES

You need to have a plan of attack when you begin to research. When you set out to find evidence it is helpful to have an idea of what arguments you are trying to support ahead of time. Those ideas can often come from brainstorming sessions by you and your teammates. As you think of ideas for arguments you should write them down and save them to review when you begin your research.

Doing outstanding research is a function of effort. The best-researched teams are the ones that spend the most time doing it. Just like in most things, the more work you put into it the greater your chances of success. Some times it takes a while to find any evidence for your point at all. Other times you can find average-quality evidence but it takes more time to find high-quality evidence.

Thoroughness is crucial, and can prove decisive in winning and losing. When you find good evidence you should bookmark the web site or write down the part of the library you used. You will find that as you gain more experience with researching that it will get easier and you will develop your own shortcuts and strategies for being efficient. As you become more experienced with debate rounds you will learn a sense of how good your evidence must be to help you win the debate.

Library

The library at your school or community might be a good source for finding materials on the debate topic. You can often discover good evidence in books, from reference documents, journals and magazines and sometimes paper copies of newspapers.

If you are unfamiliar with how to search for books, journals and newspapers in nearby libraries ask the librarians to help you get started. They will be eager to assist you. That is their job.

Internet

Most debate research these days is done over the internet. It can be done either at school or at home depending on where you have access.

A common internet-based research strategy is to use a search engine like Google or Yahoo. Using either a basic or advanced search in one of these programs can help you find relevant web sites, newspapers and reports. Google Scholar is a good resource for finding articles in academic journals, although sometimes you have to have a subscription to get access to those articles.

Evaluating the Internet

The internet is a fantastic resource for debate research. Most of you are already very experienced with how to use it to find things that you want. In many ways the internet helps to equalize access to research across urban, suburban and rural areas. On the other hand, there are many potential pitfalls with internet research – namely, anyone with a keyboard can “publish” internet materials. It is important to be able to sort out the good from the bad.

Unfortunately, most of this evaluation has to be done on a case-by-case basis. You can often judge a web site based on the factors of authority, accuracy, objectivity and how up-to-date it is. Does the site provide authoritative references and footnotes? Do its claims conform to what you already know, and what other authors claim? Does the web site treat alternative ideas fairly and thoroughly? Has it been updated recently?