

# LD REBUTTALS AS SPEECHES

by

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LD students seem to worry more about the quality of their rebuttals than about any other aspect of their performances. This preoccupation, made clear to me during my eight summers of workshop teaching, probably results both from a perception that debates are won and lost in rebuttals and from the insecurity generated by these unscripted and often rushed speeches. I do not share the belief that rebuttals are the most important components of a winning performance; as a competitor, I focused my preparatory energy on research and case planning, and as a judge, I have often written decisions after the first negative speech. But no debater can (or would want to) ignore rebuttals. This essay offers some specific advice on LD rebuttals rooted in a reconceptualization of the nature of these speeches as speeches.

Writing about how to give rebuttals is a bit like writing about how to dance: both skills require a range of practical, situational judgments which cannot be fully prescribed in economical formulae. And even if it were possible to describe a pleasing instance of either type of performance, both practices can be botched in ways too numerous to catalog. This is one reason that a human coach is far preferable to books for students of either art, for only a personal observer can identify the specific errors a given student makes. So while I have worked with many individual students to improve their LD rebuttals, I have hesitated to suggest general advice on so various a subject. However, I have noted several widespread habits which detract from rebuttal speeches, and in satisfying myself that those habits are problems, I have also had to construct a more positive (but hardly original) vision of what rebuttals should be. Part I of this essay calls attention to seven problems endemic to recent LD rebuttals, Part II proposes a corrective view of what rebuttals should be, and Part III suggests a method for students to use to improve their own rebuttals, with or without a coach's help. Insofar as I do not explain the basic structure and content of rebuttals, I am addressing primarily experienced debaters; yet all of the issues below concern students at all

levels, and I hope that this advice will be a useful supplement to the instruction of even new debaters.

## I. Forensic Pathology

Here are seven habits of highly ineffective speeches, most of them exhibited to one degree or another by virtually all LD debaters (doubtless including this author):

**First**, many rebuttals say little or nothing about the resolution supposedly being debated. Fully one-third of the 2ARs I have heard in the past two years have not included a single major term from the resolution. It is harder to speak for a full six minutes in the NR without saying anything about the resolution, but it does happen. More commonly (almost universally, in fact), rebuttals make a few scattered references to the resolution, but most of the individual arguments say nothing explicit about it. It is obviously impossible to argue for the truth or falsehood of a resolution without talking about that resolution. So most rebuttal arguments are, rhetorically, wasted breath. Of course, some generous judges are willing to try to construct connections between what a debater actually says and the resolution being debated; these judges are sometimes labeled "interventionists" by students bitter that their arguments were not interpreted as the students intended them to be.

**Closely related to the first symptom is the second:** most students use personal (we, you, it, they) and demonstrative (this, that) pronouns with unclear antecedents or no antecedents at all. Students often imagine that they have said something about a resolution by using a pronoun which they mean to stand for an agent or party in the resolution, but the meaning of the pronoun is often completely unclear to listeners. Most resolutions allow reference to many persons. On the resolution "Colleges and universities have a moral obligation to prohibit the expression of hate speech on their campuses," relevant parties might include: colleges as collectives, college administrators, college teachers, college student bodies, purveyors of hate speech, targets of hate speech, the ethnic majority, ethnic minorities, and the public at large. When a

debater uses "they" in the context of such a resolution, s/he could be referring to any of the aforementioned groups or to hate speech incidents or to hate speech codes. And when debaters use "we," they frequently mean to refer to some (unspecified) party in the resolution, but also sometimes to "we debaters" or "we auditors of this particular debate round," compounding the confusion.

The **third** habit, like the first two, moves rebuttals away from clear discussion of the resolution and into the realm of confusing abstraction. This is the practice of stating arguments only as general principles, without offering concrete illustrations. Many debaters have heard the familiar criticism that examples and analogies are not arguments. This statement may be true when applied narrowly to the validity of deductive arguments, but it neglects the inductive support that examples provide for empirical generalizations, and it also ignores the persuasive power of a well-chosen illustration. Any debater can assert in the abstract that hate speech is a vague concept which may be employed to silence unpopular views, but well-prepared students can add immensely to their credibility by describing with dates, places, and other relevant details specific incidents when hate speech codes were used to squelch dissent. As I have argued in these pages before, the meaning of abstract arguments is never clear until we understand what, in practice, those arguments entail. Listeners will always respond more strongly to an argument embodied in a concrete human situation than to the purely abstract presentation of the same logic.

The use of debate jargon, especially flow-related jargon, is a fourth common detractor from LD rebuttals. Gnosticism is the ancient heresy which teaches that salvation comes through secret knowledge, and debate, sadly, has come to resemble a Gnostic cult. Here are some words and phrases meaningful only to members of the cult: flow, drop, extend, cross-apply, solve for, AC, NC, CX, AR, NR, voter, crystallize, turn, pull, group, go aff, go neg, top, bottom. The (Baldwin to page 42)

(Baldwin from page 39)

overuse of such terms results in statements like “For my first voter, flow across the underview at the bottom of the AC that solves for racism, which she dropped in the NR.” This sentence would be completely meaningless to anyone outside the debate community, and it is rhetorically repugnant to many of us within. Coaches and debaters share the blame for this one: coaches, for introducing such terms as instructional shorthand without emphasizing that they have no place in actual speeches; and students, for fancying that they will appear clever and sophisticated for peppering their speeches with a clumsy technical vocabulary.

Wordy, repetitive, and imprecise transitions are a fifth blemish on many rebuttals. “Next” and “but” are by themselves too imprecise to introduce a new point, resulting in an unshapely pile of arguments. “Look to” (like “that of” in the statement of a value premise) is pompous and archaic. “Talk about,” as in “Next she talks about freedom,” is too vague; good debaters *argue* that some proposition is true or false rather than merely *talk about* a subject. “Gives you,” as in “He gives you equality,” is too colloquial and also too vague. Overly wordy (and inept) transitions include statements like, “Now looking on down the flow, what you must realize is the idea that . . .” Some speakers use “basically” to introduce every sentence for no apparent reason. Any word or phrase that becomes a generic transition will make the logical relationships and relative importance of statements hard to understand. Another serious transition problem occurs when speakers promise to provide a certain number of arguments and then fail to number their statements accurately. When a listener has been promised two responses and is then offered a “first” followed by a half-dozen “nexts” and “buts,” he will naturally become confused about whether there is really a second argument, which statement is the second argument, whether there may also be a third and/or fourth and/or fifth argument beyond the promised two, or whether the speaker has moved to a new set of arguments. In LD rebuttals, as elsewhere, numbers should be used with care.

The first five problems are facilitated by the sixth, the excessive speed of most rebuttals. On the one hand, it is to be expected that speeches in a competitive debate will proceed at a higher rate of speed than do most informal conversations. On

the other hand, many LD rebuttals have become so fast that the uninitiated simply cannot follow them. I have heard many judges complain about the speed of LD rounds, but I have never heard a judge complain that debaters spoke too slowly. Like sloppy transitions, speed prevents speakers from effectively emphasizing their arguments. It also creates the impression of a frantic loss of control. I suspect many LD students speed for the same reasons they use certain kinds of jargon: doing so helps them overcome the inferiority they feel for not doing policy debate. Sadly, some students who accustom themselves to such speaking during high school find that they are unable to present intelligible spoken arguments in the larger world. It is a safe working assumption that, no matter who you are and how slowly you think you speak in rebuttals, you need to slow down.

Cynics and third-party observers (like me) can offer a variety of cultural and psychological explanations for the six bad habits so far mentioned, but many debaters would offer a more straightforward reason for all of them: the need to offer more arguments. Missing links, pronouns, abstractions, jargon, generic transitions, and speed are all explainable as products of the pressure many debaters feel to offer more arguments than their opponents do. The unnecessary multiplication of responses is the seventh and final bar to effective rebuttals. To the extent that it occasions the first six, it is also the most serious. Many debaters treat responses like raffle tickets, imagining that the more of them they possess, the greater the chance that the lucky winner will be chosen from their stack. This image highlights what is missing from the modern style of reflexive refutatory rebuttals: thought. Debate rounds are not games of chance. Good debates are won by making *better* arguments, not by making *more* arguments. The most persuasive debaters can often defeat an opponent’s entire position with one or two strategically chosen responses. The blitzkrieg approach to rebuttals is almost never persuasive because the really important arguments cannot be explained and emphasized when they are rolled into a lengthy (and usually repetitive) series of blips. Weak and insignificant responses actually sap the power of stronger ones. A well-placed rifle shot is far more effective than a barrage of pebbles for hunting large game, and much easier on the arm.

Eliminating these seven habits would not guarantee the excellence of LD rebut-

tals. But for many current debaters, these problems are their most prominent stylistic flaws, and overcoming them would result in stronger, more persuasive speeches.

## II. Health

To classify the seven practices outlined above as defects in rebuttals, we must have some positive ideal of what LD speeches should be. If rebuttals ought to move away from these habits as symptoms of disease, what is the state of health toward which they should move? The answer is simple: rebuttals should be delivered as persuasive speeches. By itself, this answer might seem neither insightful nor useful. I am happy to cede any claim to insight, but I do believe that reflection on LD rebuttals as persuasive speeches yields a number of helpful principles. I will begin by suggesting three qualities we should expect to find in a persuasive speech and then consider the implications of this vision for each of the seven unhealthy rebuttal practices.

First, a persuasive speech should be clear. What is the mark of a clear speech? Any adult of average intelligence and education should be able to understand it without taking notes. Most judges in LD rounds do take notes to help them remember the details of speeches, but an ideally clear speech can be followed in the moment by someone who is only listening. Clear speeches may occur in the course of exchanges and debates, but their basic clarity is preserved even when they are detached from their rhetorical contexts. A persuasive letter to the editor will provide all the background information an educated reader needs to understand its arguments even if the reader has not read the article to which the letter responds. Likewise, a good rebuttal will be clear enough to persuade a listener of the truth or falsehood of a resolution even if the listener has heard no other speeches in the debate round. An ideally clear rebuttal speech could, by itself, persuade a listener of the truth of its claim such that the listener could accurately paraphrase the conclusions of the speech and the arguments that support it.

For a speech to be clear enough to be memorable, it must also be unified. One who attempts to persuade his audience of everything will likely fail to persuade them of anything. Speeches are public events, given on rhetorical occasions which help to define their meanings. Consider Antony’s funeral oration for Caesar. Ostensibly a (Baldwin to page 44)

eulogy, it also shared elements of a persuasive speech and even of a rebuttal. Antony's speech was occasioned generally by Caesar's death and specifically by the charges of ambition brought against Caesar by Brutus and the conspirators. Had Antony attempted to catalog the treacheries of the conspirators, to tell the life story of Caesar, or even to recount each of Caesar's good deeds, the power of the speech would have dissipated. Instead, Antony persuaded the crowd by selecting three examples of Caesar's noble conduct unified by their display of generosity rather than ambition. Debate tournaments create artificial occasions to discuss the truth value of some assigned proposition (the resolution), and it is this purpose which should unify everything said in the course of a debate round. Given the multitude of possible arguments relevant to any resolution's truth, effective speeches must achieve a further unity by selecting a relatively small subset of those arguments to develop in detail.

A further trait of persuasive speeches is that they are shapely. A good speech, like a good essay, should have a discernible beginning, middle, and end. Rather than plunging a listener immediately into the thorny thicket of issues and leaving him there, a persuasive speaker will earn his listener's ear with an appealing opening, gently direct his attention to the relevant more specific issues, and finally step back with him to survey the results of the battle from a distance (in the case of debate rebuttals, from the perspective of the resolution as a whole). It may occur to some readers that current LD rebuttals do have a kind of shape: they begin with a "roadmap," move to "line by line," and conclude with "crystallization." But there is little in this pattern that is fetching, persuasive, or memorable; no practiced public speaker would deliver anything resembling a current LD rebuttal to an audience he wished to win over. Clarity, unity, and shapeliness will complement each other in a persuasive, well-executed rebuttal.

It is easy to see how these three elements of a persuasive speech prescribe healthy correctives to the seven ineffective speech habits described in Part I. First, a concern for clarity and unity requires speakers to make explicit reference to the resolution under discussion at every possible turn. Effective introductions will often call the audience's attention back to the central issue of the debate (the truth value of the

resolution) after that attention has been distracted by an opponent's confusing and abstract jumble of responses. Likewise, every particular response will remain individually relevant and connected to other responses by including specific words or phrases from the resolution as part of the response. At no point in the speech will a persuasive speaker allow his listeners to forget that he is arguing primarily about a resolution and only secondarily about this or that specific sub-issue. Speakers who find themselves prone to ignore important words from the resolution might benefit from writing them in large letters across the top of their flow pads (pardon the jargon).

Clarity further dictates that most pronouns be eliminated from rebuttal speeches. In general, it is unwise and unclear to use pronouns to stand in place of parties in the resolution. Second- and third-person pronouns should be used only when referring literally to persons present in the capacities they actually fill (do not, for instance, use "you" to refer to the judge as if he were a policymaker whose decision would literally [say] condemn thousands of Serbian children to die in NATO bombings).

The use of particular examples and illustrations can enhance the clarity, unity, and shapeliness of speeches. Obviously, listeners will have a clearer idea of what they are being persuaded to believe when the broad generalization of the resolution is applied to specific or analogous contexts. Note, however, that illustrations must be slowly and fully explained if they are to exercise persuasive power. Further, several well-placed references to an illustration from cross-examination or from the first part of a speech may provide a unifying (and memorable) thread for the speech as a whole. Finally, I am indebted to Mr. James Copeland for suggesting an important way in which concrete applications of a resolution may contribute to the shape of a persuasive speech via its conclusion. Speakers may direct their final summary appeals to the consciences of listeners by asking them to choose between the worlds represented by an affirmation and a negation of the resolution. For instance, rather than praising the glories of school safety or student civil liberties in the purely abstract language of rights or contract obligations, a persuasive speaker might bring his argument to a satisfying conclusion by describing the likely experiences of students and teachers in the worlds (i.e., concrete realizations) of both sides of that resolution. The classic "moti-

vated sequence" pattern for persuasive speeches satisfies an audience's felt need to react to the urgent arguments they have just heard by proposing an action they (the audience) may take to address the problem at hand. While there is no point in pretending that debate judges can effect dramatic widespread changes in society, debaters can bring their appeal to a climax by playing up the ethical and rhetorical importance of publicly endorsing a certain kind of world by voting to accept or reject a given resolution. Listeners will feel the importance of such a decision only insofar as they regard it as a choice between different human experiences rather than philosophical vagaries.

Clear speakers will also avoid debate jargon like the plague. In particular, references to a listener's notes are often confusing and always slightly ridiculous. It is crass and presumptuous for debaters to dictate to judges what is or should be on "the flow." A debate is a rhetorical contest embodied in speeches over a period of time; it is not a board game with a geography neutrally observable by all the players. The members of any audience are free to note or ignore whatever they please, and speakers can best assure their points will be heard and remembered by making them clearly and memorably to begin with, using only the language of ordinary educated English-speakers. Of course, it is very likely that debate judges will, in fact, take notes on rounds, and smart debaters will present their arguments in ways that make it easy for notetakers to follow and organize. Just as a graceful child will courteously account for an aged relative's limitations without remarking on those limitations, so a graceful debater will speak in ways conducive to notetakers without remarking on the notes themselves. In general, one should avoid using terms in a debate round that one has picked up only in debate.

Specific transitions are obviously essential to create a clear, shapely, and unified speech. The carefully chosen "however" or "additionally" primes the expectations of listeners, allowing them to logically connect your statements one to another and to recognize the place of a given statement in the structure of the speech as a whole. Such verbal cuing is especially vital for those listeners who do take notes. Any worthwhile English textbook will list a variety of useful transitional words, phrases, and strategies. Here I will simply note that the now-common practice of beginning rebuttals

with “roadmaps” is one of the most rhetorically clumsy ways imaginable to introduce a persuasive speech. Good speakers will, in fact, give their listeners signals about where they are headed, but they will not attempt to grab their audiences’ attention by saying, “OK, first I’ll go aff, then, uh, neg. Is everybody ready?” Transitions should be smoothly integrated into the substance of a speech; they should be as unobtrusive as the nails in a well-built house.

Persuasive speakers will use a moderate speed to remain clear at all times during their rebuttals. Whether listeners are recording speeches in their memories or on paper, they need time to comprehend sentences they themselves did not compose. Many of the students who debate in front of me would probably be dismayed at the number of sentences I do not understand (and thus do not record) because they are spoken too quickly. Comprehensible speed, like comprehensible enunciation, is a basic physical requirement for clear speeches, but thoughtful variations in speed also contribute crucially to the shapeliness of speeches. A uniformly fast rate obliterates all sense of form. But an occasional quick argument may suggest, “This is just review” or “Here’s the icing on the cake.” Likewise, a noticeably slower pace suggests, “This is the crux of the matter” or “This is complex—listen carefully.” Generally, speeches should start slowly, gradually accustom the listener to a brisker pace, and then finish slowly.

Finally, the unity and clarity of a persuasive speech dictate that it be focused and selective rather than comprehensive. Effective speakers choose the few points they want to make about their topic and then make each one thoroughly. The more points a speaker makes, the less likely they will appear related to one another, and the more likely contradictions will emerge among them. Further, speakers are more likely to impress their listeners with their mastery of a subject when they can clearly and confidently *explain* one or two lines of reasoning in response to an argument rather than hastily *listing* every response they can think of. Successful magicians know far more tricks than they perform on any given occasion. They impress audiences by presenting a few tricks exceptionally well and always leaving audiences begging for more. In similar fashion, a speaker communicates power by implying, “Here’s the kind of high-quality reason I can give you to believe my position in the time I have; imagine what I could do if I had more time.” Choosing the

best one or two response strategies against a contention requires a knowledge of argument types and a certain tact, both of which are beyond the purview of this essay (I hope to address these issues in the future). But the best way to learn to make wise choices among possible arguments is to practice by actually making such choices, if not at first in tournament rounds, then in practice rounds or in post-tournament flow reviews. Much of the time saved by making fewer arguments will be filled by making those arguments more slowly and with suitable illustrations and specific references to the resolution.

### III. Therapy

How can LD students move from the bad habits outlined in Part I to the model of persuasive speaking described in Part II? First, let it be said that no single decision will transform a debater from an ineffective to an effective speaker. As with most good habits, the habits of successful speaking must be developed gradually over time. Students who attempt to tackle all of the above-noted problems in a single afternoon of rhetorical self-improvement will probably throw up their hands in exhaustion and despair. Wise students will diagnose their own current habits honestly (and ideally with the help of others) and then make triage decisions about which habit needs the most immediate attention, which habit is next most pressing, and so forth.

The lowly tape recorder is a speaker’s best friend for diagnosing and treating his own speech habits. Every one of the seven detractors identified above can be recognized in a tape-recorded speech, and repeated recordings of oneself giving substantially the same speech can reveal improvement or deterioration. Here is a method that can be used to cure any of the seven bad habits: First, record one of your own rebuttal speeches; speeches from tournaments are best because they may reveal verbal habits you display under pressure which do not surface in contrived practice speeches. Second, listen to the tape and jot down any of the seven (or others) which you notice. You may need to listen several times, attending to different aspects of the speech each time. Decide which habit in the speech you want to treat first, which second, which third, and so on. Then transcribe the entire speech, word for word, complete with all the “uhs,” stuttering, and sentence fragments. Typing the speech will do two things for you. First, it will make you irritated with yourself for making all

those indiscriminate blippy arguments which you are now having to type. Second, it will give you a written copy that will allow you to more objectively and deliberately study what you say and how you say it.

After you have typed the speech completely, go through it with red pen in hand to mark all the instances of whatever habit you are striving to improve. For example, if you are trying to make more clear references to the resolution, mark the total number of distinct points in the speech, then mark each use of a major word from the resolution, and then flag any individual point that does not use any of the resolution’s words. After you have marked all the problem areas, go back and rewrite (yes, write) the speech to fix the problems. You may have to impose somewhat arbitrary rules on yourself to address some of the problems. For instance, to reduce your speed, you may have to simply decide to reduce the length of your text by one-fourth; to reduce the number of your responses, you may have to limit yourself to two responses per contention, or no responses less than three complete sentences long, or only half as many responses as your original speech contained. You can be your own judge, but do not hesitate to impose relatively draconian standards on yourself for practice purposes.

Once you are satisfied that you have adequately treated a given speech (this may involve combing through several written drafts looking for different symptoms), make a tape recording of your new and improved version. Practice reading the speech with proper emphasis, speed, and enunciation; your goal is to fill the time with a slower, more polished speech. *Reading* well-chosen words will help accustom you to *saying* well-chosen words, and eventually such practice will rub off onto the extemporaneous performances you give in rounds. If possible, listen to your new version with a parent or non-debate auditor. Note any areas for further improvement, and repeat the type-rewrite-record cycle again.

Tapes and written speeches will allow you to recognize your own speech habits in a way that is not usually possible in the moment you are speaking. And these artifacts allow you to review your speech actions with a care and leisure that hurried practice rounds do not typically permit. As you become a more perceptive critic of your taped and written speeches, you can continue to improve simply by performing a re-

buttal speech for a tape recorder, listening to it for the problems you most want to fix, and then performing it again and again on tape until you get it right. Of course, coaches and teammates are helpful in this process if for no other reason than to relieve the tedium of doing the same thing over and over. Genuine improvement is hard work, but time and effort will pay off.

The ultimate test for rebuttal speech quality is one that requires either a long interval of time or listeners who have no knowledge of LD. Let us call it the drawer test. The drawer test consists of recording a rebuttal speech and then putting the tape in a drawer without listening to it. The tape should stay in the drawer for as long as you can remember the round it came from, preferably until your memory of the resolution's details begins to blur; this may obviously take a number of weeks or even months. After sufficient time has elapsed, listen to the speech without taking notes. Does the speech, standing alone, clearly inform you about what issue is at stake in the debate and memorably persuade you to adopt a position on that issue? If so, congratulations! If not, what is missing or unclear? Of course, you can achieve this same effect without the drawer (or the months) by playing your speech for someone who has no knowledge of LD or of the resolution addressed in the speech. Does the speech by itself persuade that person of what you want to persuade him? What questions remain unanswered by your speech for such a person? Is there anything in your diction or delivery that confuses or distracts the average (i.e., non-debate) listener? If you fail the drawer test, go back to your word processor and try to remedy the problems in your performance.

No doubt there are many other strategies students can profitably employ to develop their rebuttal ability, but I believe focused self-criticism, made possible through tape recordings and transcripts, is an essential part of any serious improvement. In any case, consistently approaching rebuttals as persuasive speeches rather than as speed refutation contests is certain to yield more appealing, compelling, and educational LD rounds.

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