Chapter 10

**Refuting and Rebuilding Arguments**

So far, the discussions in this text have focused mainly on the process of constructing arguments. For ease of understanding, this text has spoken about making arguments to support or oppose a motion as if those arguments existed in their own space, without regard to any other debaters or any other issues. Of course, in an actual debate, arguments are made always with an eye toward how they interact with other arguments. Furthermore, anytime anyone makes an argument, they take the risk that another person will confront their argument. In a debate, that risk is almost a certainty. This chapter will focus on how one speaker refutes the arguments of another, then how, once refuted, another speaker revives and rebuilds those arguments.

**Chapter Outline**

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**Refuting Arguments**

Refutation is the act or process of refuting an argument raised by another debater. According to that usage, “refutation” is a noun and “refute” is a verb. In any debate, refutation is one of the processes used for interacting with other arguments. Refutation is the act of refuting or criticizing an argument made by someone else, to show how that argument is somehow problematic. The argument can be shown to be weak, incomplete, poorly proven, or false. In addition to using refutation to weaken an argument, it also can be used to defend a position that another debater has refuted. Refutation is an interactive process wherein debaters critically examine one another’s arguments by comparing them to other arguments deemed to
be cogent, or by subjecting them to various tests of strength. The process of refutation applies both to invalidating or validating an argument.

Refutation also applies to rebuilding. Thus, this chapter deals with the twin topics of refuting and rebuilding. Refuting is generally thought of as a process of invalidating an argument, and rebuilding is considered a process of revalidating an argument. The first part of the chapter will deal with refutation used to disprove, debunk, discredit, or otherwise invalidate an argument, and the second part of the chapter will deal with rebuilding, repairing, and reconstructing arguments previously refuted.

Refutation serves several purposes. The first one that people ordinarily think about is that refutation weakens, destroys, dismantles, or overturns an argument. Thinking of refutation in that manner occurs when debaters are interested in making arguments that prevail over those of other debaters. In that situation, debaters would use refutation to weaken the argument of their opponents so that judges will see their arguments as superior.

A second function of refutation, even when it is used to invalidate an argument, involves a generative process where refutation shows the weaknesses of an argument and those weaknesses are then used to generate better arguments. This generative process of refutation can lead the original debater to improve his or her argument to account for the weaknesses pointed out in the refutation. Refutation also can help the person refuting to make better arguments to support his or her side of the motion. The second function of refutation, the generative function, is much better suited to the nature of excellent debate than the first. Of course, a debater can weaken or even “destroy” an opponent’s arguments using refutation, but a truly excellent debater uses refutation to make a better debate by generating better arguments.

In this section, we will discuss methods of refutation, methods of deciding what to refute, and introduce a four-step process of refutation.

Methods of Refutation

Refutation can be accomplished by methods that are internal or external to the arguments being refuted. The internal method involves pointing to fallacious reasoning, and the external method involves creating a counter argument. Of course, refutation can also be accomplished by a combination of these two methods.

Internal Refutation. The first method of refutation can be called internal because it involves examining the argument by looking at its component parts and the relationship of those parts to one another. When debaters examine an argument internally, they are trying to decide whether or not it meets the criteria for a good argument. If it does not, the argument is said to be “fallacious.” Thus, the internal method of refutation involves the process of detecting
The concept of fallacies is briefly developed here simply to illustrate the idea of internal refutation. Fallacies will be discussed briefly in this section and more extensively in Chapter 21.

To understand the process of detecting fallacious arguments, the criteria for the logical assessment of arguments needs to be examined more fully. A good argument must have good evidence, and the evidence should be soundly linked to a claim. The features of argument—claims, evidence, and links—will be more fully discussed later. For now, we will simply say that an argument is a good one if it is built upon good evidence and good links between the evidence and the claim.

Canadian Philosophers, Ralph H. Johnson and J. Anthony Blair, developed three standards for distinguishing good arguments from poor ones. Those standards are related to the quality of evidence and the quality of the links between evidence and claims; the first standard is related to evidence, and the second and third standards are related to links. The three standards are called acceptability, relevance, and sufficiency. The following diagram, that we will henceforth call the Johnson and Blair Model of Argument Cogency, is a simple illustration of these three criteria.\(^2\)

**Johnson and Blair Model of Argument Cogency**

![RSA Triangle: The criteria that a good argument must satisfy.](image)

Arguments that satisfy the three criteria are logically good arguments, and those that fail to satisfy one or more of them are not as good. If an argument fails to satisfy one of the criteria, then the debater presenting that argument has committed a fallacy. The sections below outline each of the three criteria and the basic fallacy associated with each criterion.

The standard of acceptability is related to the concept of evidence. Evidence is the material that debaters use to support their arguments. For instance, debaters might use information or

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1. Our approach to fallacious arguments and to the criteria for the logical assessment of arguments is completely borrowed from the work of two Canadian Philosophers: Ralph H. Johnson and J. Anthony Blair in their book entitled *Logical Self-Defense*.
2. Johnson and Blair, page 55.
statistics from published sources as evidence to support their argument. A debater thinking about refuting an argument based on a published source would want to ask if the published source was a good one; does the publication have a good reputation for publishing accurate information? Sometimes a debater might use persons of authority to support their arguments. Here, the rebuttalist might ask whether or not the author who is cited is qualified in the field that is the subject of the published source.

Statements such as “the publication my opponents have cited has a reputation for only publishing liberal (or conservative) information” or “the person my opponents cite as an authority may be an authority in some field, but not in one relevant to this argument.” Statements like those involve internal refutation. If those statements prove acceptable, they indicate that the opponent’s argument involves a fallacy.

Sometimes, an argument can be supported by acceptable evidence but still be a logically poor argument because it does not meet one of the two other standards. Such would be the case if the evidence were acceptable but not properly linked to the claim. In that case, the standard of relevance is used to judge whether or not the evidence, however good, is related to the claim the debater is trying to make. Let’s say that a cancer drug was tested on 25 males and found to have a positive effect, and that study was used as evidence to support an argument that the cancer drug was good for a particular kind of cancer that occurred primarily in females. Because the evidence only involved males and the conclusion only involved females, the evidence is not relevant to the conclusion. Such an argument would be open to a charge that it does not meet the standard of relevance and, thus, the debater has presented a fallacious argument.

An argument can begin with acceptable evidence that is relevant to the claim and still not be good enough to persuade the judge or the audience. A number of examples exist where evidence is relevant to an argument but still not sufficient. Say, for instance, that a lawyer says, “Because of the place of the wound, we know the murderer was left-handed and the accused man is left-handed, thus, the accused is guilty of murder.” Of course, the evidence that the accused is left-handed is relevant to whether or not he was, in fact, the murderer, but that evidence is not sufficient to convince a reasonable judge or audience because the murderer could have been any number of left-handed men or women.

The standard of sufficiency demands that the combination of evidence and reasoning be good enough to convince an audience or judge to accept the argument with a reasonable degree of certainty. A reasonable level of certainty is never 100%. In most argumentative situations where they are expected to choose between two competing arguments, judges will accept the argument that they consider most probable. The standard of sufficiency is the standard that ensures that the argument meets this level of probability.

Thus, if a debater can show how the argument does not meet the standards of acceptability, relevance, and sufficiency, that debater can show how the opponent has presented a fallacious argument. The charge of fallacy may inspire the original debater to make the argument better, in which case, refutation has served the generative function of causing improved arguments. If the argument cannot be repaired, it will be rejected.
**External Refutation.** A second method of refutation involves the external method of presenting a counter argument. We may think of this method as external because, rather than criticizing the internal structure of the argument, it brings another, outside argument to bear on the critique of the original argument. Even if the arguments presented by an opponent are not fallacious, debaters may be able to present arguments that directly counter them. In the earlier example of the left-handed murderer, if the defense attorney proclaims, “Yes, but the defendant is really right-handed,” then, even though the defense attorney did not criticize the internal method by which the other attorney made the argument, the defense attorney nevertheless has refuted the original argument by presenting a counter argument.

Imagine a debate in which a debater on the Government side argues for changes in education policy, and a debater on the opposition side claims that the present system is already making necessary reforms and those reforms make the changes suggested by the Government debater unnecessary. The Government debater might present a counter-argument to suggest that the reforms being undertaken are of a cosmetic nature only and do not address the main issues of educational opportunities. That kind of counter-argument constitutes what this chapter calls external refutation.

Thus, refutation may involve either an internal method of examination of the argument to detect fallacious reasoning, or an external method of presenting a counter argument. Either of these methods may succeed in refuting the argument. But perhaps the strongest method would be to refute an argument by using a combination of both methods—to show that the argument fails to meet one or more of the standards of a good argument and, in addition, to present a counter argument.

**Deciding What to Refute**

Time does not usually permit refutation of each and every argument. In a competitive debate situation, each debater has a limited amount of time and needs to think about the judicious use of time. Debaters need to remember that, not only will they be engaging in refutation, but they need to have time to present constructive arguments as discussed in previous chapters of this text.

Even in a situation where time is not limited, the choice to try to refute every argument still may be unwise. Imagine how an audience might react to a debater who said “no” to every point raised by a speaker. The audience might perceive the debater to be particularly arrogant and disrespectful of the speaker of the opposite side. So, whether time is or is not of the essence, the debater needs to make some judgments about which arguments to refute.

Since every argument cannot and should not be refuted, debaters will need some guidelines to decide where to focus their efforts. A frequent error committed by beginning debaters is to look for their opponents’ weakest arguments and focus their efforts there. The implicit idea is that, because something can be refuted it should be refuted. In cases like these, the beginning debater frequently refutes a number of arguments that have no overall impact on the outcome of the debate.
Instead of focusing on refuting weak arguments, debaters with more experience focus on refuting particularly important arguments. By focusing on the important arguments, debaters have a greater likelihood that their overall plan of refutation will have a greater impact on the debate. Every argument a debater makes is not equally important. Debaters should refute only those that are the most important.

Deciding whether or not an argument is important involves at least two considerations:

First, is the argument essential to the case made by the opposing speaker? If it is, then the debater will want to consider refuting that argument. For example, if an opponent suggests that the principle that supports reform of hukou is equality of the individual, the debater may want to refute the fact that equality is not an important principle in collectivist society. In this example, because the opponent has held equality of the individual as a high value, presenting the value of a collectivist society as higher than that of the individual is an important factor in the overall judgment.

Second, does the argument stand in the way of some important argument that the debater engaging in refutation wants to make? If so, then that debater needs to refute it. For example, a debater on the Government side intends to advance an argument that reform of education will advance the principle of sustaining one’s community. If, in this case, an Opposing debater claims that the current education system is congruent with community values, the Government debater supporting the proposition should consider refuting the connection between the educational system and community values. Otherwise, the debater defending the motion cannot possibly continue to advance the argument because the principle of sustaining a community is no longer held as important.

After debaters think about internal and external methods of refutation and consider what arguments should and should not be refuted, they are ready to think about the method of refutation that they will use.

*Four-Step Method of Refutation*

No single method of refutation exists that is inherently better than all of the other methods. However, for beginners, we suggest the following four-step method because it has the advantages of being simple and containing the elements most important to refutation. Of course, as debaters advance in their skills, they may want to experiment with this method just as they experiment with other aspects of debate. The four steps can be most easily defined by the following four phrases:

“They say . . .”
“But I say . . .”
“Because . . .”
“Therefore . . .”
The first phrase, “they say . . .” identifies the argument that the debater is going to refute. Identifying the exact argument about to be refuted is particularly important in order to orient the audience or judge with the argument to which the debater is referring. Sometimes, beginning debaters start the process of refutation without clearly identifying the argument they are refuting. Judges and audiences are left disoriented regarding what the speaker is actually doing. The simple phrase, “My opponents said that education policies are already being reformed,” successfully identifies the argument that the debater is about to refute. This simple statement constitutes the first of the four-step process.

The second phrase “But I say . . .” states the debater’s response to the argument about to be refuted. Sometimes, debaters start explaining their refutation before they concisely state the central idea of the refutation. Judges and audiences can get lost in the explanation if they have not been told the central idea before the explanation. The phrase, “But I say . . .” provides the orientation needed by the judge or audience to be able to understand the explanation. By saying, for instance, “But these education reforms referred to by my opponents are merely cosmetic,” the audience or the judge is oriented to the explanation that is to follow. This is the second of the four steps.

The third phrase, “Because . . .” signals that the debater is about to begin explaining the details of his or her refutation. This step contains the bulk of the refutation. This third phase is when the debater either explains why the argument to be refuted contains one or more fallacies, or explains a counter argument. This step might begin with a sentence such as, “The reforms mentioned by my opponent do not solve the essential problems of employment opportunities or social benefits, and thus are just cosmetic.” Of course, this sentence will then require further explanation, but it begins the third of the four-step process of refutation.

The fourth phrase, “Therefore . . .” signals that the debater is about to explain the importance of the refutation. The simple refutation of an argument does not have much of an impact on the debate unless the debater takes the time to explain what difference the refutation makes to the argument under consideration, or better yet, what difference the refutation makes to the debate as a whole. Many debaters frequently overlook this important step. So, the sentence, “My opponent’s argument is not sufficient to suggest that reform of education policy is unnecessary,” would require more explanation, but is one good way to begin the fourth of the four-step process of refutation.

The following is a summary of the four-step process of refutation:
As stated earlier, this four-step process is not the only process of engaging refutation, but it is a good one for beginners to learn as they develop their skills. More advanced debaters can change and enhance this and other processes of argumentation.

Rebuilding Arguments

As stated earlier, the process of refutation can be used to invalidate or otherwise weaken an argument. Refutation also is used in the process of rebuilding arguments. Refutation can be used to revalidate arguments that have been refuted. This section of the chapter will focus on this use of refutation.

In most cases, when an argument is refuted, it needs to be rebuilt. Of course, exceptions to that rule exist. Some arguments may not be particularly meaningful, thus, even if they are refuted, their revitalization may not be worth the effort. But most of the time, if a debater presents a major argument and a debater on the other side refutes that argument, the argument needs to be rebuilt.

The original arguments that a debater presents are presumably among the strongest that the debater has to offer. If this is the case, and if those strong arguments are refuted, then to not rebuild them may appear to be tacit admission that they were not that strong to begin with. To allow the argument to be refuted and not revive it may communicate to the audience that the argument is weak. In this case, the credibility of both the argument and the debater who
presented it may suffer. For this reason, debaters need to revive and reassert their most important arguments before going on to offer new ones.

Rebuilding is a constructive process that also involves incorporating the original argument of with the refutation brought against it. Thus, rebuilding is neither entirely constructive nor entirely rebuttal. It is an integration of both. To rebuild an argument, one must start with the original argument then pay some consideration to the points of refutation brought against it. The rebuilding process then integrates the original argument and the points of refutation in such a way that the original argument survives even in light of the refutation.

**Five-Step Method of Rebuilding an Argument**

Rebuilding is an art that can be accomplished in a variety of ways. The following five-step process is one such way:

1. Stating the thesis of the original argument,
2. Stating the refutation offered of the original argument,
3. Assessing whether or not the refutation really weakens the original argument
4. Refuting the refutation,
5. Re-establishing the original argument in light of the insufficient refutation offered against it.

In the argument about educational reform previously introduced in this chapter, the original argument was that educational reform is a necessity. The Opposition refuted this argument by claiming that educational reform already was being accomplished. The rebuilding of this argument might then proceed by following the five steps mentioned above.

The first step simply involves identifying the original argument. The debater might say something such as, “Our original argument was that educational reform was a necessity.” The first step is intended to identify for the judge and the audience the precise argument that the debater intends to rebuild. Using the same language that was originally used is quite important because subtle changes in language might confuse judges and audiences. So, if the original argument was “educational reform is a necessity,” then debaters should not change the language to something like “reform of education is important.” Although the second phrase is really not that different from the first, maintaining the language of the original argument simply helps to ensure that the debater and the audience are on the same page regarding the argument that the debater wants to rebuild.

The second step identifies for the judge and the audience the refutation that was raised against the original argument. The debater who is interested in rebuilding the original argument should simply restate the refutation as clearly and precisely as possible, being true to the language used by the debater who offered the refutation. So, the debater might say something such as, “Our opponents attempted to refute our argument by saying that education already is being reformed.” The debater who wants to rebuild the original argument need not spend time explaining the refutation, unless he or she intends to show how
the internal structure of that argument is flawed. But generally all that is needed is a statement of the refutation itself.

In the third step, the debater should assess the opponent’s refutation. After having identified the refutation, the debater should then state his or her assessment of the refutation as simply and concisely as possible. For instance, that statement might be as simple as “My opponent’s refutation is insufficient,” “My opponent’s refutation is based on insufficient evidence,” or “My opponent’s refutation is inconsistent with what we know to be true.”

In the fourth step, the debater should explain the reasons underlying his or her assessment of the refutation. Why is the refutation inadequate? What are the reasons that underlie such an assessment of inadequacy? A debater might say something such as, “Even if true, the refutation does not deny the basic thrust of our argument,” or “The refutation is based on evidence offered a year ago when the situation is entirely different today.” In other words, the fourth step is an opportunity to explain why the assessment of the refutation is as it is.

In the fifth step, the debater will re-establish the original argument in light of his or her assessment of the refutation. Given the assessment of the refutation and comparing this assessment to the original argument, why is the original argument still persuasive? The fifth step also is a good place for a debater to add something new to the original argument. Perhaps the debater can strengthen part of a causal relationship that was implicit but not explicit in the original argument. Perhaps the debater can intensify the value that already exists in the original argument. By adding something new to the original argument, the debater signals to the judge that he or she is adding something new to the debate by enhancing the argument introduced by his or her partner.
The five steps are illustrated in the following diagram:

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<tr>
<th>Step 1: Identify the original argument.</th>
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<tr>
<td>“We said…”</td>
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<td>“Our original argument was that educational reform is a necessity.”</td>
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<th>Step 2: Identify the refutation to the original argument.</th>
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<tr>
<td>“Our opponents said…”</td>
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<td>“Our opponents refuted the argument by saying that education is already being reformed”</td>
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<th>Step 3: State the assessment of the opponent’s refutation.</th>
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<tr>
<td>“But we say…”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“But we say the refutation offered by our opponents is insufficient.”</td>
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<th>Step 4: Explain the details of your assessment.</th>
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<td>“Because…”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“The reforms mentioned by the opposition are cosmetic, and taken as a whole, current reforms do not provide the kinds of reforms that are needed.”</td>
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<th>Step 5: Re-establish the original argument in light of the refutation.</th>
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<tr>
<td>“Therefore…”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Therefore, our original argument that reform is a necessity still stands, even in light of the opposition’s refutation.”</td>
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These five steps are a practical method of rebuilding an argument. They simply represent one way to rebuild an argument that has been refuted. The important thing to remember is that in the process of rebuilding, refutation is integrated with argument construction so that a debater’s original argument can be revitalized. Rebuilding an argument is important because otherwise, once refuted, an argument has no further life in the debate. If a debater introduces what they consider to be an important argument and another debater refutes that argument, the team supporting the original argument is obliged to do their best to rebuild that argument.

**Summary**

Refutation involves refuting an argument, in order to invalidate or otherwise weaken that argument. Refutation also is used to revalidate an argument that already has been refuted. Thus, refutation has two different functions: to invalidate arguments and revalidate them. The process of rebuilding or revalidating arguments involves an integration of the rebuttal and constructive functions of argument.

Debaters need to remember that they cannot and should not refute every argument. Deciding which arguments that should be refuted is an important part of the art of debating. Debaters
need to learn to decide which arguments should be refuted and which are so unimportant that they can safely be ignored.

Refutation, whether to weaken or to rebuild an argument, may include internal and external methods of refutation. Refutation can be accomplished by following a four-step process that uses the phrases “they say,” “but I say,” “because,” and “therefore.” After the process of refutation, the process of rebuilding an argument allows a debater to reconstruct an argument that has been weakened by refutation. This process of rebuilding an argument can be accomplished by a five-step process using phrases such as, “we said,” “they said,” “but we say,” “because,” and “therefore.” Those steps sound, and are, quite mechanical. They are not designed to be a hard-and-fast template for how to conduct the processes of refuting and rebuilding. They are designed as a rubric to help debaters understand the important elements of these processes so that they can communicate their refutation and rebuilding effectively.
Terms and Concepts From Chapter 10

Refutation
Rebuilding
Dismantling function
Overturning function
Generative function
Internal method of refutation
External method of refutation
RSA triangle
Acceptability
Relevance
Sufficiency
Counter-argument
Four-step refutation process
Five-step rebuilding process

Discussion Questions For Chapter 10

How are the dismantling, overturning, and generative functions of refutation different from one another?

How is refutation used in the process of rebuilding an argument?

How are the internal and external methods of refutation different from one another?

What are the three standards that distinguish good arguments from poor ones? How do they function in the process of refutation?

How might a debater decide which arguments are important enough to refute?

What is the four-step method of refutation?

What is the five-step method of rebuilding an argument?
Exercises For Chapter 10

**Exercise #1 refutation:** This exercise involves two students. Have the first student present a two-minute speech that offers one argument in support of some action or proposal. Have the second student present one point of refutation in response to this argument. This refutation should carefully follow the four-step refutation process.

**Exercise #2 refutation:** This exercise involves one student constructing an argument and several other students responding to that argument. One student will present a five-minute speech that involves two or three arguments in support of some action or proposal. The other students will, using the four-step method of refutation, construct at least three points of refutation about the arguments in the speech. Then, the group will discuss the points of refutation.

**Exercise #3 refutation and rebuilding:** This exercise involves two or three students. Have the first student present a two-minute speech that offers one argument in support of some action or proposal. Have the second student present one point of refutation in response to this argument. The refutation should carefully follow the four-step refutation process. Then either the first or the third student will carefully rebuild the original argument using the five-step rebuilding process.