
Debating

Making a Claim

The material you present in making your case can be broken down into three parts:

- **Assertion:** The actual claim you are making. This assertion is not simply an opinion, but is a statement that can be backed up.
- **Reason:** You are answering the “why” of the assertion... why do you believe the statement is true?
- **Evidence:** Back up the assertion with details.

For example, a Spring 2018 *Spectator* opinion piece asserted that Hamilton needs a longer reading period. Why? Because students need more time to study and finish projects without the constraints of also going to class. The evidence provided includes comparisons about the number of reading days provided by other NESAC schools. The author uses this evidence (statistics) to back up the reason she gives for the assertion. While this example comes from writing, the same holds true in a verbal debate.

Refuting a Claim

One element of a debate is the opportunity to counter the other party’s assertions. You can make these counterarguments based on several types of reasons.

- **Definitions:** Perhaps the meaning of a key term/idea is unclear in the other party’s argument; it’s also possible that the other party did not define a term which you can then use to your advantage (e.g., what does it mean to say that one approach is “better” than another?)
- **Logic:** The other party’s logical connections may not be as sound as they hoped. There may be generalizations or presumed causality; other times, there is a clear bias.
- **Grounds:** You can respond by pointing out gaps in the evidence used (e.g., not enough evidence, missing critical pieces of evidence, misinterpretations of evidence)

In the above example of reading days, one counterargument could be pointing out that Hamilton actually considers the Saturday and Sunday between Class and Charter Day’s concert and the true last day of classes (a Monday) to be reading days. Therefore, the assertion that Hamilton only offers two reading days (May 8 and May 9, 2018) is misleading.

Express Thyself!

Structuring a Rebuttal

Responding to what the other party has said can be done following a straightforward set of four steps:

1. “They say...” Start by directly referring to the other party’s argument
2. “But I say...” Give your counter-argument, which may include making the opposing argument or stating a different argument that runs contrary to the original
3. “Because...” You provide evidence for your counter-argument (or for why the other side’s interpretation is wrong)
4. “Therefore...” Show how your argument is better.

Therefore, the rebuttal might sound something like:

Our opponents have argued that Hamilton’s reading period is too short. However, the real reading period is on par with our NESCAC peer institutions and provides four days without classes in which students can prepare for their final exams and projects.

Furthermore, some final exams are later in the exam period, which means you may have a full week to spread out your studying for a specific exam. Therefore, the argument that we only have two days falls apart.