

Contesting Your Opponent's Evidence February 12, 2011 by Stefan Bauschard

In addition to advancing your own evidence-supported arguments in your debates, you need to be able to contest evidence that is presented by the other side. If you are able to make effective arguments against your opponent's evidence, the judge will likely review that evidence after the debate and consider the arguments that you have made against it. In this brief essay, I will review some of the main ways that you can make arguments against your opponent's evidence.

The evidence doesn't match the tag. This is the most common and effective criticism of evidence that is presented in debates. For example, debaters may tag a card, "Depression inevitable," but the evidence may only say that unemployment is high and that there will likely be a "recession." In this instance, the evidence is "power tagged" and does not match the claim being asserted in the tag.

The author is not qualified. If the argument is about economics, the author of the evidence should be an economist or should be citing an economist. For example, a blog post from an undergraduate student writing about his or her own economic observations is not fitting.

There are qualifiers in the evidence. Most reputable authors don't make direct, outrageous claims because they know that there are multiple causes of any given problem and that any prediction must be greeted with some caution. Instead, they add "qualifiers" to any claim that they make. So, to continue with the economics example, most qualified authors would not say that a "depression is inevitable," but rather that "a depression is possible." If evidence is actually written by a qualified author, it will likely have a number of "qualifiers" that you can use to attack the evidence. If the evidence does make direct, outrageous claims, it is probably not written by a qualified author.

The evidence is biased. "Bias" is a difficult argument to make because almost any advocate of a claim will have some sort of bias. They may have a professional reputation at stake, they may have a financial interest, they may have a political interest, or they may have some personal interest. Their professional reputation may be at stake because they have argued on behalf of the claim before. They may have a financial interest in the claim being correct. They could gain politically from the accuracy of the claim. For example, if the President says that the economy is rebounding such a claim will likely help him at the polls. Personally, they may be friends with the advocate of the claim.

Something in the evidence contradicts. Often, debaters will only read the parts of the evidence that supports their claim, but there will often be other parts of the evidence, usually not underlined, that contradicts the claim/tag. For example, a piece of evidence that says that a recession is possible now may also point out that that employment is rebounding. You should read through your opponent's evidence to look for arguments in the evidence that refute the claims that they are making.

The evidence is not consistent with what you know. Sometimes author's make claims in evidence that are blatantly inconsistent with reality. For example, debaters often read evidence that says that "a recession will cause a depression." But this is not consistent with what most people know; we had, for example, a severe recession in 2008 – often referred to as "The Great Recession" – but a depression did not result. You should point this out when refuting their evidence/claim.

The evidence is not timely. While recency is often an overrated evidence comparison, if something has changed in the world since the evidence was written that makes the evidence no longer relevant, you should point that out. For example, if the housing market and employment rebound in September of 2011, a quote that says the economy is in decline from January 2010 will not be timely.

There is not a sufficient data set. If a team argues that a recession will cause a depression and isolates the late 1920s, you can argue that one example of a recession causing a depression is not sufficient and that since there are many counter-examples of recessions not causing depressions that the data set to support the original claim is not sufficient.

The author makes other outrageous claims. Poorly qualified authors often make outrageous claims because there have no professional peer pressure that prevents the outrageous claims. If the author makes claims that seem intuitively outrageous, even if they aren't directly relevant to the argument being made, you should argue that this destroys the credibility of the author in regards to all of his or her claims.

There are no warrants. Warrants are *reasons* that the claim is true. Often, debaters will simply read evidence that simply *repeats* the claim that is being made in the evidence. For example, they may have a tag that says, "Economic decline now," and then read a one sentence card that says, "The economy is declining." In this case, the evidence doesn't have any *warrants* as to why the original claim/argument/tag is true and should therefore not be considered.

Attack the warrants. IF evidence has warrants, you can directly attack those. For example, if evidence that claims that the "economy is declining" says that unemployment is increasing, you could read evidence that says "unemployment is decreasing." If you attack the warrants, you are attacking the evidence that supports the claim.

While these are all effective means of contesting evidence, you do have to make sure that you are being consistent in your contest. For example, do not attack the qualifications, bias, timeliness, and lack of warrants in the other team's evidence if your evidence is also lacking in those qualities. If your evidence does have an advantage *relative* to theirs in these respects, it is useful to make these comparisons to contest their evidence, but if your evidence also fails these tests, do not bring them up when criticizing your opponent.