

Principles for Having a Good Debate

Debating is an art. I think that we can easily lose sight of this statement especially in the heat of an argument or in normal social parlance. Since the Greek era and into the early modern era, rhetoric was one of the subjects taught in the school systems. Rhetoric focuses on word choice, sentence structure, forming arguments, and, most importantly, portraying the intended message. In order to speak well and present a formed argument, the speaker needs to be trained and exercise the skill of rhetoric and debating. This guide presents some principles to remember when forming arguments as well as tips and tools for noticing issues in another person's arguments.

Principles for good discussion:

1. Know the question

Every debate centers around a question or a topic for discussion. One of the most common errors in debating or dialoging with another person is we lose sight of the original topic or the question. When this occurs, the simplest solution is to recognize the error and return to the original question.

Example: The principle question is: is the forest service managing the forests in Montana well? This topic includes such topics as forest health, recreation management, fire cycles and ecology, and management practices. But the conversation could easily delve into the lives and practices of individual people, which are outside the scope of this question. Topics that should not be included or would deviate from the questions are, best places to hike, camp, hunt, or fish, the new forest service building that cost a huge sum of money, the ways the forest service is providing outreach to the community.

Another common issue that stems from the principle question is errors regarding definitions and facts. Many people create errors in arguments simply by not agreeing on the definition of some of the words in the original question. The easiest solution is to stop the discussion and agree to use the same terms and definitions. The most common example used to describe this issue is the following: Go put my money in a bank. So he went and buried the money by the side of a river.

Example 2: Is the prison sentence for rape too long? I sense that the common error most people will make in attempting to answer this question will regard facts and definitions. Do you know what is meant by rape? What is considered just? How do the court and prison systems work?

2. Follow the arguments

The next major issue that occurs commonly in any discussion is a lack of following the logic of the discussion. The system of logic should flow from one argument to the next fluidly and reach a conclusion that ties all of the points together. The analogy that I want to use to describe this idea is that of laying brick. Each brick is laid next to the preceding brick to form a line of bricks. You would not want a side walk where the bricks are randomly spaced and cemented without any rhyme or reason. Similarly you wouldn't want to listen to an argument that you can't follow. Creating a logical series of statements takes a lot of work and a lot of practice. The universities

teach classes on logic to help students recognize problems of logic and form better arguments. These classes are rather complex and I do not wish to delve into their intricacies. If you are unsure whether the point makes sense, ask: hey I didn't understand that last point and its connection to the previous point, could you clarify?

Example: the topic is the death penalty and I am making the argument that there are cases where people should be put to death. The arguments are as follows. The death penalty is useful in deterring people from breaking the law. Those who see someone die for the crime will think about committing the crime. We need to protect our society by enforcing ways to prevent criminal activity. The best way to protect our society is through the death penalty. Since the death penalty deters some criminals, we should use this form of deterrent on those crimes that are the worst.

3. Fallacies

Fallacies are errors in logic. Some are simple and easy to catch, other are rather tricky and take a trained person to notice the issue. I will list some common fallacies below. If you are interested in building your skills in noticing fallacies, I recommend that you watch commercials. Nearly every commercial contains a fallacy (and if you choose to do this, you will probably never buy a product from a commercial again).

- I. Fallacies of ambiguity: these fallacies relate to problems in the way the words or language are used.
 - a. Fallacy of Equivocation: using a word in two different ways like the example above using bank as a financial institution and bank as the side of a river.
 - b. Fallacy of Accent: stressing a specific word when speaking to provide extra emphasis when emphasis is not needed. Example: be courteous to strangers. Just strangers what about everyone else.
 - c. Fallacy of Hypostatization: treating an abstract noun as a concrete noun. The easiest examples of these are colors. The color red does not exist outside of the object that it colors. Red can make a mess of this situation. No, red can't do anything it is a color.
- II. Fallacies of Presumption: these fallacies deal with the assumptions made in the argument
 - a. Fallacy of generalization: taking an issue and generalizing it even though it should not be generalized. Women make this fallacy a lot. Just kidding, but this is a great example of generalization.
 - b. Fallacy of Slippery Slope: making claims that once an action is taken there is an inevitable outcome. I think this one is easy to spot.
 - c. Fallacy of False Analogy: the analogy used to make the point doesn't match the issue at hand. This fallacy, I think, is the most difficult one to notice. In order to recognize the fallacy, you must determine whether the analogy matches the situation.
 - d. Fallacy of Begging the Question: instead of offering a new argument, the person restates the questions in a new way.
- III. Fallacies of Relevance: these fallacies relate to the type of reasoning used

- a. Fallacy of Personal Attack (aka ad hominem): instead of attacking the argument, premise, question, or analogy, you attack the person. Well you are using that analogy because you are a dumb person.
- b. Fallacy of Mob Appeal: we should agree to the argument because everyone else does.
- c. Fallacy of Appeal to Pity: you should agree with my argument because you are a fellow Christian and every good Christian would.
- d. Fallacy of Appeal to Authority: you appeal to someone in authority instead of making an argument.
- e. Fallacy of Ignorance: using the argument that since no one knows, then it must be true. There is intelligent life in the universe, since no one has been able to prove otherwise.

All of these tips are meant to help us in answering these questions. Knowing some of the issues that are part of the debate process will help us notice when other people use them and help us make better decisions. Throughout this series I hope that we will keep these in mind and help each other to solidify our arguments and work towards answers to these questions and the complexities of life.