

Rhetorical Constructs for Classroom Debates

Overview

Whatever the format of classroom debating being used – Table Debates, SPontaneous ARgumentation Debates, Showdown Debates, Intelligence Squared Debates – or structured argumentation activity – Shaping Arguments, Refutation Two-Chance, Argumentative Analysis, or many others – there is common language used to introduce or present argumentation. This common language is formed for use by anyone engaged in an academic or public debate into something we call **rhetorical constructs**. Rhetorical constructs can also be called sentence stems or templates, though they have a particular purpose, power, and breadth of application when thought about and taught in the context of argument.

As Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein explore in depth in *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*, students must have the access to and facility with the language of argument – its common templates and rhetorical moves – in order to succeed academically, especially in college. The influential argument theorist Stephen Toulmin made a similar, if more allusive, point, in his 1984 book *An Introduction to Reasoning*. There he calls these standard tools of argument construction “tropes” and “linguistic strategies.” Though the names may vary somewhat, there is a consensus on the importance of providing students with these commonly needed tools to successfully perform their academic work.

Here, then, are a set of useful rhetorical constructs for students engaged in a debate or structured argumentation activity. One thing to notice: all of the argumentation is referenced in the present tense. This is, in effect, a stylistic choice. It is not incorrect for a debater to reference the other side’s argumentation in the past tense (“they said,” “they argued that,” etc.). What is (at least somewhat) important is that the debaters maintain a consistency of tenses throughout the debate, and keeping everything in the present tense (“they say,” “they argue that”) seems more dynamic.

Initial Arguments/Case Arguments

- **My name is _____, and I am arguing that** [insert overall position]. **My first argument is** [insert argumentative claim]. [Follow with evidence and reasoning. Avoid using the phrase: “My evidence for this is _____.” Simply begin stating the evidence and reasoning.]
- **My name is _____.** **On the question** [insert debatable issue], **I/we take the position that** [insert overall position]. **One reason for this is** [insert argumentative claim]. [Follow with evidence and reasoning.]
- **My second argument is** [insert argumentative claim]. [Follow with evidence and reasoning.]
- **Another reason that I/we believe that** [insert overall position] **is that** [insert argumentative claim.] [Follow with evidence and reasoning.]

Counter-Arguments

- **My name is _____, and I will be responding to the other side’s case [or opening] arguments. They first argue that** [insert their first argumentative claim.] **I/We disagree with that.** [Insert counter-argument, starting with the claim, then following with the evidence and reasoning.]
- **A second reason we disagree with their claim that** [repeat their argumentative claim] **is that** [insert second counter-argument.]
- **Also,** [insert second counter-argument.]
- **Secondly,** [insert second counter-argument.]
- **My name is _____, and I will be responding to the other side’s case [or opening] arguments. They first argue that** [insert their first argumentative claim,] **but their evidence to support that claim is weak. The evidence says that**

[insert interpretation or reasoning of the evidence that exposes a flaw or weakness.] **It doesn't say that** [insert their interpretation or reasoning of the evidence.] **They haven't supported this claim which means that** [statement of the impact that this has on support for their overall position.]

- **I will be addressing the** [affirmative or negative] **team's arguments. First, they say** [insert argumentative claim.] **That isn't true.** [Insert counter-argument, starting with the claim, then following with the evidence and reasoning.]
- **They also argue that** [insert their second argumentative claim.] **But their evidence doesn't support this claim. Their evidence would need to say** [insert reasoning that would apply to evidence that is aligned, credible, sufficient to support their claim.] **It doesn't say that. It actually says** [insert reasoning that shows that the evidence is not aligned, credible, or sufficient.] **This means that this argument isn't true that therefore** [statement of the impact that this has on support for their overall position.]

Rebuttal

- **We are/I am arguing that** [insert original argumentative claim.] **They counter-argue that** [insert counter-claim], **but that isn't true:** [insert refutation.]
- **We are/I am arguing that** [insert original argumentative claim.] **They make the argument that** [insert counter-claim]. **However, our original evidence denies this** [or addresses this.] [Insert reasoning to show how this is true and why the original evidence is better than the evidence for the counter-argument.]
- **They also make the counter-argument that** [insert second counter-claim.] **This is also not really true.** [Insert refutation.] **What this means is that** [repeat original argumentative claim,] **which is very important because** [connect the argumentative claim back to the overall position, emphasizing the importance of this argument to proving the position.]



- **Then they say that** [insert second counter-claim] **but without much if any evidence.** [Reason through how the evidence for the original argument is more convincing – more aligned, more credible, more sufficient – than the evidence for the counter-argument.] **We are proving that** [repeat original argumentative claim.] **This means we win the debate since** [connect the argumentative claim back to the overall position, emphasizing the importance of this argument to proving the position.]