



Lesson Plan

Unit Name: Big Questions Debate

Topic: Refuting an Argument

Essential Questions:

1. How does one map out an argument in order to facilitate refuting that argument?
2. What are the different types of ways that you can refute an argument?
3. What is the difference between an “offensive” response to an argument and a “defensive” response to an argument?

Objectives:

1. Students will be able to break down an argument into not only its parts (claim, warrant, and impact), but also its premises (the steps the argument takes in order to establish a warrant or impact).
2. Students will be able to identify different types of responses to an argument: an “offensive” response vs. a “defensive” response, an indict vs. a “turn,” a response to a warrant vs. a response to an impact, and so on.
3. Students will be able to generate responses (of different types) to an argument.

Instructional Materials Needed:

You will need several example arguments (or source passages) that can be used for premise mapping activities and as example arguments for students to refute. The number of examples you will need will depend on how many times you plan to iterate the activities. You may choose to use some student generated arguments (for example, arguments that students produced during the “constructing an argument” lesson). However, you will also want an example argument that you have selected (or an example passage from which the class will construct an argument), so as to ensure that it is a good example for the lesson activities.

Overview of Lesson:

This lesson has three main parts: (1) students will learn how to break down an argument into its premises; (2) students will brainstorm responses to the argument they have mapped out, and you will use the responses generated by this brainstorm to introduce students systematically to the different types of responses that can be used in order to refute an argument; (3) students will use what they have learned to practice generating responses to arguments.

Detailed Step-by-Step Lesson:

Argument mapping [25 minutes]

The best way to figure out how to refute an argument is to begin by breaking it up into its parts. For this exercise, you will be best served by using an example passage that has an internally complex warrant. In other words, you want an argument that proves its point by going through several (3 or 4) steps. So, you will want to select (or write) a passage that makes an argument in a way that fits this criterion.

Start by giving every student a copy of the passage that contains the example argument. Have each student mark for themselves the area(s) of the passage that contain the claim, warrant, and impact of the argument. (Students will be able to do this if you have previously taught the “constructing an argument” lesson). Briefly discuss to ensure that everyone is on the same page.

Now identify the portion(s) of the argument that contain multiple steps. Most likely, the “warrant” part of the argument goes through multiple steps in order to justify the claim being advanced by the argument. You now want to focus on that part of the argument and walk students through breaking it up into its steps, or premises. You can think of each of these premises as advancing an argument of its own, while in combination they work together to provide justification for the claim of the larger argument. The first time through this process, you may want to simply guide them through identifying each of the steps together, creating an outline of the argument on the board. (For extra practice, you may wish to have a second passage that you ask students to map out into claim, warrant, impact, and then premises in partners).

Students will now have one or more arguments mapped out into component parts and premises, and you will have at least one of these outlined on the board. This is an excellent time to introduce the first (and most basic) type of refutation that students can make against an argument: they can argue that the warrant of the argument is simply missing a step, and as a result that it doesn’t justify the claim. You can illustrate the point by covering up one of the steps in the argument you have outlined on the board. Ask students: without that step, would the argument justify its claim? You can then ask students to practice writing a response to the argument (the version of it with one of the premises covered up) that explains that the argument does not prove its point because it is missing a step. You will want to emphasize that successfully refuting an argument in this way involves *both* explaining that the argument is missing a step *and* explaining why the argument requires that step in order to justify the claim it is making. You may wish to have students attempt this type of response a few times in order to get the hang of it. (For extra practice, you may wish to partner students and have them give their “no warrant” refutations for each other).

Brainstorming + additional types of responses to an argument [25 minutes]

Once students are able to break down an argument into its premises, and identify when a needed premise is missing, it becomes much easier to generate responses to that argument. You can begin the process of generating additional responses to the example argument with a group brainstorm. Point out to students that an easy way to come up with ideas for responses to an argument is to simply focus on any one of its parts/premises and think of responses that would deny or claim the opposite of that part/premise.

Give students a few minutes to generate ideas either individually or with partners. Then, solicit responses from students and generate a class list of responses. At this point your concern is not so much that student responses are complete arguments (though you may want to point out to them ideas of what might help complete their proposed responses) because your objective is to generate a list from which you can illustrate different *types* of responses.

Once you have a set of arguments brainstormed, point out an example of each of the following types of arguments, explain what that response type is, and solicit suggestions from the students about other responses from your brainstorm that are of the same type. Here are basic types to look for, but you may also have additional ideas:

The most basic distinction between types of responses to an argument is between **offensive** responses and **defensive** responses. A defensive response to an argument claims that that argument, or some specific part of it, is false or unjustified. An offensive response goes further by claiming either that that argument, or some specific part of it, is the *opposite* of the truth, or that it proves the opposite of what it intends to prove. A silly example: suppose you argue that it is better to watch sitcoms than sports because sitcoms are funny. A defensive response might be that sitcoms are not very funny. An offensive response might be that sports are actually funnier than sitcoms.

In debate, offensive arguments are often called “**turns**.” And we can distinguish between **two different types of turns**: those that claim that the opposite of the argument being responded to is true, and those that claim that the argument being responded to proves the opposite of what it intends. Consider our silly example. A turn of the first kind would argue that, in fact, sitcoms are less funny than sports. A turn of the second kind would argue that it is better to watch sports *because* sitcoms are funnier, and for some reason it is better to watch something that is less funny. (You will want to note that it is a bad idea to make both types of turns simultaneously because they would work together to help your opponent’s position rather than your own. For example, if you say both that sports are funnier than sitcoms *and* that it is worse for a show to be funny, then you will have inadvertently provided a reason why sitcoms are better to watch than sports).

Another distinction between types of responses is that some responses are **empirical** and others are **analytical**. Those are fancy names, but the distinction is straightforward. Empirical responses contest a matter of fact, while analytical responses contest a line of reasoning. Often, an empirical response will be a response that is about or depends on a statistic, study, or set of real world examples. In contrast, an analytical response will often be about either a question of values or principles, or about the conclusions that we should draw from a statistic, study, or real world example (rather than any of those items in their own right).

It might be helpful to point out that, when contesting an **empirical** argument, one can choose to indict it in several different ways. For example, you could question whether the empirical claim being made is generalizable (for instance, are they drawing too broad a conclusion from a limited set of examples?). Or, you could question the soundness of its methodology (does it really establish a causal connection rather than a correlation?). You could also question its origins: should we be suspicious of the author/organization that published/performed the underlying study? Of course, you can also go on the offensive by presenting a contrary piece of empirical evidence.

Another way to respond to an argument is to contest the relative weight or importance of its impact. This type of response is often referred to as a **weighing** argument. A weighing argument concedes that there might be some truth to the argument, but minimizes its importance. For example—returning to the sitcoms vs. sports example from above—a weighing argument might say, “it might be true that sitcoms provide more humor than sports, but providing humor is less important than providing thrilling or suspenseful moments, and sports provide more of those.”

Of course, there are also “**no warrant**” responses (discussed above).

Over the course of this discussion, you will be able to create groups of arguments from the brainstorm that fit each type of response. You can use this groups as illustration for the explanation you provide of each of the types of responses.

Additional Practice [Homework or 20 minutes]

Now that students have a set of response types, you can provide them with additional practice by breaking them off into pairs and asking them to map out an argument and come up with at least one response to it of each of the types you have identified. If students have already written some of their own arguments on the Big Questions topic, you could ask pairs to exchange arguments and map out/refute their partner's argument. Alternatively, you could provide each pair with a new argument.

Informal Assessment Strategies:

You will be able to informally assess student understanding in larger group discussions, monitoring of smaller group/partner work, and the refutations that students produce in small group, partner work, and/or individual work.

Formal Assessment Strategies:

At the end of the lesson, you may wish to assign students an argument to map out (dividing it first into claim, warrant, and impact, and then mapping out its premises) and refute. In order to test their understanding, you could ask them to refute the argument by providing at least one response of each of the types that you identified during the lesson. In addition, you could choose to collect any or all of the work produced by students during the course of the lesson: their "no warrant" argument or their practice refutation argument.

Reflection/Review for Future:

You will refer back to mapping out the premises of arguments, as well as to the different types of refutation of arguments whenever you work with students on responding to an opponent's case/arguments.