



How To Be Effective In Informal Debates

BY RICHARD P. BURKE

PURPOSE:

Those who master basic debating skills will be effective in public life and (often) in private life. Whether debating with your spouse, your employer, your friends at a coffee shop, or your state senator, using basic debating tools will improve your chances of winning the argument. The purpose of this course is to provide you with these basic debating guidelines...

1 IDENTITY YOUR AUDIENCE

Who are you really talking to in your debate? Obviously, if you are in a private one-on-one discussion, your audience will be the person you are talking to. But if you are at a family event, a coffee shop, a TV or radio show, or a service club, think carefully about it - **your real audience may be those around you who are listening, not the person you are debating.** It might be smart to focus on convincing **THEM** instead of your opponent!

2 ALWAYS BE NICE... NO MATTER WHAT

Political debates can be vigorous and emotional. **But when an issue becomes too emotional or personal, reason stops working as a tool of persuasion.** If you find yourself raising your voice, calling people "idiots" (especially those you are debating), pointing fingers at faces to make a point, or using profanity or wild gestures, you have already lost. **Those in your audience will see any display of temper as a sign of desperation, weakness, and frustration.** Let your opponents lose THEIR temper. **Whenever they get meaner, you get nicer.** You will come off as being reasonable, credible, and your audience will like you.

3 YOUR OPPONENT IS NOT YOUR ENEMY

Misguided? Perhaps. Ill-informed? Very likely. Naive? Sure. **But most people are well-intentioned and, like you, are doing what they truly believe will create a better world.** America is about a competition of ideas, and our founders risked everything to preserve it for us. You will build credibility with your audience, and maybe even make friends with your opponents, if you treat them as honorable but mistaken colleagues, rather than an "enemy to be slain by the sword of reason."

4 YOU DON'T HAVE TO KNOW EVERYTHING

As much as we'd like to think so, we don't have all the answers. Who does? **If your opponent raises an issue you don't have a good answer for, don't try to fake, bluster, lie, or bluff your way out of it.** If your opponent makes an interesting point, it is alright to say so; state that you would like to think about it and discuss it later. This lets you to move on to the next point, buys you time to strengthen your position, and builds your credibility with others who will see you as reasonable and a good listener. **Even if you lose this debate, your opinion will carry more weight in the future. ABOVE ALL ELSE - if you use facts, and claim to know something, be SURE of the facts you cite.**

5 LOOK FOR COMMON VALUES OR OUTCOMES

A debates rarely comes to a constructive conclusion unless two sides can agree on outcomes they are both fighting for. Once two people can agree on desired values or outcomes, one can evaluate which approach promotes those values or outcomes best. For example, "cost" is a value established by debating "What is the least expensive way for us to maintain good roads?" Once this value is established, you have enough common ground for meaningful debate to take place. **Ask your opponent what values or outcomes they are trying to promote, and share the values or outcomes you are trying to promote with your opponent and your audience.** If you can agree on some of these, **you can win by simply showing that your approach is the best.**

6 FRAME THE DISCUSSION BY ESTABLISHING VALUES

If you are promoting the virtues of chocolate, would you rather frame the discussion in terms of **pleasure**: “Does chocolate bring joy to people,” or in terms of **harm**: “Does chocolate pose a health risk?” **As you can see, whomever is able to “frame a discussion” in this way usually wins the debate.** If you are not able to establish agreed values as discussed above, it is important to establish at least one value by first having a debate over what is to be achieved in the discussion.

7 PUT YOUR BEST ARGUMENTS FIRST

In journalism, there is a rule saying, “Don’t bury the lead!” **This means, do not bury your best arguments deep in your news article.** In debate, people sometimes do this with the intent of saving their knock-out blow for the end. This almost never works because leading with your weak arguments offers momentum to your opponent and you may lose your audience before you get to your strongest arguments. **Always put your best arguments at the top!**

8 THANK YOUR OPPONENT AND AUDIENCE FOR THEIR ATTENTION

This is really an extension of Debate Tool #2, “Always Be Nice... No Matter What!” as shown above. **Remember - no matter how obnoxious your opponent might be, he or she believed you were worth spending their time and energy on. And no matter who makes up your audience, they thought you were worth their time.** Thank them, and do it with sincerity no matter how pleasant or unpleasant they may have been. You will show yourself to be classy and will earn respect as a debater - even from your opponents.