MAKING REBUTTAL OVERVIEWS MORE EFFECTIVE
by David M. Cheshier

In the past ten years, the tactic of starting each of the last two rebuttals with a short overview has become popular almost everywhere. Students now routinely instruct judges to set aside extra paper for their introduction, and many judges are enthusiastic about them: if done well, overviews add an element of real eloquence to the rebuttal, and more importantly, they provide debaters an opportunity for synthesis, a chance to offer a more fully elaborated "big picture."

Of course, these overviews aren't perfect. Sometimes they run on too long, diverting time from critical line-by-line coverage. At other times they feel a bit perfunctory, as if tacked on at the top, repetitive of more nuanced explanations that will come later. Sometimes even outstanding debaters get a bit derailed when they end up spending a full minute or more explicating the "five reasons we're winning."

A word about my own bias: Like many judges I like the summation section at the top of the rebuttal. But, and perhaps this puts me in the minority, I believe introductory overviews tend to be too long, frequently contributing too little to the overall tactical work a great rebuttal must accomplish. My purpose in writing is to invite you to consider how the introductory overview can be improved.

A note too about terminology: In what follows, I want to distinguish between short introductions that start off an entire rebuttal, and introductory assessments offered along the way in a speech, such as at the top of a major position. So when a student starts off his or her rebuttal with an assessment ("The case turn nullifies the advantage, meaning any risk of Clinton outweighs"), I refer to that kind of speech starter as a "rebuttal overview," or RO. I aim to contrast that sort of global introduction with internal overviews ("On Clinton, remember: all their uniqueness arguments actually feed the disadvantage. Now on the 2AC #1: No link..."), and refer to those as IO's. The basic gist of this essay is a recommendation that RO's be used sparingly, and that IO's be used more frequently.

What Goes Into a Good Overview

Rebuttal overviews, RO's, should only be used if they make strategic choices more powerfully clear for your judge, and if they free up time you would otherwise have to expend elsewhere. Unless they meet both criteria, in my opinion, you should think about eliminating the overview.

To see why this is so, consider that a major benefit, perhaps the overriding benefit, of the RO is how it provides debaters with an opportunity to escape the sometimes straightjacketing constraints of the flowsheet. If rebuttalists simply follow the previous sequence of arguments, or argue methodically line by line, a kind of deadening and equalizing effect sometimes results where everything blurs together and all claims appear equal in significance. The RO allows speakers to pull one or two major ideas out of this morass and call them to the attention of a judge who might not appreciate their real importance to his or her decision. Given this, the major question you should consider in formulating your overview should be: What arguments are most productively pulled to the top of the flow? And, relatedly, will moving this claim around on the flowsheet benefit our position (both with respect in time and strategy), or will it end up costing us in both areas?

In the couple seconds time you have to think about your rebuttal introduction, think about using these rules of thumb:

In thinking about the round, if you find yourself returning to the same central point over and over as you prep major positions, move that point into the overview. Does the counterplan have a transforming effect on every other argument? Do you find yourself making such a point on every disadvantage? Then move the thought to the top. Say it once, explain it fully, and move on to the line by line. Then, when you get to the same point later, your reference can be speedier and even a bit cryptic, since the idea has been explained in full from the start. Do all the disadvantages suffer the same uniqueness flaw? Instead of making the point elaborately on every disadvantage, put it at the top.

If time permits, think about what one argument your opponent has most screwed up, and consider discussion of it at the top. Or conversely, decide what one argument in the debate most favors your position, and move that to the top. If a major response has been mishandled from the beginning of the round, make it the RO ("From the start, they've never understood that our plan does not require Russia to do anything - it only makes an offer. This takes out their disadvantage links!"). Or if a major aspect of the case has been dropped all along, make that the RO ("At no point in this debate have they even tried to answer the nuclear accidents scenario. A totally conceded nuclear war!").

You might also *consider using the RO to address glaring weaknesses in your own position.* Has an argument been mishandled or dropped by your partner? Sometimes it can be quite effective to acknowledge the problem at the beginning of the rebuttal, get it out of the way, and then move on to other issues that favor you.

If there is an issue of great remaining complexity, consider a full explanation of your position in an RO. I often seen rounds where students introduce a smart counterplan, specific to the affirmative and designed to nullify some major part of the case. But because counterplan texts are read at top speed, the strategic brilliance of the maneuver can become confused in the judge's mind until too late in the debate, and judges sometimes find themselves wondering how, for example, the counterplan you've designed escapes your own disadvantages. In cases like this, where either the strategic complexity or argumentative sophistication of your claims might leave the less informed behind, consider allocating time in an RO to a quick summary explanation of your strategy.

Making the Overview More Powerful

Once you decide to use a rebuttal summarizing overview and what to include in it, how can it be made more effective and powerful?

First, *keep it short.* At the start of a rebuttal you have the judge's full attention. There is no need to orate at length about your argument. Say what must be said once, explain the point clearly, and move on. Guard

against letting valuable rebuttal time slip away. And, related to this, *keep the overview as simple as possible*. Overviews which start with words like, "There are seven reasons why..." will almost always prove a disastrous misallocation of time later in the speech.

Use the overview to make impact assessments. Overviews are often most powerful when they make assessments across arguments which could not successfully be made on the impact subpoint of any particular position. The overview can even provide some limited opportunities for making new impact calculations. Stress what is exceptional about case or disadvantage impacts, or alternatively, lay out a brief framework for judge decisionmaking (e.g., use the summary to remind the judge of the critique's *a priori* status).

Think about scripting out the rebuttal overview in advance of the speech. The 2AR often has some time to think about the larger issues in the round while the second negative rebuttalist prepares. While the critical issues sometimes change given radical 2NR choices, usually they don't. Therefore, if you give the 2AR, consider scripting out word for word what you might want to say at the start of your speech. It will only take a couple seconds to modify the script right before you speak, if necessary. An advantage of such advance scripting is how it keeps you focused on moving quickly through the overview, and minimizes the need for extensive elaboration and repetition. Obviously such scripts are not to be read at hyperspeed, but should be delivered with eloquence and a sense of urgency and forcefulness.

Think about your summaries after the debate. Often judge critiques will use rebuttal overviews as the starting point for decision explanations. Listen carefully to how your critics interpreted what you said, where they seemed to diverge from your own assessments, and where they accepted your analysis. At home, consider how you could have more persuasively overviewed the rebuttal. How could putting the point differently have swayed the judge to your point of view? What might have been emphasized to clarify judge confusion about the strategy you defended? Spending time at home focused on big picture questions and their clear articulation will strengthen your big picture and scenario-construction skills in future debates.

Conclusion:
Why Overreliance on Rebuttal Overviews Can be Dangerous

Back to the beginning: rebuttal overviews are popular for many reasons. Some love them because they like how introductions appeal to lay judges who might be less inclined to carefully follow the line by line execution of major positions. Others like the freedom summaries give debaters to escape the sheer technical work involved in arguing line by line. And of course others appreciate the occasion it provides for "big picture" debating, where everything is "put together" for the judge.

But sometimes forgotten are the dangers in allocating substantial time to the eloquent overview. Some judges feel the need to give RO's extra scrutiny, since new claims can easily be hidden there and left unchallenged directly by opposing debaters. Rebuttalists tend to overallocate time to the first issues they address (after all, as one speaks during the first minute, it seems the rebuttal will last forever), and so critical line by line coverage is too easily shortchanged at the bottom of the speech.

It is worth considering the possibility that the RO might not actually be the best vehicle for a student to communicate the "big picture." This is so because the big picture is necessarily and best conveyed throughout a speech, and not just at its start. In my experience, judges are most impressed with students who, at every moment in the rebuttal, convey a grasp of their arguments and the interrelationships between those positions. If this is true, moving all big picture assessments to the start of the speech can actually hinder strategic clarity and execution to the extent it trades off with argument-by-argument assessment.

Even lay judges may not be best served by short eloquence bursts at the top of the speech. I've noticed that many inexperienced judges don't even write down the overview. They'll sit there with their hands neatly folded together, and wait to start flowing until the line-by-line arguing begins.

These combined risks, that time will be misallocated, that overviews will divert from better "big picture" conveyance elsewhere, and that judges may not flow the overview or understand its role, lead me to recommend a modified approach which still has a place for limited rebuttal overviews, but which minimizes their use.

Many of the best debaters prefer to put short introductory sections of analysis at the top of each main issue, as opposed to grouping it all together at the start of the speech. Thus there will be short introductions at the top of each advantage, disadvantage, topicality position or critique still being extended. This is the better way to go. First, since these internal overviews (IO's) are directly pertinent to the issue at hand, the judge is likely to write your points down; after all, he or she is looking at the Clinton flow as you offer an assessment about the Clinton debate, so it only makes sense to flow. Second, IO's provide debates with more frequent occasions to articulate connections and convey the big picture, and thereby send a constantly reinforced message that the rebuttalist understands the intricacies of argumentative interaction. Third, IO's are less likely to derail overall time allocation, since they are not all assembled into the very start of the speech.

The habit of generating internal overviews on, say, each disadvantage improves your strategic skill as well, in part because the practice requires more mental work than just coming up with a pithy rebuttal opener. The practice forces one to give specific thought to each position, and to think about the strengths and weaknesses of that argument and an opponent's responses to it. The hyper-generality of most RO's too often lets debaters off the hook, and permits ultimately unpersuasive and banal summary claims, of the "Call for our cards!" or "We're winning topicality, killing them on nationalism, and the counterplan solves the case!" variety.

Of course, IO's do not foreclose the option of rebuttal introductions, But as you learn to introduce each major position, and declare your view of its strategic centrality to the debate, you'll find how little exposition needs to be productively moved to the very start of the speech. The result will be shorter and more powerful rebuttal overviews, supplemented by compelling issue-specific analysis; in short, the best of both worlds.

All of this is less relevant when debating before a judge who has explicitly stated a preference for extended rebuttal overviews. Obviously, for such critics you will best succeed by adapting to their bias. But my guess is that for the vast majority of other judges, you'll do better by offering very brief and powerful rebuttal introductions, elaborated along the way with issue-by-issue assessments.

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