This system of flowing ensures that debaters are able to follow the flow of the round and easily recognize when arguments have or have not been responded to.

**Responding: Refutation and Rebuttal**
Flowing is an essential skill for the successful debater but ultimately is only a means to an end: generating clash by responding to one’s opponent. Responding to arguments is the core element of debate and is broadly divided into two categories: refutation and rebuttal. *Refutation* is the process of answering an opponent’s argument. *Rebuttal* is the process of defending one’s arguments against an opponent’s attacks. Debaters will find themselves doing both refutation and rebuttal in every debate round, and the line between the two will often blur. Additionally, both refutation and rebuttal share the same basic goal: to respond to arguments.

Responsive debaters do four things:

1. Locate the argument they wish to answer.
2. Summarize the argument to which they are responding.
3. Respond to the argument.
4. Explain the impact.

**Locating the Argument**
This does not simply mean that a debater must find the argument for himself; the debater must locate the argument on the flow for his judge. In Public Forum, the debater will typically signpost, or refer to the portion of the case in which the argument is found. For example, a
debater may say, “Look at our opponent’s third contention.” This enables the judge to go to that place on his flow, locate the argument, and flow the debater’s response. Without such clear signposting, judges will inevitably be confused about what the speaker is responding to. Clarity about location is key to the judge’s understanding of an argument and to the debaters crafting a clear round.

In Congressional Debate, locating an argument means knowing which speakers have made or responded to a particular argument. If three debaters have made an argument that the bill will increase unemployment, then a speaker wishing to refute them should know and mention the names of each of those debaters. This demonstrates awareness to the judge, who is now more likely to reward the speaker for being engaged in the debate.

**Summarizing the Argument**

Simply saying “Go to my opponent’s third contention. They are wrong because . . . ” is not enough. A debater must tell the judge what argument he is answering so that the judge understands the argument that the debater is making in response. This summary should be no longer than 5–10 seconds and should include the claim and a brief description of the warrant of the argument being answered. This makes the premise the debater is challenging extremely clear to the judge.

**Responding to the Argument**

A response can challenge any part of the argument: the claim, the warrant, or the impact. Claim- and impact-level challenges typically do not respond to the reasoning provided by the opposing side; rather, they provide alternate reasons why the claim is ultimately untrue or why the
argument is less important than the opposing side wants the judge to believe. For example: “My opponent argues that this resolution will increase unemployment by stifling private sector growth. This is not true because the resolution will increase public spending on infrastructure, thus creating more jobs.” This statement does not challenge the explicit reasoning behind the opposing argument: the bill will stifle private sector growth. Rather, it challenges the claim that unemployment will go up by providing an alternate means of increasing jobs.

An impact-level challenge also does not address the explicit reasoning behind an argument; rather, it explains why the argument is fundamentally less important than the opposing side wants the judge to believe. For example: “My opponent says millions of jobs would be lost because private sector expansion will be stifled. These lost jobs, though unfortunate, are a necessary step to restructuring our economy for the twenty-first century.” Again, the debater is not disputing the claim that jobs will be lost; he simply claims that the impact is a necessary evil.

Thus, claim- and impact-level responses do not disprove the argument being answered; they merely provide alternative reasons to disregard the argument or reasons that carry greater weight than the original argument. While claim and impact challenges are perfectly acceptable, challenges to warrants are usually the most compelling form of refutation. Challenges to warrants explain why an opponent’s explicit reasoning is incorrect; challenges to data demonstrate that the opposing debater is simply making assertions unsupported by fact. For example: “My opponent argues that the resolution would increase unemployment by stifling private sector growth. This is
not true because the resolution actually increases private sector expansion by funneling money through the federal government into the hands of private contractors.” This directly challenges the opponent’s warrant by explaining why the opposite effect will take place. These arguments are typically the most engaging because they target the explicit reasoning of the opposing debater. Warrant-level challenges demonstrate strong critical thinking skills to the judge—more so than claim-level responses, which do not necessarily engage with the line of reasoning used by the other side, or impact-level responses, which typically are not as strong as warrant-level responses.

Another way to think about the various types of responses is to use some rudimentary logic. A *claim-level* response follows this model:

Debater 1 — A, because B  
Debater 2 — C, because D

This exchange offers two noncompeting arguments (“A” and “C”) with noncompeting warrants (“B” and “D”). A judge could evaluate each argument separately with little interaction between them. Both arguments could be true or both false; this does not produce clash.

A *warrant-level* response follows this model:

Debater 1 — A, because B  
Debater 2 — Not A, because Not B

In this exchange, two competing arguments (“A” and “Not A”) are presented in direct opposition to each other, with competing warrants (“B” and “Not B”). A judge is forced to evaluate these claims in competition with each other because only one of the arguments can be true. This produces clash and healthy debate.
Explaining the Impact

After the debater has responded, she needs to explain the impact of her response. She can choose between two separate kinds of impacts: impacts on the real world and impacts in the debate. An impact on the real world details the effect the response will have on some element of society. It should explain in detail what will happen, good or bad, as a result of the argument (for further explanation, see Chapter 3: Argument Construction). An impact on the debate details the effect the response has on the opponent’s argument. It connects the argument that is being made to the ballot and decision that the judge ultimately must make. A good response will contain both a real-world impact and an impact on the debate round. For example:

Because the resolution will not stifle, but rather will stimulate, the private sector, millions of jobs will be created and millions of families will be better off. This argument is central to the affirmative’s position, and now that it has been turned against them, it should be clear that a negative ballot is justified.

This impact begins with a real-world explanation of the argument’s effect and ends with an explanation of the argument’s weight and importance in the debate.

Offense and Defense in Debate

An important distinction exists between offensive arguments and defensive arguments. “Offense” refers to a proactive reason to vote for one side of the debate; “defense” refers to a reason to disregard or discredit an
argument made by an opposing debater. For example, an argument that claims a resolution will increase employment is offense because it gives the judge a reason to endorse the resolution. An argument that says the resolution will not increase employment by as much as has been claimed is defense because it provides no proactive reason to vote against the resolution but, rather, attempts to mitigate, or lessen, the affirmative impact. It defends against a claim made by the other side; it does not compel the judge to vote one way or another. Typically, offensive responses are more persuasive because the debater can derive tangible impacts from them and explain them to the judge. Hearing that jobs will be created is much more meaningful to the judge than hearing that “only” 10,000 jobs will be lost (instead of 20,000).

That said, some defensive responses can impress judges. The most notable of these is a methodological indictment of data. This is when a debater analyzes and explains the flaws in an opponent’s evidence. For example, if a team presents a study and the opposing team explains why the study’s methodology was flawed, they are using a defensive response that demonstrates a deep understanding of evidence and related issues. Hence, while offensive responses are preferable, good defensive responses can be made.

**Responding in Congressional Debate**

In Congressional Debate, every speaker except for the author or sponsor must respond to opposing debaters. If competitors choose not to do so, Congressional Debate ceases to be debate and turns into competing oratories. Each speaker, therefore, must respond to at least one key