

[Train for any argument with Harvard's former debate coach | Bo Seo](#) (YouTube Video)

Our public conversations are in a state of crisis. They're stuck. It's people fully convinced of their views, shouting at each other from a distance. One of the reasons we find it so difficult is, I believe, because the skills of good argument have been [atrophying](#) for some time. We no longer view [argument](#) as something [to be worked at](#), rather we see it as something we jump into [out of instinct](#) or [defensiveness](#). The bad [arguments that result decrease our confidence in what disagreements can do for us](#), so the quality of the conversation further [degrades](#). [I think we need to restore confidence and faith in what disagreements can be, and to highlight its potential as a source for good as well as a source for ill.](#)

My name is Bo-Seo, I'm a two-time world debate champion, a former coach of the Australian and Harvard debate teams, and I am the author of *Good Arguments*. For me, my love of debate is [inextricably](#) tied to [a life that I've led](#) of always moving countries. I had to move from South Korea to Australia as [an eight-year old](#) without really speaking English. And I quickly found the hardest part of crossing language lines, of cultural lines, was disagreements where people [tend](#) to be more [disruptive](#), to [interrupt](#), to speed up and slow down. [In response to all \[of\] that](#) I [resolved](#) to be very agreeable [in the way I presented at school](#) and to keep my thoughts to myself.

[The thing that changed that was \[that\] I joined the debate team off the strength of one promise, which was in debate, when one person speaks, no one else does.](#) And to someone who had been interrupted and [spun out of conversation](#), that sounded to me like [a kind of salvation](#). If intelligence is the ability to respond to any argument, wisdom [lies in](#) knowing which arguments to respond to, and which parts of an argument to respond to.

Arguments are easy to start and hard to end because there are any number of differences between two people. And unless you're careful to say,

"We're having this disagreement at this moment and not all the other disagreements we could be having."

All of the differences between two people can start [flooding in](#) and the argument becomes this [unruly mass](#) where any of the potential sources of conflict can come to the [fore](#) and you're not making progress on any given one.

One of the frameworks that I've developed in order to pick my fights more wisely is called the *RISA Framework* ([Real, Important, Specific, and Aligned Framework](#)). Before launching into a disagreement or challenging a claim, ask four things:

1. Is it real?
[First, whether the disagreement is in fact real as opposed to](#) a misunderstanding.
2. [Second](#), is to ask [whether it's important enough to you to justify the disagreement](#).
3. [The third](#) is to ask [whether the topic of the disagreement is specific enough](#) in order for you to make some progress.
4. And the fourth is to ask [whether you and the other person engaged in the disagreement are aligned in your objectives for wanting to partake in that conversation](#).

By checking off on these four lists, you can't guarantee that a conversation is going to go well, but you may be able to give it the best possible chance of doing so.

One of the limitations of the *RISA Framework* that I worry about is that it is increasingly difficult to find the right kind of alignment in people's interests in wanting to engage in a disagreement. So if you have two sides that simply want to hurt one another's feelings, that's some kind of alignment, but not the right kind that leads to productive conversations.

So one place where you might be able to apply the *RISA Framework* is getting together with extended family for Thanksgiving or Christmas and knowing that some of the personal or political disagreements are going [to bubble up to the surface](#). The *RISA Framework* provides two sources of help in that situation:

1. The first is that every disagreement should **start with a little bit of agreement**, and that is often naming exactly what it is you disagree about so that it doesn't bubble up in to all the different areas in which you don't see eye-to-eye. The first step is to name the disagreement in front of you.
2. The second thing is to check, well, why do you want to engage in this disagreement, and can we **come to an agreement about** [what it is we're hoping to get out of this conversation?](#)

[So, forcing the slightly quarrelsome family member](#) who just wants to be a [contrarian](#) or to cause trouble to say,

"Are you really in this, hoping to persuade me to change my mind?"

That bit of negotiation of why it is that we're in the conversation in the first instance can often allow our conversations to go better than if we just jump into the disagreements without much [forethought](#). It allows us to almost make a contract with the other side:

"This is what we're disagreeing about and these are the reasons why we're engaging in that dispute."

And one of the things that you can do with someone who tries to break those rules, to expand the debate into something it wasn't about, to change the topic, to introduce new reasons for wanting to engage in the dispute, is just to remind ourselves of the agreement that we made and to bring the conversation back to those parameters.

Just as any number of the differences between two people can give rise to a disagreement, any number of things that people say within an argument [can be contested](#).

"The success cases, these are the ones in which the revolution works. Closing, I'll take you if you have something."

And apart of the wisdom one has to develop as a debater is to know which arguments to challenge, and which to let go.

"A Marxist revolution at this point doesn't change that."

"And will lead to a huge period of economic instability, particularly with their [livelihood](#)."

“Apparently, their role ...”

“... if we’re to buy [the premise](#) of their case at all.”

There are two questions that we often ask to make that decision ([to contest a premise](#)):

1. The first is, is this disagreement between the two sides necessary to resolve in order to make progress in the argument?
2. And if it’s not, is us challenging it going to help us make progress on the [overall dispute](#)?

No matter how offensive or wrong-seeming it may be, by asking whether it’s first necessary to challenge, or even if it’s not whether challenging it would help us make progress on the argument, you can be a little bit more [judicious](#) in [how you disagree and prevent our arguments](#) from becoming [this unruly all-encompassing dispute](#).

One of the great lessons of debate is, in order to be heard, you have to first listen. We’re used to thinking about [listening as an essentially passive act](#). We sit back in our chairs, and [take it all in](#). Debaters know that it’s a much more active process than that. There are two lessons that we can [take away from how debaters listen](#), and to try to apply it in our own lives:

1. The first is, it is in your best interest to understand the opposition’s argument as they would understand it. It’s not in your best interest to [twist their meaning](#) or to take it at its worst or to capture only a fraction of it, because they won’t feel as though they had been listened to and heard and ultimately responded to.
2. The second thing is, it’s also in your best interest to respond to the strongest version of the other side and sometimes build up the other side’s case so that it’s even better than where they have it now. You know [that] after you finish speaking the opposition might have a “light bulb” and come up with a better case, or someone on their side might say,

“You’ve responded to the weak version of this argument, but here’s something better.”

So, the further you can take it and the stronger the version of the other side you can respond to, the more you challenge the other side to go even further, and the better the conversation even comes.

So much of a debate is an exercise in certainty. It’s about spending sometimes weeks researching your side of the case, coming up with the best possible arguments that you can to sell the truth of your side to the listener. But in the last moments, before a debater goes on stage, they know to take out a new sheet of paper, and to put themselves in their opponent’s shoes and write the four best arguments of the opposing side. They know also to look over their case again, this time through the eyes of someone who [fervently](#) disagrees with them, to identify all of the [flaws](#) and [criticisms that could be leveled against them](#).

Debate is also known to imagine a world in which they lost the debate and [to come up with](#) the reasons why they did. Those exercises, which are called *The Side-switch exercises* puts a a pause on this feeling of uncertainty. It makes us feel for a moment the subjective reasonableness of other people’s beliefs. It gives us that moment where we get back on our

toes and think [that] maybe we missed something. It makes us imagine a world in which we're wrong. And all of that creates [wobble room](#) through which something like [humility or empathy might arise](#). The *Side-switch exercises* and the kind of empathy that debate brings into the conversation is not only applicable in personal disagreements, but in my view, more urgently needed than ever in our political disputes and ideological commitments. Each of us are bigger than our political affiliations, than our religious commitments, than our ideological beliefs. It's in that setting that exercises like *Side-switch* become most effective. It expands the scope of what we are able to talk about. It enlarges and improves and strengthens our ability to talk about [contentious](#) and difficult issues, in humane, compassionate, and productive ways.