Attacking the Other Team's Evidence

Sometimes the other team reads a piece of evidence that you have no prepared answer for. What should you do if you have no evidence that contradicts a particular claim made by the other team? Give up? Concede their argument? Of course not! You're a debater; you never concede. There are plenty of ways you can attack another team's evidence without having expert testimony of your own. Here are some kinds of arguments you might make:

1. Anecdotal evidence. If you hear the affirmative talk about one isolated example, you should make the claim that this is anecdotal evidence. Further, you should claim that one should not base policy on one example.

2. Assertions. If the affirmative makes a claim without giving any supporting evidence or reasoning, this is an assertion and not a proven argument. You should point this out to the judge, as an unsupported claim will usually not stand.

3. Conclusionary evidence. If the affirmative reads evidence which merely states the conclusion of the author without the reasons and evidence used to support that conclusion, it's impossible to tell if the claim is true. This is a poor use of evidence and should be noted to the judge (who will sometimes dismiss such evidence). Debaters making this argument will often say that there is "no warrant" for the claim in the evidence. This simply means that the author does not explain the link between her assumptions and her conclusions.

4. Biased sources. Be on the lookout for why an author might make certain claims. Sometimes bias can be revealed in their job, their affiliations, or the manner in which they state their case. Identifying biased sources will hurt the credibility of some evidence.

5. Dates. On rapidly changing issues, the date of the evidence is extremely important. If the affirmative reads evidence that says the economy is on the brink of collapse, or a war is about to start or some other timely issue, when the evidence was written can be extremely important. If your evidence is more recent than your opponent's, you should argue that your claims should be preferred because they "post-date" the other team's claims.

6. Vague references. Many times different authors will use the same word to refer to different ideas or situations. A political "disaster" for a Democrat might be entirely different than an political disaster for a Republican.

7. No causality. Sometimes evidence will refer to correlations between events, but this assertion does not mean that one causes the other. The tragedy at Columbine High School illustrates how some saw the cause as access to weapons, some as access to the Internet, some as access to violent games and movies, and others as part of an alienated suburban youth. The existence of all these variables in the same place does not guarantee that there IS causation between any of these problems and the tragedy in Colorado.

8. The "does it make sense?" test. Sometimes even highly qualified experts make arguments that are obviously flawed. Just because they're smart doesn't mean they're smart about everything. You should not allow the fact that the other team has evidence from an expert deter you from making your own arguments. Attack the logical connections in the evidence, or provide counter-examples from your own experience. or your own knowledge. This is one of those times you'll be glad you read the paper every day.