

This is why you will lose your argument

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It's so easy to get sidetracked during an argument if you don't remember just one thing. So what is it? Credit: Flickr/Daniela Vladimirova, CC BY

So the Great Barrier Reef has not been listed as endangered by UNESCO. And same-sex marriage is [high on the national agenda](#). Care to argue the case? Careful, there's a minefield ahead.

There is one thing that is poorly understood about arguing in the public arena. It is the reason that a strong case will often lose its momentum and that an obvious logical conclusion will be missed. It is one of the reasons our political leaders fail utterly to have a reasoned conversation with the population and with each other. And it's why denialists on just about any issue can sidestep rational debate.

It's called the "point at issue" and describes what the argument is *actually* about. If you move away from this simple idea, the argument will be lost in a fog of related but unnecessary issues.

Finding the point

Before we can argue, we must actually agree on something: what we are arguing about. If we can't do this, and then stick to it, there will be no progress.

Let's consider the Great Barrier Reef as an example. Some [media commentary](#) would have us believe that the fact the reef was not listed means any concerns about its well-being are entirely misplaced.

This misses the point completely. As many articles have pointed out, that the reef has not been listed does not mean any environmental concerns are unjustified.

The point at issue is whether the reef meets the UNESCO criteria for listing as endangered. It is another point entirely to say the reef is not at risk. Conflating the two muddies the waters.

As another example, imagine someone comments that locking up refugees is psychologically damaging to them. Another person says that the policy is much better under the current government than it was under the last.

The argument has shifted from whether the processes is damaging to who manages the process best. It is not the same thing. If that is not noticed, the argument usually degenerates and we are no closer to finding the truth of the original claim.

For a third example, the federal treasurer, Joe Hockey, recently had to [defend spending his accommodation entitlements](#) when he is in Canberra on a house owned by his wife. He tried to argue the necessity of politicians to be able to claim expenses as they move into the capital for parliamentary business. But these are two different points. Arguing the second does not progress the first.

Deniers of climate science engage in shifting the point at issue as a standard part of their argument technique. One example involves moving from the fact that there is a rapid shift in global temperature to that climate has always changed.

Another example is moving from [consilience](#) and consensus in climate science as indicators of the degree of confidence within the scientific community to trying to make the debate that consensus is not proof. In both cases the latter point is true, but it's not the point under discussion.

Changing the point at issue often flags an attempt to move the argument onto more favourable ground rather than engage with it on the offered terms.

Focusing our thinking is not easy

This type of intellectual sidestepping is the root of the straw man argument. It is the source of the common phrase "beside the point", indicating that it is not directly relevant.

If we follow this path, the original argument remains unaddressed and

we have only the illusion of progress.

The trick is to recognise when the point at issue shifts, but to do this you need to be very clear at the start about what the original argument is. If you are not clear, you are vulnerable to defeat, losing to an argument that was not your point in the first place. Recognising this shift is a surprisingly difficult thing to do.

One of the reasons we do not focus well on the point at issue, and are sometimes very bad at defining it, is that our minds range across related topics very well. We see connections, implications and perspectives on many issues. This is a useful tendency, but one that needs to be curbed to develop a sharp argumentative focus.

If the point at issue is that smoking is bad for you, don't start talking about the individual liberty to smoke. If it's that biodiversity in forests is important, don't make it about logging jobs. If it's about how well a political party is doing a job, don't turn it into a comparison with the other mob.

Stick to the point, sort it out properly, and then move on to the next one.

How we frame an issue can define the argument

Finding the point at issue is also a matter of framing the issue correctly.

Realise, for example, that the point of not teaching Intelligent Design in science classes is one of quality control, not of academic freedom. Or that teaching about religion in schools is not the same thing as instruction in specific religions. Or that [same-sex marriage](#) is about equality of rights, not degrading them.

As Christopher Hitchens so [succinctly put it](#) when considering the issue

of homosexual marriage more than a decade ago:

This is an argument about the socialisation of homosexuality, not the homosexualisation of society.

Politicians are masters at changing frames and the point at issue. Witness the use of phrases like "what the public really wants to know" or "what's really important here" to avoid addressing the issue raised in an interview.

Journalists are often very lax about this, allowing the point at issue to change without bringing it back and pressing for an answer to the original question.

One of the skills of advanced argumentation – and of good journalism – is knowing how to keep things on track. This includes the ability to recognise when the argument shifts and to say "that's not what we are talking about".

It also includes knowing how to go on and explain to people that their argument may be relevant to the topic in general but it's not relevant to the specific point at issue.

You might like to argue that many of the topics I've mentioned should be explored in full. That we should talk about biodiversity and jobs when discussing forests, for example. But if you think that, you missed the point at issue of this article.

There's no reason not to pursue other arguments and other points at issue, but let's take them one at a time for the sake of clarity and improvement. This is what will improve public debate and better hold politicians to account.

That's what I'm talking about.

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