

A few simple rules for polemicizing without overheating:

(1) Determine for yourself if your position has merit. If it doesn't have merit, don't even think of getting into a debate, or you will get upset. If you've already stated the position in print, swallow your pride, abandon it, and don't expend any more energy on defending it, or you will get upset.

(2) Identify all the counterarguments to your position, formulate them more clearly and persuasively than your opponent ever could, and then address them honestly. Make sure there are no counterarguments you didn't see coming, or you will get upset. The full back and forth of the debate should proceed, as much as possible, within your own contribution, where you can ensure it is conducted fairly. It will leave your opponent without reasonable things to say.

(3) Never, ever, state any of your arguments more than once, even if that means not responding at all at some point. Your opponent may willfully misunderstand or misrepresent your arguments, but by issuing elaborate corrections every time, you only end up affirming the effectiveness of that strategy, and the extent to which you are not in control.

(4) Do not expect to “win.” You may feel the truth is on your side, but your opponent can always manipulate the appearance of truth by rhetorical means. Let them--nobody wants to be publicly humiliated. View the debate as an opportunity to state your position as lucidly and definitively as possible, and be content with the fact that your voice has been heard. It may take decades for the scholarly community to agree with you, or it may never happen in your lifetime. Knowing this in advance may keep you from becoming needlessly upset.

(5) Do not empower your readership by appealing to their sense of civility, decorum, humor, or indignation, all of which they have the power to withhold for any reason at all. In other words: do not use manipulative rhetoric. Readers have a responsibility to think clearly about the argument before coming to their own determination. If they don't properly exercise that responsibility, their agreement or disagreement means nothing at all.

(6) It is critical to be deeply-versed in the logic of scholarly argument. All debates are essentially variations of the same models of reasoning. An excellent introduction is David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*. Read Karl Popper before you read Paul Feyerabend or Thomas Kuhn, but read them all. You cannot use postmodern epistemology to full advantage unless you have thoroughly worked through modern epistemology.