

Counterargument

When you write an academic essay, you make an argument: you propose a thesis and offer some reasoning, using evidence, that suggests why the thesis is true. When you counter-argue, you consider a possible argument *against* your thesis or some aspect of your reasoning. This is a good way to test your ideas when drafting, while you still have time to revise them. And in the finished essay, it can be a persuasive and (in both senses of the word) disarming tactic. It allows you to anticipate doubts and pre-empt objections that a skeptical reader might have; it presents you as the kind of person who weighs alternatives before arguing for one, who confronts difficulties instead of sweeping them under the rug, who is more interested in discovering the truth than winning a point.

Not every objection is worth entertaining, of course, and you shouldn't include one just to include one. But some imagining of other views, or of resistance to one's own, occurs in most good essays. And instructors are glad to encounter counterargument in student papers, even if they haven't specifically asked for it.

The Turn Against

Counterargument in an essay has two stages: you turn against your argument to challenge it and then you turn back to re-affirm it. You first imagine a skeptical reader, or cite an actual source, who might resist your argument by pointing out:

- a problem with your demonstration, e.g., that a different conclusion could be drawn from the same facts, a key assumption is unwarranted, a key term is used unfairly, certain evidence is ignored or played down;
- one or more disadvantages or practical drawbacks to what you propose;
- an alternative explanation or proposal that makes more sense.

You introduce this turn against with a phrase like *One might object here that...* or *Some would argue that...* or *It might seem that...* or *It's true that...* or *Admittedly,...* or *Of course,...* or with an anticipated challenging question: *But how...?* or *But why...?* or *But isn't this just...?* or *But if this is so, what about...?* Then you state the case against yourself as briefly but as clearly and forcefully as you can, pointing to evidence where possible. (An obviously feeble or perfunctory counterargument does more harm than good.)

The Turn Back

Your return to your own argument—which you announce with a *but*, *yet*, *however*, *nevertheless* or *still*—must likewise involve careful reasoning, not a flippant (or nervous) dismissal. In reasoning about the proposed counterargument, you may

- refute it, showing why it is mistaken—an apparent but not real problem;
- acknowledge its validity or plausibility, but suggest why on balance it's relatively less important or less likely than what you propose, and thus doesn't overturn it;
- concede its force and complicate your idea accordingly—restate your thesis in a more exact, qualified, or nuanced way that takes account of the objection, or start a new section in which you consider your topic in light of it. This will work if the counterargument concerns only an aspect of your argument; if it undermines your whole case, you need a new thesis.

Where to Put a Counterargument

Counterargument can appear anywhere in the essay, but it most commonly appears:

- as part of your introduction—before you propose your thesis—where the existence of a different view is the motive for your essay, the reason it needs writing;
- as a section or paragraph just after your introduction, in which you lay out the expected reaction or standard position before turning away to develop your own;
- as a quick move within a paragraph, where you imagine a counterargument not to your main idea but to the sub-idea that the paragraph is arguing or is about to argue;
- as a section or paragraph just before the conclusion of your essay, in which you imagine what someone might object to what you have argued.

But watch that you don't overdo it. A turn into counterargument here and there will sharpen and energize your essay, but too many such turns will have the reverse effect by obscuring your main idea or suggesting that you're ambivalent.

Counterargument in Pre-Writing and Revising

Good thinking constantly questions itself, as Socrates observed long ago. But at some point in the process of composing an essay, you need to switch off the questioning in your head and make a case. Having such an inner conversation during the drafting stage, however, can help you settle on a case worth making. As you consider possible theses and begin to work on your draft, ask

yourself how an intelligent person might plausibly disagree with you or see matters differently. When you can imagine an intelligent disagreement, you have an arguable idea.

And, of course, the disagreeing reader doesn't need to be in your head: if, as you're starting work on an essay, you ask a few people around you what *they* think of topic X (or of your idea about X) and keep alert for uncongenial remarks in class discussion and in assigned readings, you'll encounter a useful disagreement somewhere. Awareness of this disagreement, however you use it in your essay, will force you to sharpen your own thinking as you compose. If you come to find the counterargument truer than your thesis, consider making *it* your thesis and turning your original thesis into a counterargument. If you manage to draft an essay *without* imagining a counterargument, make yourself imagine one before you revise and see if you can integrate it.

Copyright 1999, Gordon Harvey (adapted from The Academic Essay: A Brief Anatomy), for the Writing Center at Harvard University.

Many more resources available on their website:

<http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/counter-argument>