

# Addressing Counterarguments

## What does it mean to Address Counterarguments?

1. **Counterargument:** an argument against your argument; an argument that opposes your thesis.
2. **Refutation (rebuttal):** an argument that states why the counterargument is wrong or insignificant.

### Example<sup>1</sup>

1. *Some may argue that students lack the responsibility to have drinks in class.* 2. **This, however, is not true. Students drink soda in the cafeteria all the time, and rarely is there a spill. Also there could be a compromise where students only bring in clear liquids. This would eliminate any attains if there was a spill. A final reason is that there could be a rule that all drinks had to have twist on or snap on lids.** 3. These reasons eliminate the concern of our lack of responsibility.

## Why address counterarguments when you write?

- Drafting: a good way to test your ideas while you still have time to revise them.
- Final Essay: a persuasive and disarming tactic. It allows you to anticipate doubts and pre-empt objections that a skeptical reader might have;
- Helps your ethos! 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.

## How to introduce the counterargument (the turn against)

To get you thinking about possible counterarguments, 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.

Here are some ways you can introduce your counterargument:

1. Phrase:
  - *One might object here that...*
  - *It might seem that...*
  - *It's true that...*
  - *Admittedly,...*
  - *Of course, ...*
2. Anticipated challenging question:
  - *But how...?*
  - *But why...?*
  - *But isn't this just...?*
  - *But if this is so, what about...?*

• content adapted from <http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/counter-argument> (Copyright 1999, Gordon Harvey (adapted from *The Academic Essay: A Brief Anatomy*), for the Writing Center at Harvard University the Writing Center at Harvard University)

• <sup>1</sup>Counterargument & Refutation Paragraph Example: [http://msmallian.weebly.com/uploads/5/5/8/2/55823453/writing\\_-\\_persuasive\\_-\\_counterargument\\_example.pdf](http://msmallian.weebly.com/uploads/5/5/8/2/55823453/writing_-_persuasive_-_counterargument_example.pdf)

• <sup>2</sup>Boston Debate League Handout

• <sup>3</sup>Examples Source: <http://www.shoreline.edu/doldham/101/html/what%20is%20a%20c-a.htm>

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.)

### How to refute the counterargument (the turn back)

After you offer the counterargument, you **MUST** refute it (show how it is wrong.) In reasoning about the proposed counterargument, you may

- Deny: tell why the counterargument is not true
- Reverse: tell why the counterargument helps your claim
- Minimize: agree with the counterargument but say why it is not very important
- Outweigh: agree with the counterargument but argue a supporting warrant is more important. <sup>2</sup>

Here are some ways you can announce or frame your refutation:

#### 1. Single word:

1. *but*
2. *yet*
3. *however*
4. *nevertheless*
5. *still*

#### 2. Sentence frames:

- What this argument [overlooks/fails to consider/does not take into account] is ...
- This view [seems/looks/sounds/etc.] [convincing/plausible/persuasive/etc.] at first, but ...
- While this position is popular, it is [not supported by the facts/not logical/impractical/etc.]
- Although the core of this claim is valid, it suffers from a flaw in its [reasoning/application/etc.] <sup>3</sup>

### 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.

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## Structures for the Counterargument

**Caution!** These structures are guidelines; the number of paragraphs, amount of evidence, etc. may vary depending on your essay's needs.

Structure A	Structure B	Structure C
Each body paragraph addresses a counterargument to the main claim in the paragraph and then refutes it.	Structure each body paragraph by the counterargument, and then refute it by making your claim and providing evidence.	Address a critical or overriding counterargument in one section of your essay.
<p><b>Body Paragraph 1</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Claim (Topic Sentence)</li> <li>• Evidence (examples/quotes, etc.)</li> <li>• Counter-argument</li> <li>• Refutation</li> </ul> <p><b>Body Paragraph 2</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Claim (Topic Sentence)</li> <li>• Evidence (examples/quotes, etc.)</li> <li>• Counter-argument</li> <li>• Refutation</li> </ul> <p><b>Body Paragraph 3</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Claim (Topic Sentence)</li> <li>• Evidence (examples/quotes, etc.)</li> <li>• Counter-argument</li> <li>• Refutation</li> </ul>	<p><b>Body Paragraph 1</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counterargument</li> <li>• Claim (doubles as refutation)</li> <li>• Evidence (examples/quotes, etc.)</li> </ul> <p><b>Body Paragraph 2</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counterargument</li> <li>• Claim (doubles as refutation)</li> <li>• Evidence (examples/quotes, etc.)</li> </ul> <p><b>Body Paragraph 3</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counterargument</li> <li>• Claim (doubles as refutation)</li> <li>• Evidence (examples/quotes, etc.)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Body Paragraph 1</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Claim (Topic Sentence)</li> <li>• Evidence (examples/quotes, etc.)</li> </ul> <p><b>Body Paragraph 2</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Claim (Topic Sentence)</li> <li>• Evidence (examples/quotes, etc.)</li> </ul> <p><b>Body Paragraph 3</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counterargument</li> <li>• Refutation (Topic sentence that doubles as refutation)</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>or</b></p> <p><b>Place it in your introduction!</b> If your counter-claim opposes your entire thesis, you can address and refute it in your introduction.</p>

**Notes:**

# Writing a Counterargument and Refutation

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## Counterargument

The counterargument paragraph is developed in much the same way that an argument paragraph is developed. The difference is that *the counterargument is your opponents' (the other side's) argument that explains why you are wrong*. This paragraph is structured as follows:

1. **Topic sentence.** It states the other side's reason for why you are wrong. Nouns used in this sentence are *critics* and *opponents*. Verbs used in this sentence are *argue*, *claim*, and *contend*.

### Pattern 1

Transition + some critics / opponents + argue / claim + that + argument against your thesis.

Nevertheless, some critics argue that the reason why some terminally ill patients wish to commit suicide is nothing more than melancholia.

### Pattern 2

Transition + it is argued that + argument against your thesis.

Nevertheless, it is argued that the reason why some terminally ill patients wish to commit suicide is nothing more than melancholia.

2. **Explanation sentence.** It explains the controlling idea, the topic sentence.
3. **Expert evidence sentence.** This sentence backs up the topic sentence with a quotation or paraphrase of evidence from expert(s). It includes the name of the author, name of the article, and the date of publication.
4. **Explanation sentence.** It explains the supporting evidence from expert(s).
5. **Example and / or statistics sentence.** This sentence contains an example or statistics that support the evidence from the expert(s).
6. **Explanation sentence.** It explains the significance of the examples or statistics as related to the controlling idea, the thesis sentence.
7. **Conclusion sentence.** It states what conclusion can be made once people consider the

controlling idea and evidence.

**Directions:** After reading the sample counterargument paragraph below, answer the questions that follow it.

Critics argue that the reason why some terminally ill patients wish to commit suicide is nothing more than melancholia. Patients suffering terminal illness might tend to be negative, hopeless, and depressed. In "When Patients Request Assistance with Suicide," Dr. Michael Maskin, an associate professor of clinical psychiatry at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York, argues that in many cases, dying patients' thinking is simply occupied by negative reactions to their critical condition (1999). In other words, most of the reasons why terminally ill patients request doctors to assist them in committing suicide might be caused by certain problems related to their illness. For example, they may be experiencing problems such as hopelessness because there is no effective treatment, anxiety over doctors' very expensive fees, and regret for their family's burden of taking care of them (Maskin, 1999). For this reason, opponents argue that the terminally ill patient needs psychotherapy. Therefore, people who oppose doctor-assisted suicide believe that these patients are much too depressed to make a logical decision.

Adapted from student handout, *Sourcework*, Heinle & Heinle, 2006.

1. What is this paragraph about?
2. Who is the expert?
3. What is the name of the article that the expert's opinion is taken from?
4. When was this article published?
5. What does the expert argue?
6. What examples are used to support the expert's opinion?
7. Based on the examples, what do the critics argue that dying people need?
8. What conclusion is reached?

## Refutation

The refutation paragraph must prove that your opponents' objection (counterargument) is wrong. To do this, you must answer the objection in a fair and logical manner. This paragraph is structured as follows:

1. **Opening sentence.** It summarizes the other side's objection and acknowledges the

validity of the objection. This sentence must contain the modal *may*.

**Pattern**

It may be true that + paraphrase of objection.

It may be true that all such requests, in which dying patients ask doctors to help them to kill themselves, come from depression as some psychologists have claimed and that some patients will change their minds if they participate in psychotherapy.

2. **Topic sentence.** It states the reason why the objection (counterargument) is wrong. It is introduced by a transition such as *however, nevertheless, or nonetheless*.

**Pattern**

Transition + reason why the objection is wrong.

However, all of those terminally ill patients who after psychotherapy finally choose to hasten their deaths are very determined.

3. **Expert evidence sentence.** This sentence backs up the topic sentence with a quotation or paraphrase of evidence from expert(s). It includes the name of the author, name of the article, and the date of publication.
4. **Explanation sentence.** It explains the supporting evidence from expert(s).
5. **Example and / or statistics sentence.** This sentence contains an example or statistics that support the evidence from the expert(s).
6. **Explanation sentence.** It explains the significance of the examples or statistics as related to the controlling idea, the thesis sentence.
7. **Conclusion sentence.** It states what conclusion can be made once people consider the controlling idea and evidence.

**Directions:** After reading the sample counterargument paragraph below, answer the questions that follow it.

It may be true that all such requests, in which dying patients ask doctors to help them to kill themselves, come from depression as some psychologists have claimed and that some patients will change their minds if they participate in psychotherapy. However, all of those terminally ill patients who after psychotherapy finally choose to hasten their deaths are very determined. In "Opposing Views on Assisted Suicide," Faye Girsh points

out that many dying patients want to know about how to get help from a doctor to achieve a peaceful death even if ultimately they do not choose suicide (1999). In other words, terminally ill patients who voluntarily choose to ask doctors to help them commit suicide are those who decide carefully to take advantage of the doctor-assisted suicide law. For example, Girsh states that patients who consider assisted suicide are aware of their exact medical condition through a mutual exchange of information with their doctors, these patients understand their medical treatment along with risk, benefits and other options, and they must talk with a psychologist to determine if they are psychologically able to make such a decision (1999). These are not patients who want to end their lives simply because they are depressed. In short, terminally ill patients who finally choose to ask doctors to help them commit suicide are mentally competent and very determined about what they want to choose.

Adapted from student handout, *Sourcework*, Heinle & Heinle, 2006.

1. Does the writer acknowledge the validity of the other side's objection?
2. Why is the objection wrong?
3. Who is the expert?
4. What is the name of the article that the expert's opinion is taken from?
5. When was this article published?
6. What does the expert argue?
7. What examples are used to support the expert's opinion?
8. What does the example prove?
9. What conclusion is reached?