

Counterarguments

A counterargument presents a claim that meaningfully challenges either an element of your thesis or your interpretation of a specific piece of evidence. The counterargument must be supported with evidence from the text, and it demands a thorough refutation in order to explain why your thesis stands despite the counterargument.

Counterarguments are an important part of critical thinking. Identifying and responding to counterarguments allows you to test your ideas. Subjecting your ideas to potential logical and evidentiary objections clarifies your ideas and strengthens your ability to defend them.

Counterarguments are essential to arguing effectively because they are a natural part of the process of persuasion. In an argumentative essay, the writer sets out to persuade the reader of a particular claim while the reader adopts a position of friendly skepticism. As the reader progresses through your essay, she will start asking questions about what is and what is not in the essay. Questions like the following:

Why doesn't the essay deal with the hero's death?

-or-

Maybe the philosopher does appear to suggest *x* about slavery here, but what about the entire chapter later in the text where he clearly says *not-x* about slavery?

In order to persuade your reader, be sensitive to this skeptical process and do your best to anticipate reasonable challenges to your argument. If you can articulate these counterarguments well and then respond to them, your argument will stand stronger, and the reader will be more likely to be persuaded. In this way, a good counterargument and response can be the most persuasive part of your essay.

Developing a Counterargument

1. Develop your provisional thesis and gather the evidence that best supports it.
2. Spend some time thinking from the perspective of someone who disagrees with your argument.
 - Identify the basic logic of the other side. How might they interpret the texts you are thinking about?
 - What evidence might they use to support their position?
3. Select the other side's most powerful claim and evidence and determine which part of your argument it most directly challenges. Does it challenge the basic claim of your thesis? Does it provide a counter-example to the examples you chose to discuss? Is it an alternative reading of one of the specific pieces of evidence you used to support your argument?

4. Make the strongest case *for* the counterargument that you can. Use evidence from the text to support it and show why it is a plausible challenge.
5. Respond to the counterargument. Having given credit to the plausibility of the counterargument, you now have to show why it is not the better argument. Your response should be as serious as your counterargument. Use evidence from the text to support your reasoning about why the reader should not be persuaded by the counterargument.

Let's work through an example (numbers refer to the steps above):

(1) You think about the prompt, look at the evidence in the text, and develop the following argument that includes a thesis and a roadmap (sub-claims you will discuss):

Abraham deserves God's favor because he prioritizes God's covenant throughout his life. His prioritizing of the covenant is evident when he immediately obeys God's specific commands, in his treatment of his sons, and in his consistently righteous actions.

(2) Where is this argument open to critique? The claim is debatable. If the thesis simply claimed that Abraham is faithful that would be too obvious—Genesis tells us that much—but that Abraham keeps the covenant a *priority* is worth arguing. One avenue for the counterargument is to find an instance in which it seems that the covenant is not Abraham's priority. Perhaps that seems difficult to show, so then turn to the roadmap. Can any of these sub-claims be fruitfully challenged? If yes, then how?

(3) In your review of the evidence *against* your thesis, you identify several places in Genesis in which Abraham appears to be less than admirable. Pick the strongest available. (4) You focus on the *consistency* of Abraham's righteous actions. In Genesis 12 and 20, Abraham lies to a local ruler, saying Sarah is his sister, not his wife (twice!). These two cases suggest that Abraham is not consistently righteous. Use the text, including quoting a passage, to show that the local rulers chastise Abraham for the unnecessary deception. Now draw out the implication: Abraham's inconsistency indicates a failure to keep faith in the covenant at all times.

(5) You now must respond to the counterargument. It is a strong counterargument and takes some thought to refute. You have two options: show that Abraham's actions were actually righteous or show that, even in this falter, he was prioritizing the covenant. The first option will not get much support in the text. Genesis is famously short on explanations about why people do things. The second option seems better. Go back to the text. What are the terms of the covenant? Can you interpret Abraham's actions as consistent with them, even if not ideal? If so, reinterpret the counterargument's evidence to fit into *your* main argument.

Considerations When Writing Counterarguments

- **Avoid straw man arguments.** A *straw man argument* is a weak counterargument that no one would take seriously. It can be an outlandish counterfactual like *Some might say that Abraham lacked faith*. No, nobody who has read Genesis could say that. Most straw men are subtler than that, but they all lack the support of concrete evidence from the text. Straw men are too easily refuted and add nothing to your argument. They waste your reader's time.
- **Avoid reversing the whole thesis.** It is important to think about the essay you are writing. Since your thesis is arguable, a counterargument exists that simply reverses your thesis. Using the thesis-reversal does not make an effective counterargument in your essay for two reasons. First, if it takes you five pages to defend your thesis, then a serious counterargument deserves a similar amount of space (which you don't have!). Second, a counterargument gains its power from its specificity. The thesis-reversal engages the argument at *too general* of a level to be effective.
- **Introducing the counterargument.** Be sure to signal to the reader that you are beginning your counterargument; otherwise the reader will be confused and wonder if you have started to contradict yourself. "Some might say" is not the most elegant start to a counterargument, but it does communicate that *some* (who are not you) would make the following argument. Another possibility: "While it appears that *x*, there is some evidence that suggests *not-x*..." Find the phrasing that works with your voice and the flow of your essay.
- **Where does the counterargument go?** The unhelpful answer is that it depends. Place it where it makes the most sense. If your counterargument challenges a specific sub-claim or an interpretation of a piece of evidence, then the counterargument should directly follow your treatment of the sub-claim or evidence it challenges. If the counterargument introduces a new piece of evidence, then it might make sense to place it toward the end of the essay. Sometimes the response to the counterargument can also double as the conclusion (*see section on Conclusions*).