

## Responding to Counterarguments: FAQ

*What is a counterargument?*

A counterargument is an argument, with factual evidence or other kinds of support, that challenges either your thesis or a major argument for it.

*What is the purpose of identifying counterarguments?*

By identifying counterarguments to your ideas, and seeing whether you can respond to them adequately, you test the persuasiveness of the ideas. Some writers avoid thinking about counterarguments, because they fear that mentioning them will weaken their own arguments. They're wrong. Even if you don't mention arguments that might plausibly be used against your own argument, you can be certain that your readers will think of them, and discount your argument accordingly. A good response to a counterargument is often the most persuasive part of your own argument.

*What is the process of thinking through arguments and counterarguments?*

1. You come up with a thesis that expresses your view of the evidence and of the conclusions that should be drawn from it. 2. You clearly identify your evidence and arguments in your own mind. 3. You seek evidence or logic on the other side, evidence or logic that might undermine your thesis; you anticipate what critics might say to attack your case. 4. You state the opposing argument or arguments, and you show that they don't succeed in refuting your own arguments.

*What might be an example of this?*

Suppose you are asked to write an essay on whether the framers of the Constitution were right in providing the government with a multitude of checks and balances—opposing the power of each branch of Congress to the power of the other, and to the powers of the president, the Supreme Court, and the individual states. And suppose that (1) your thesis is: “The framers were right, because checks and balances help keep the government from having too much power over the individual.” (2) You identify the evidence and arguments you want to use: Checks and balances reduce the total power of any particular part of the government, so, logically, they reduce the power it might have to oppress individuals. Further, there have been many occasions in history in which one part of the government attempted to oppress individuals, but was thwarted by another part (state some examples). Still further (you argue), observe that the United States, with its constitutional checks and balances, has endured for longer than two centuries without taking away the basic rights of individuals.

Now (3) you ask yourself what an intelligent person might object to this argument. One objection might come from facts: In some cases, the U.S. government has indeed acted oppressively toward individuals (state examples). Another objection might come from logic: If one part of government is given the power to thwart another, sometimes it is bound to do so for bad purposes; after all, human beings are imperfect, and so are their political actions.

Do you have a persuasive response to such counterarguments? If you don't, then you should go over to the opposing side, and change your thesis! This often happens when people look fairly at counterarguments. But if you still think your own arguments are right, then you need to show why they are right. This showing is your response to the counterargument(s).

To continue with the current example of a thesis and counterargument: You might respond that yes, human beings are imperfect, and nothing, not even the Constitution, will work perfectly; but that it cannot be shown that individuals are *less* likely to be oppressed by a system in which there are *fewer* checks on the government's power to oppress. If you respond in that way, you might be able to turn the tables on the counterargument, and use its own basis (the observation that humans are imperfect and sometimes do bad things) to show that the counterargument is not as persuasive as your own argument. But you don't always need to turn the tables in exactly this way; all you need to do is bring forth argument or evidence that makes the counterargument seem unconvincing.

*What are some errors to avoid in responding to counterarguments?*

One error is the creation of a “straw man” argument—a counterargument that is so weak that no one would ever take it seriously. You can create such an argument by offering a counterargument without any good supports, or a counterargument that is contradicted by evidence that would easily occur to most intelligent people. Straw-man counterarguments are bad because their refutation adds nothing to your own argument. They just waste your reader's time.

A second error is identifying a “counterargument” that is just a statement, not an argument at all. “Some might say that constitutional checks and balances just weaken the government. But as I’ve shown, that’s not true.” Here, the first statement is simply that—a statement. There’s no evidence or logic to support the position. The “response” is equally banal. To make this a real counterargument with a real response, the writer might proceed in this manner: “Some might say that checks and balances just weaken the government, keeping it from waging war effectively. The Supreme Court, for example, prevents Congress and the president from arresting people who denounce the government and urge their fellow citizens not to support it, thus weakening the government’s war efforts. It would hardly be ‘oppression’ to force such people to be quiet, but the government cannot do that, under the current constitutional system.” That is a real counterargument, and real arguments can now be brought forward to oppose it.

*Where do counterarguments go in a paper?*

That depends on the nature of your arguments. If you are arguing for a position that readers will probably object to right away, you may want to respond to their likely counterarguments immediately after your thesis. If your thesis is, “There are Martians living in Galbraith Hall,” you know that the first thing readers will think is, “There aren’t any Martians; nobody ever saw them.” That’s an obvious (and very persuasive) counterargument, and you’ll need to state and respond to it immediately, because you know that, until you do, your readers won’t pay attention to the other things you say. You’ll need to spend some time, right after your thesis statement, arguing that “many things exist that cannot be seen,” etc., before you bring up your own, positive evidence for the Martian infestation.

Usually your thesis won’t be that radical. But some parts of your argument will be vulnerable to attack, so when you get to these parts, you may want to identify and respond to the likely counterarguments right then. (By the way, you don’t always need to say, “This is a counterargument.” You can just state the counterargument and reply to it.)

Often, as mentioned above, a successful response to a counterargument can be the strongest part of your paper, because it meets and answers the doubts that your readers may have been building up. If you have a particularly successful response to a counterargument, you might place the counterargument and its reply *last* in your paper, because that would provide a climax and an exit.