

HOW TO WRITE A COUNTERARGUMENT

The main purpose of an academic essay is to argue a particular case. You put forward your main idea – your **hypothesis** – and then you provide evidence for it, using different sources. However, if you only provide a one-sided argument, this makes your work **biased**. As strange as it may sound, by not arguing *against* your main idea, you're not fully justifying your position. You can actually make your argument stronger by giving different perspectives to it. Providing counterarguments allows you to be one up on any skeptics by anticipating possible objections they may have. It also demonstrates sound reasoning, helps to sharpen the way in which you think about your ideas, and assists you in developing a clearer and more powerful stance regarding your hypothesis.

■ Choosing your counterarguments

Don't pick counterarguments that nobody believes or agrees with: you're not going to gain anything from these. A couple of points to consider when deciding on which counterarguments to choose are:

- ▶ Is there sound evidence that this could be the case?
- ▶ Or, at least, is this a well-known counterargument to your hypothesis? Don't forget to consider your audience.

■ Denouncing your hypothesis

First of all, you need to denounce – or turn against – your hypothesis:

- ▶ think of any weaknesses or disadvantages it has that could be used against it
- ▶ consider a substitute or alternative proposal that others could or do claim makes more sense than yours

Use evidence and good sources to make this challenge, and be clear and convincing. Be objective, and consider who might hold such a counterargument. Avoid using biased language: to do so would only be counterproductive. Even if you disagree with a counterargument, at least give it the benefit of the doubt in your writing.

■ Introducing a counterargument

You need to make sure that you introduce your counterarguments in a way that your reader knows that the view or opinion you're about to convey is not one that you (completely) agree with. Otherwise, it'll look like you're contradicting yourself. Simple ways are to begin a sentence or paragraph with "But..." or "However..." Another is to contribute the idea to someone else: use the name of the specific writer or thinker, or state "Many people think..." or "It is also believed that..."

■ Reaffirming your hypothesis

You then need to return to your original argument: “But...” “However...” “Yet...” Your counterstatement – or rebuttal – is the argument you use to reaffirm your hypothesis. For instance:

- ▶ you could explain how this counterargument is not correct or mistaken in some way, maybe factually, analytically or morally
- ▶ you could recognize that the counterargument is valid, but that, on balance, your hypothesis is more so
- ▶ you could even start a new section in which you analyze your hypothesis in light of the counterargument

Nevertheless, be careful to use sound reasoning and evidence as to why your hypothesis still stands; don’t simply dismiss counterarguments as intrinsically wrong.

■ Introducing your counterstatement

You also need to introduce your rebuttal carefully; otherwise, as before, your reader will become confused as to what your main argument is. You need to make it clear that you’re responding to a counterargument in favor of your own hypothesis: “This is a valid/popular argument, but...”

■ Agreeing with a counterargument

You may come across a counterargument that you actually agree with! This doesn’t mean that you have to abandon your original hypothesis. However, it might mean that you need to adjust it in some way to accommodate this new idea, perhaps if only to acknowledge that in certain circumstances this counterargument could be the case. Thereby, you’re not contradicting yourself, only refining your argument.

■ Using counterarguments in your writing

There are no hard and fast rules as to where to put counterarguments. However, having said this, counterarguments shouldn’t be placed in your conclusion: you should have presented *all* of your arguments before this final section.

Common places to include counterarguments are:

- ▶ when you first present your hypothesis in your introduction – it can provide justification to your topic
- ▶ as a following section to your introduction
- ▶ after a relevant section in which you argued the opposite case
- ▶ the section before your conclusion, thereby providing additional support to your closing statement