COUNTERARGUMENT

When you write an academic essay, you make an argument: you propose a thesis and offer evidence and reasoning to suggest why the thesis is true. When you counter-argue, you consider a possible argument against your thesis or some aspect of your logic. This is a good way to test your ideas early on, while you still have time to revise them. And in the finished essay, it can be a persuasive and disarming tactic. It allows you to anticipate doubts and pre-empt possible objections; it presents you as someone who weighs alternatives before arguing for one, who confronts difficulties instead of ignoring them, 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 *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

Watch that you don't overdo it! An occasional counterargument will sharpen and energize your essay, but too many will weaken it by obscuring your main idea or hinting that you're ambivalent.

Counterargument in Pre-Writing and Revising

Good thinking constantly questions itself, so having an inner debate during the drafting stage can help you settle on a case worth making. As you consider possible theses and begin to write your draft, ask yourself: how might an intelligent person plausibly disagree with you or see matters differently? When you can imagine an intelligent disagreement, you have an arguable idea. Others can be of assistance here, too! If you ask people around you what they think of topic X and/or stay alert for uncongenial remarks in class discussions, etc., 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 write. If you come to find the counterargument more persuasive than your thesis, consider making *it* your thesis and turning your original thesis into a counterargument. And finally, 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.

Credit: Adapted from Gordon Harvey, *The Elements of the Academic Essay*, 2009.