

# Counterarguments

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers counterarguments by describing how to introduce and refute them in an essay. It also provides examples of effective and ineffective ways to do so.

This tutorial examines counterarguments in three parts:

1. Counterarguments
2. Introducing and Refuting Counterarguments
3. Counterarguments: Examples

## 1. Counterarguments

**Counterarguments** are, in the context of an academic argument, a representation of an opposing viewpoint or argument, including the restatement of the accuracy of the author's thesis, argument, or point — even given that other viewpoint. Counterarguments are a key component of classical argumentation, but they are also commonly used in other types argumentation.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Counterargument

In an argumentative composition, representations of an opposing viewpoint or argument, and then restatement of the accuracy of the author's thesis, argument, or point — even given that other viewpoint.



### BIG IDEA

Counterargument is a sophisticated way for a writer to demonstrate the depth and strength of his or her thoughts and knowledge about a topic and thesis.

Just as there can be more than one argument on a topic, there can be more than one counterargument to a specific thesis. Although it may seem counterintuitive, writers should choose the best — the toughest — counterarguments to address in their essays. Including counterarguments without your refutations of them will *not* strengthen your essay.

In short essays, it is standard practice to devote a paragraph to a counterargument. In longer works writers

may need to address several counterarguments and use many paragraphs to do so. Small, focused counterarguments are sometimes addressed in a sentence or two (or less) throughout an essay. For example, here is a short passage that quickly introduces and refutes two counterarguments.

We shouldn't fight the development of genetically-modified food crops because this is the wave of the future. Though some find the idea of man-made plants and animals frightening, this is real life, not science fiction. We cannot allow fear to prevent scientific progress because if we don't make these advances, someone else will. Those who advocate for restricting GMO research in the United States will not stop the future from happening. All they can do is make sure that Americans don't profit from it.

When introducing counterarguments, you can use direct quotes, paraphrases, or summaries from sources that take the counterargument's position. Conversely, you can use hypothetical situations and representative examples, as in the preceding passage.

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## 2. Introducing and Refuting Counterarguments

When incorporating counterarguments into essays, writers sometimes make one of three kinds of mistakes:

1. The Straw Man Fallacy. Possibly the easiest mistake to make is to oversimplify or mis-characterize the opposing view. This mistake is called the Straw Man Fallacy. To avoid this mistake, imagine the person who holds the opposing viewpoint and ask yourself whether that person would agree with the way you are presenting his or her idea, even if they disagree with your conclusion. If your answer is "yes," you have almost certainly represented the opposing viewpoint accurately and ethically.
2. The Ad Hominem Fallacy. This occurs when writers attack someone who holds the counter-viewpoint, rather than the counter-viewpoint itself. To avoid this, focus on opposing ideas, not on the person or people who express those ideas.
3. Writers sometimes focus so much of their attention on the opposing position that they fail to support their own position adequately. Even though you must devote a fair amount of time and space to counterarguments, your main goal must be to show the validity of your thesis. Don't forget to conclude the section on counterarguments with assertions, reasoning, proof or other support for your argument's validity, even though those who agree with the counterarguments likely disagree with you.

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## 3. Counterarguments: Examples

Following are some examples of how counterarguments can be used, for better or worse. Suppose you are writing an essay that argues the following thesis:

Thesis: Requiring labeling of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) in food will unfairly impact businesses and spread misinformation.

There are certainly those who will disagree with this position, so if you want to construct an effective

argument, you must introduce and refute some of the counterarguments. You should *not*, however, do it like this:

My opposition hates GMOs because they don't understand science. Rather, they're a bunch of hippies and hipsters, happy to jump on any bandwagon that labels things "unnatural." The "unnatural" part makes the least sense because lots of natural things will kill you, like viruses and poisonous mushrooms. Clearly, these people are just idiots who are happy to be uninformed.

This example illustrates why the Ad Hominem Fallacy must be avoided in an essay. If you want to convince people who don't agree with your position, insulting them is the best way to ensure that you will fail to do so. The following paragraph also deals with a possible counterargument. It also has problems, though they are less obvious than in the previous example.

Those in favor of labeling refer to GMOs as "Frankenfoods," an evocative name that calls up Victor Frankenstein's famous monster and his use of science to meddle with the laws of nature. They argue that we have been given a planet capable of producing ample, healthy food and that the only reason to monkey with nature is corporate greed. I disagree, because GMOs feed the world.

This paragraph makes better use of a counterargument than the first example, though it is vague. The biggest problem in this example is that the paragraph hasn't done anything to refute the counterargument. Simply stating that GMOs feed the world does not counter the use of the term "Frankenfoods." Without support of some kind (e.g., evidence) it doesn't effectively refute the argument that the planet is capable of feeding the human population without GMOs. Next, consider the following paragraph and its use of a counterargument.

Many disagree with my position. The most common refrain from the opposing side is that consumers have a right to know what's in their food. Indeed, some even admit that, nutritionally, there seem to be few negatives and potentially some positives with GMOs. Yet they also express concerns about environmental impact and lack of corporate oversight. I concede that we should consider the environmental impact but I also feel that fears about evil corporations are overblown. Corporations are the backbone of the American economy, and they are strongly regulated by the U.S. government. Furthermore, the American public remains ignorant on this subject. Slapping GMO labels on food products will not improve their understanding but, paradoxically, may cause consumers to panic before they inform themselves on the facts behind GMOs.

This paragraph represents the opposing viewpoint with respect, and effectively explains why — even in light of the counterargument — the argument's thesis (that GMO food products should not be labeled) is valid.



## SUMMARY

This tutorial examined counterarguments in the context of academic arguments. Counterarguments are representations of an opposing viewpoint or argument and then restatement of the accuracy of the author's thesis, argument, or point — even given that other viewpoint. Good and bad ways to introduce and refute counterarguments were investigated, and examples of both were evaluated.

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Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall



## TERMS TO KNOW

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