

# Using Counterarguments

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the role of counterarguments in argumentative composition, and how to introduce and refute them in an essay. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Counterarguments in Writing
2. Introducing and Refuting Counterarguments
3. Examples of Counterarguments

## 1. Counterarguments in Writing

In the context of an academic argument, a **counterargument** is a representation of an opposing viewpoint or argument. Counterarguments are a key component of classical argumentation, but they are also commonly used in other types of argumentation.

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.

### IN CONTEXT

As an 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.



#### BIG IDEA

Addressing a counterargument is a sophisticated way for writers to demonstrate the depth and strength of their thoughts and knowledge about a topic and thesis.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### Counterargument

In an argumentative composition, a representation of an opposing viewpoint or argument.

## 2. Introducing and Refuting Counterarguments

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

1. **Possibly the easiest mistake to make is to oversimplify or mischaracterize 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 their 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. **Another mistake is when writers attack someone who holds the counter-viewpoint, rather than the counter-viewpoint itself.** This is called the ad hominem fallacy. To avoid this, focus on opposing ideas, not on the person or people who express those ideas.
3. **Finally, 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.

## 3. Examples of Counterarguments

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:

*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:

*Some people hate GMOs because they don't understand science. Rather, they're just 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 diseases and poisonous plants. 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 has problems as well, 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 is in their food. Indeed, some even admit that, nutritionally, there seem to be few negatives and potentially some positives to GMOs. Yet they also express concerns about the 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 uninformed 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

In this lesson, you learned about the use of **counterarguments in in writing**, which are representations of an opposing viewpoint or argument. There are good and bad ways to **introduce and refute counterarguments**, as you saw demonstrated through several **examples of counterarguments** in action. When responding to counterarguments, it's important to avoid logical fallacies in which you either insult your opposition or fail to address the actual counterargument. Instead, successful refutations will involve respectfully demonstrating how your position remains valid despite the points raised by the counterargument.

Best of luck in your learning!

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