All About Counterarguments

So, you’ve been assigned a paper about counterarguments…

Or, maybe a paper that just requires you to think about the opposition to your argument. Never fear! Counter-arguments can help you to better understand your own argument. This type of assignment allows you the opportunity to think about the issue or problem as a whole rather than just your piece of the whole.

What is a counterargument?

A counterargument is an argument that goes against your thesis and that expresses the perspective of someone with an opposite point of view from your own. While it may seem that acknowledging your opponent’s argument would undermine your own argument, if done well, a counterargument actually fortifies your point. With a counterargument, you have an opportunity to acknowledge and respond to any objections from the opposition, giving you the advantage since the response comes from you. Usage of a counterargument also demonstrates that you’re a rational and fair arguer who is well-versed in your issue since you acknowledge both sides of the argument.

How to start:

• First, start as early as possible. Part of utilizing a counterargument is in knowing your argument well, and knowing any subject well takes time.
• To find your subject, think about what you’re interested in, but also something that you’re not necessarily emotionally, politically, or personally tied to. That way, you can consider both points in a fair and unbiased way, allowing for equal arguments for both sides of the issue, even though eventually you’ll only take one side of the issue. Start by looking up information about your topic.
• Use online databases, looking up both sides of the issue. Remember to that the library has access to hundreds of online databases housing scholarly articles that you can access for free! The university pays for the resources, so be sure to take advantage of them.
• Be open to what you find! Even if you initially take one side of the issue, you might find that your stance has changed. This is not necessarily a bad thing! Consider which side feels more compelling based on the research that you find.

How to present your counterargument:

• It may be tempting to just write a sentence or two explaining your opponent’s argument and then spend paragraphs refuting that argument, but a good counter-argument is fair in the assessment of the opponent’s position.
• Here are some tips:
  o Provide a few fair reasons why someone could possibly have the perspective of your opposition.
  o Communicate the counter-point objectively without bias. Look for any words that communicate feelings specific (especially negative) emotions or feelings concerning the argument. Those probably aren’t fair or unbiased. A reader can usually tell that you’re being unfair and might not want to continue reading.
  o Consider this: would the person who holds this opposite perspective be okay with your method of explaining their side of the issue? If not, then you’re probably not being fair.

How to actually write and implement a counter-argument:

1. Identify or explain opposing viewpoints. Use phrases like “on the other hand…” or “it is often perceived that…” or “critics may argue…” or “although…” or “some people may think” or (invoking the viewpoint of an expert/group) “according to…”
2. Summarize their stance in your own words.
3. Concede. Explain what aspects of your opponent’s argument have validity (but only if you really feel this way because if you don’t, the reader can tell).
4. Respond. Bring the reader back to your argument and its strengths. Refute your opponent’s argument by explaining how your point works better, is more logically sound, or makes more sense.

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