Counter-Argument

When you write a persuasive essay, you make an argument: you make a claim in your thesis and offer some reasoning, using evidence, that suggests why the thesis is true. When you counter-argue, you consider a possible argument against your thesis or some part of your reasoning and then state why your claim is still valid. This is a good way to test your ideas when writing your first draft, while you still have time to review them. Arguing against someone’s objection to your claim is called counter-argument. Countering the argument against your claim allows you to anticipate doubts and counter-objections that a reader might have; it presents you as the kind of person who weighs alternatives before arguing for one, who considers other points of view instead of sweeping them under the rug, and who is more interested in discovering the truth than winning a point.

Not every objection is worth countering, of course, and you should carefully consider what to argue against. Including at least one opposite view to your own claim should occur in your persuasive essay.

The Turn Against

Counter-argument 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 reader, who doesn’t share your opinion, or cite a real person, who might resist your argument by pointing out

- a problem with your reasoning, different conclusion could be drawn from the same facts;
- one or more disadvantages or practical drawbacks to what you propose;
- an alternative proposal that makes more sense than yours.

You introduce this turn against with a phrase like Someone 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 and clearly as you can, pointing to evidence where possible.

The Turn Back

Your return to your own argument is called the turn back. You announce the turn back with a but, yet, however, nevertheless or still---must likewise involve careful reasoning. In reasoning about the proposed counter-argument, you may

- show why it is not a real problem
- acknowledge its validity, but suggest why it’s less important than what you propose
- agree to the opposing argument and then restate your thesis in a more exact, qualified way that takes into account the objection. This will work if the counter-argument concerns only a part of your argument; if it destroys your whole claim, you need a new thesis.
Where to Put a Counter-Argument

Counter-argument can appear anywhere in the essay, but it most commonly appears

• 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 any body paragraph, where you imagine a counter-argument not to your main idea but to the point that the specific paragraph is arguing or is about to argue;
• as a paragraph just before the conclusion of your essay, in which you imagine what someone might object to in your argument.

But watch that you don’t overdo it. A counter-argument will sharpen and energize your essay, but too many can have the reverse effect by making your main idea appear weak because there are too many objections.

Counter-Argument in Pre-Writing and Revising

Good thinking constantly questions itself, as Socrates observed long ago. But at some point in the process of composing an essay, you need to switch off the questioning in your head and make a case. Having such an inner conversation during the drafting stage, however, can help you settle on a case worth making. As you consider a possible thesis and begin to work on your first draft, ask yourself how an intelligent person might disagree with you or see matters differently. When you can imagine an intelligent disagreement, you have an arguable idea for a persuasive essay.

Be careful: if you come to find the counter-argument truer than your thesis, consider making it your thesis and turning your original thesis into a counter-argument. If you manage to draft an essay without imagining a counter-argument, make yourself imagine one before you finish your essay and add it as the last paragraph before the conclusion.