Argumentative Essays (Counter-arguments)

Why use counter-argument?

Why would you include a counter-argument in your essay? Doesn't that weaken your argument?

If done well, it makes the argument stronger. This is because it gives you the chance to respond to your reader's objections before they have finished reading. It also shows that you are a reasonable person who has considered both sides of the debate. Both of these make an essay more persuasive.

How should a counter-argument be presented?

A counter-argument should be expressed thoroughly, fairly and objectively. **Do not just write a quick sentence and then immediately rebut it. Give reasons why someone might actually hold that view. A few sentences or even a whole paragraph is not an unreasonable amount of space to give to the counter-argumen**t. Again, the point is to show your reader that you have considered all sides of the question, *and* to make it easier to answer the counter-argument. It's easier to respond to a point you have already spelled out—and it's easier for your reader to follow you.

Make sure you express the counter-argument fairly and objectively. Ask yourself if the person who actually holds this position would accept your way of stating it. Put yourself in their shoes and give them the benefit of the doubt. Don't use biased language or stack the deck when presenting their position. Readers see through that sort of thing pretty quickly.

Obviously, if you really believe the position expressed in your thesis, you will not be able to be completely objective in how you express the counter-argument—but you should try. One of the most common purposes of counter-argument is to address positions that many people hold but that you think are mistaken. Therefore, you want to be respectful and give them the benefit of the doubt even if you think their views are incorrect. They'll be much more likely to be persuaded then. (The other approach, to use sarcasm and satire to expose mistaken ideas, is very powerful, but should be used with care, especially before you've mastered the art of rhetoric.)

Organization

Where does the counter-argument go?

The short answer is a counter-argument can go anywhere except the conclusion. This is because there has to be a rebuttal paragraph after the counter-argument, so if the counter-argument is in the conclusion, something has been left out.

In practice (there are exceptions), the rebuttal is usually not the concluding paragraph, which means that generally the counter-argument is anywhere but the last two paragraphs.

Counter-arguments can be very effective in introductions, especially if you are arguing against a popularly held view. However, it's also very common to place them after the presentation of the case for the thesis. In other words, they would go after all of the main points that support the thesis, but before the conclusion—in the third-to-last paragraph, with the rebuttal in the second-to-last. This is probably the most common position.

Generally, unless there is some compelling reason specific to the particular argument being made, it does not make sense to put the counter-argument in the middle of the case for the thesis. In other words, you would not typically present two points in support of the thesis, then the counter-argument and rebuttal, and then more points in support of the thesis.

Here are three outlines showing the most common placement of the counter-argument. The first is probably the most common.

A. Introduction (**Counter-argument contained in introduction** and the rebuttal would be included in your introduction. It would usually be your thesis).
B. Point 1
C. Point 2
D. Point 3
E. Conclusion

A. Introduction
B. **Counter-argument**
C. Point 1
D. Point 2
E. Point 3
F. Conclusion

A. Introduction
B. Point 1
C. Point 2
D. Point 3
E. **Counter-argument** (Can be more than one paragraph)
F. Conclusion

How should the counter-argument be introduced?

It's important to use clear signals to alert the reader that the paper is about to express a view different from (typically, the opposite of) the thesis. Since the purpose of the whole paper, including the counter-argument, is to support the thesis, these signals are crucial. Without them the paper appears incoherent and contradictory.

Generally, the counter-argument will begin with a word, phrase or sentence to indicate that what follows is not the author's view. These can range from the very simple—sometimes the single word "But" or "However" is sufficient—to quite complex whole sentences:

*In his majisterial work on representation in western literature, a foundational text in the discipline, Auerbach **argues** that the mixture of styles is an essential ingredient of all modern realism, a **view** that has found **wide acceptance** in the half-century since its publication.*

Notice, however, that even this sentence is careful to attribute these views to other people, and to call them "views"—in other words, to subtly hint that they are *not* facts or truths.

In general, the strategy is to make it clear quickly that this is someone else's view. Typical introductory strategies include the following:

- Many people [**believe/argue/feel/think/suppose**] that [**state the counter-argument here**]
- It is often [**thought/imagined/supposed**] that [**state the counter-argument here**]
- [**One could imagine/suppose**] that [**state the counter-argument here**]
- It might [**seem/appear/look**] as if [**state the counter-argument here**]

You can also cite specific writers or thinkers who have expressed a view opposite to your own:

- On the other hand, [**Author's name or some people**] argues that...
- However, [**Author's name or some people**] has/have written, ...
- [**Author's name or…**] takes the position that...

How should the rebuttal be introduced?

If the counter-argument requires careful signaling, so does the rebuttal. The essay has just done a 180° turn away from its thesis, and now it is about to do another 180° turn to complete the circle. The reader needs warnings and guidance or they will fall off or get whiplash—you'll lose them, in other words, because the essay will seem incoherent or contradictory.

The common strategies for introducing the rebuttal are the mirror image of those for introducing the counter-argument, and they all boil down to the same basic concept: "Yes, but...." They can be as simple as that, or as complex as this example sentence:

*While Auerbach's claim **seems initially plausible,** and is backed by the copious evidence provided by his astonishing erudition, it is **marred** by an **inconsistency** that derives from an **unsupportable** and ultimately **incoherent** definition.*

In all cases, the job of this transitional language is to show the reader that the opposing view is now being answered. The essay has returned to arguing its own thesis, strengthened by having taken the opposition into account. Here are some

typical strategies. These are generic examples; they work best when tailored to suit the specifics of the individual topic.

- What this argument **[overlooks/fails to consider/does not take into account**] is ...
- This view [**seems/looks/sounds**] [**convincing/plausible/persuasive**] at first, but ...
- While this position is popular, it is [**not supported by the facts/not logical/impractical**]
- Although the core of this claim is valid, it suffers from a flaw in its [**reasoning/application**]

The following example is from an essay on Homer's Odyssey. The essay's thesis was that the gods enforce justice in a fair manner. The counter-argument (*italics*) tries to refute that. The rebuttal part is shown in bold:

It could be argued that the gods only enforce their brand of justice when it seems convenient to them. Zeus complains that "the way these mortals blame the gods" is "shameless" (Homer 1:37) while Athena asks him if he has "no care for [Odysseus] in your lofty heart?" (Homer 1:72). Despite the fact that Odysseus' house is besieged by suitors, the gods do not punish them immediately - it takes years before they meet their fates. The gods seem slow acting, even reluctant to deal with such problems. Athena takes up Orestes' case not because he is a suppliant, but because the Furies will spread "the venom of their pride, plague everlasting blights of our land" (Aeschylus Eumenides 493-494) if they "fail to win their day in court." (Aeschylus Eumenides 492). She also stops Odysseus' plan to kill the army of elders, even though she had just helped murder the suitors. The Furies point out these inconsistencies, saying that "the laws of god may veer from north to south / we Furies plead for Measure" (Aeschylus Eumenides 540-541). ***But despite these contradictions, the gods actually have an interest in seeing justice dealt fairly. Athena's actions prevent Odysseus from slaughtering an innocent group of men and end the cycle of violence that plagued the house of Atreus. The gods are designed like mortals and therefore aren't perfect, but their actions show that their goal is to assist mankind, not subjugate it.***