

Rebuttal Arguments*
ENGL 121 Spring 2011
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* Taken and modified from
http://changingminds.org/disciplines/argument/making_argument/refuting_argument.htm

Rebuttals are arguments that respond to existing arguments. Refutations are one kind of rebuttal argument. Refutations seek to tear down the opponent's arguments, but not necessarily to have anything to offer in place of those arguments. Refutations focus on showing flaws, holes, and contradictions in the opposition's statements to make the existing argument collapse.

Counter-arguments are another type of rebuttal argument. In a counter-argument, the arguer evaluates, challenges, and responds to the opponent's arguments first by acknowledging the opponents points, second by showing how they're inaccurate or can be challenged, and third by offering new arguments that are "better" (according to the arguer). Counter-arguments always need to offer something in response.

Refutation

Given an argument with which you disagree, you can mount an attack it in a number of ways.

In a formal argument, the primary arguer must establish a prima facie case (that stands on its own) and thus carries the burden of proof. The opponent only needs to show that the case is not proven to win the argument and thus may well focus on attacking and disproving the given case. An alternative case may also be given, but is not needed.

Ways to refute may include any or any combination of examples below. A good refutation will likely incorporate several or more of these, but occasionally you may find that you can rebut an argument by refuting one major thing, such as a definition. If the definition doesn't hold up, by default, neither does the rest of the argument.

Refute definitions

Look at the words used in the argument. Is their meaning clear? Is there one meaning only for each? If you can detect vague meaning or ambiguity in the parts of an argument, then you can show the whole argument to be shaky -- and, of course, you can shake it until it collapses.

- Check for single, clear meanings.
- Verify that meanings are clear to everyone.
- Seek ambiguity and uncertainty.
- Challenge expertise and assumptions of authority.
- Show that there are contradictory definitions.

Refute the logic

Consider the rationale being used. Test each statement for logical soundness. Also test between statements across the argument.

- Check that logical connections are clear and sound.
- Watch for unfounded assumptions.
- Test causes for clear and direct connections.
- Check that generalizations, inductive and deductive arguments are used in the right way.

- Look for bias, intentional or otherwise.
- Watch out for distractions and changing the subject.
- Show that they are using a fallacy of some sort.

Refute grounds

Dig into the data and evidence being used to support the main claim. In other words, determine if the opposition is leaving out crucial information purposely. If that missing information is included, does the argument still hold?

- Show that there is not enough data being used.
- Show that some critical evidence is not being used.
- Indicate how data that might refute the argument is being ignored.
- Show how data is being misinterpreted or misrepresented.
- Seek to uncover suppressed evidence.

Refute support

Look at the supporting statements to the argument. Seek cracks and chinks in the armor. Look for a place to drive in a wedge. Many arguments have a valid claim but weak support.

- Refute the warrant that links the grounds to the claim.
- Refute the backing that supports the warrant.
- Look for qualifiers and floppy language that can be challenged.
- Find the weakest link in the chain and focus on it until it breaks

Counter-Arguments

1. **Introduction and your claim:** If you are responding to a specific article, tell us the title and author of the primary article that you have chosen to counter-argue. Otherwise, be sure to lay out the existing arguments that you will counter and how you know they are existing arguments (popular ideas, other research, survey, etc). Be creative and hook your readers so they want to read your essay. Despite some common ground (perhaps) you see a problem or several problems worth discussing further. Tell us enough so that we know the direction of your counter-argument. (It is not specific enough to say "this writer is flat wrong in so many ways."). Consider this structure for a thesis: "Although the author states _____, evidence shows _____." In this case, the common ground is in the first blank and your position on the topic is in the second blank.
2. **Summary of main arguments:** Identify the opposition's thesis and summarize the main arguments. Your job is to accurately summarize those key points, then make it clear that you are taking a specific position on that writer's (opposition's) argument.
3. **Common ground/making concessions:** Establish some points of common ground with the opposition. Tell us what seems reasonable and well argued; indicate what is logical, credible, and emotionally compelling. This may take you more than one paragraph, but limit this discussion because you may be tempted to simply summarize the writer's article for three pages, and you definitely do not want the bulk of this argument to be a summary, nor do you want to build the opposition's argument more than you build your own.
4. **Challenges to writing and your counter-arguments:** After you have summarized the primary essay and established some common ground with your opponent, delineate where, how and why you see problems with his/her argument. Take care not to alienate, through name-calling or

other acts, either the person with whom you are disagreeing or those who might side with that person. Instead, try to use anything you have learned in this class to dissect the argument and expose its flaws. Does the writer lack credibility? What research/support does the opposition rely on? Is it "good" support for that argument? Is the evidence weak? How and why? Does the writer attempt to manipulate our emotions, or does the writer show a distinct lack of empathy for a community of people who would be hurt by his or her argument? Is the position ethically problematic? Look at the logic of the argument: show why parts of the argument seem weak. Are the reasons insufficient? Does the argument rely on false assumptions or logical fallacies? Consider whether the writer is taking a utilitarian perspective or a "respect for persons" perspective. Who stands to lose, if anyone, if this writer's perspective on his or her topic is adopted? Explain the problems with the argument clearly and completely so that you could bring those people who might agree with the argument around to your way of thinking about the essay.

Please Note: You do not need to try to deal with *all* of the questions posed here – deal with the issues that are most relevant for the argument you've chosen to counter-argue.

5. **Conclusion:** Restating your thesis and connect back to your introduction.