Responding to Arguments

Inquire: Hello From the Other Side

Overview
Think about how it feels when someone is arguing with you and it seems like they're not listening to your side or position at all. Now, imagine you don’t even have the opportunity to talk back and state your position. This is sometimes what reading an essay that you disagree with may feel like. Since the reader can’t talk back to the writer, the essay writer has a responsibility to make sure the reader feels heard. If the writer fails to do this, the reader will in all likelihood give up on the essay before they finish reading it.

Big Question: How can I make sure my opposition hears me out?

Watch: Refutation and Rebuttal
Imagine being locked in a small room, where all you can listen to is a news channel that produces content with which you disagree. Whether it’s MSNBC, CNN, or Fox News, newscasters are on TV discussing a subject you feel strongly about. How long would you be able to listen to them in silence? Would you soon begin yelling at the TV? Or groaning each time they made a point that you know to be false? How long until you resign yourself to the fact that they’ll never acknowledge your side?

This scenario is somewhat what it’s like to read a paper written by someone who disagrees with you on a controversial topic. Imagine how different watching the news could feel if, instead, they had taken the time to acknowledge alternative viewpoints, concede points that are widely accepted, and calmly and thoughtfully explain why they just can’t get on board with your idea. This sounds a lot nicer, doesn’t it?

That second scenario is what reading a well-constructed argument should feel like. Arguments in writing should always be considerate and thoughtful of the other side, take the time to consider alternative viewpoints, and respond to the opposition carefully and respectfully.

Good thoughtful arguments will do all of the following:

- Use respectful and considerate language
- Accurately represent the opposition
- Use qualifying words
- Use reliable information

Practicing these strategies will make sure that your opposition feels heard and respected.
Sometimes, however, a writer will need to respond to and refute counterarguments that are important to the opposition in order to bring them over to their side. A writer can do this in a few ways:

- Cite counter-testimony
- Question the data
- Question credibility
- Question context
- Deny the truth of a claim

These methods for refuting counterarguments can call the data or overall claim into question, but will not be effective unless your reader feels heard and respected. Have you ever had to listen to an argument where you were disrespected? How did you feel afterward? How much better do you feel after an argument if you feel like the other side listened to you?

Read: Respecting Your Opposition

Overview
There are many ways to go about engaging the opposition in an essay. One of the most commonly used methods is to write a counterargument paragraph as a way to help a resistant audience feel heard.

Use a Respectful Tone
To say that writers ought to use a respectful tone in writing seems like a common sense, no-brainer suggestion. However, when you're talking to someone or about someone whose opinion you consider to be offensive, insensitive, or ill-conceived, it can be difficult to practice self-restraint. Maybe this is because we rarely practice talking to the opposition in real life or because we have such poor examples in politics and the media. Either way, it's an exercise in generosity to talk kindly and reasonably to the people you disagree with the most.

Even if you think someone’s viewpoint is dumb, the moment you say that in an essay, the opposition will stop listening to you. Insulting your reader rarely results in a successful essay; just consider how quickly you stop listening to someone’s argument the second they call you a name! It works exactly the same way in written arguments.

Accurately Represent the Opposition
This method can sometimes be difficult to maintain. In order to truly talk to your opposition, you need to understand their position just as well as (if not better than) you understand your own. If you fail to accurately represent the position held by your opposition, you are likely to lose them as readers. Worse still, you have tarnished the reputation of your own position as uninformed and reductive.

Even if your only goal is to rebut or refute the opposition, you still need to have a complete understanding of all points of view surrounding your topic. Some will seem more reasonable to you than others; for the more reasonable positions, you might be able to concede some or all of the point, and you might need to consider doing this if a large swath of your audience sees it as reasonable.
Use Qualifying Words

**Qualifiers** have also been called “conditions” or sometimes “hedges.” Qualifiers are simply words that can soften your claim like “sometimes,” “often,” “rarely,” “occasionally,” “many,” “most,” “some,” etc. You can see how these terms can take a major claim and make it harder to argue.

For example, if you read an argument that says, “Nobody contracts polio anymore,” you will probably be quick to point out that polio does still exist and the risk for contraction is still present, even though it has lessened significantly with the advent of vaccines and other new medical technology. If, instead, the argument were phrased with qualifiers, you might find it to be a bit more palatable: “In America, polio is rarely contracted anymore.” You can see that not only is “rarely” working as a qualifier, but “In America” is working as an additional condition. Both of these additions to the claim make it much easier to defend.

There are times, of course, when you might not want a qualifying claim. If you are making an absolute argument, you should state it strongly and with confidence. Just keep in mind that a resistant audience is always looking for ways to undercut small parts of your argument; if your claim is undeservedly bold or absolute, you might be making more work for yourself in the long run.

Use Reliable Information

This is another recommendation that seems like it should go without saying, but it is of paramount importance that you carefully check the claims, ideas, and supporting evidence you use as you respond to counterarguments. Particularly if you feel confident that you know a lot about a subject, you might be inclined to use claims you’ve heard elsewhere before. You might, though, be misremembering or misrepresenting those remembered claims, or they might have originally been shared by an unreliable source.

Sometimes, we’re tempted to include a piece of evidence because it supports our position perfectly, even if it’s less than reliable. What’s worth noting, however, is that using this kind of source material opens up a space for the opposition to throw your argument out the window. Having that perfect quote to support your claim isn’t worth alienating your audience.

Reflect Poll: Listening to the Opposition

In arguments, how do you handle it when the other side doesn’t seem to understand your position?

- I stop listening or reading. If they don’t take the time to understand me, they don’t deserve my time.
- I just tune out. I don’t want to be rude and put them off, but I don’t need to hear what they need to say.
- I still listen respectfully.

Expand: Writing Counterarguments

Overview

By now you know it’s important to write counterarguments, or at least to consider the other side, but how do you do it? First, you need to know how resistant your audience is, then you need to form a solid idea of how to respond. It can be helpful to think of a sliding scale of resistance. On one side you have
agreement and on the other side you have disagreement. Every reader will fall somewhere on this scale, and you will need to respond differently depending on whether they fully disagree or whether they are somewhere in a grey, middle-section.

Strategies for Refutation

There are several commonly accepted strategies for refuting a particular counterargument:

- **Cite counter-testimony**: Use examples and testimony that call the claim into question.
- **Question the data**: If anything about the data is suspicious (sample sizes, recency, etc), you can call it into question.
- **Question credibility**: You can always question the credibility or authority of a leading figure of the opposition, though you’ll want to be careful that your questioning has merit. Don’t attack someone’s character just because you want to win.
- **Question context**: You can question the way quotations were presented by calling the context into question.
- **Deny the truth of a claim**: If you think that a claim made by the opposition is purely untrue, you should deny it and call it into question. If you think that data or facts presented by the other side are inaccurate or untrue, you should make a point to refute the argument by pointing out those observations.

In reading these, you might have noticed they sound familiar. If you think back through the news recently, you can probably find examples of each of these as pundits and politicians work their way through the mire of political discourse. These are just a few common strategies you can use to rebut a counterargument.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

A video providing help with writing counterarguments
- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhLHdgYVg1c

A resource providing an overview of various refutation strategies
- Link to resource: http://www.wou.edu/~corninr/wr135/refutation.html

A Harvard guide to counterargument writing
- Link to resource: https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/counter-argument

Lesson Glossary

**qualifiers**: (or conditions or hedges); words that soften a claim, like sometimes, often, rarely, occasionally, many, most, some, etc.

**counter-testimony**: examples and testimony that call a claim into question
Check Your Knowledge

1. All readers will agree with you.
   a. True
   b. False

2. Refutation strategies are rarely seen in daily life.
   a. True
   b. False

3. You should never use absolute claims; you should always use qualifiers.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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