

BASICS OF COUNTERARGUMENT

A counterargument is an argument that a writer (or speaker) directs against an alternative or opposing argument. Often the counterargument is developed as writers anticipate their readers' possible objections or concerns. Review the brief introduction to refuting the opposition found in *Keys for Writers* (Raimes). Then consider the following scenario of counterargument before constructing one of your own:

Let's say that you – a first-year UCSD student living in the dorms or apartments – have a car at home and would like to bring it to school with you. You suspect, however, that your parents will oppose your doing so. You decide to write them a letter proposing this plan – in your most persuasive way. You consider first all the reasons that you have for wanting your car at school: the time you will save shopping for necessities, the ease with which you will explore the San Diego area, the fun you will have getting behind the wheel, the money you will save on transportation to and from school at vacation times, and so on. These are the reasons that you can put together to make your argument.

However, you can easily imagine what your parents are going to worry about. You make a list of your parents' worries: How much will it cost (in extra gas and possibly extra insurance) to have the car at school? How likely is it that your car might be stolen – or that it might be broken into and your radio stolen? What if you start spending too much time off campus and neglect your studies? What if you have an accident? You can easily imagine the list of worries your parents might have.

But all is not lost. You sit down, list their major worries, and then list the reasons you can use to allay their fears, dissolve their worries, answer their objections. Taken together, the reasons you assemble for arguing against their fears and objections are your counterargument.

The above example illustrates the following features of successful counterargument:

Both arguments and counterarguments take time (and space) because they anticipate readers' concerns with careful, detailed reasoning. Note, in the above example, that neither your argument nor your counterargument can be reduced to a one-liner. How effective would you be if you phoned your parents and said "I want my car at school" without anticipating possible concerns? Probably not very effective. Only when you have assembled a set of reasons and laid them out with care will you have an effective argument for wanting your car at school. Similarly, if you offered your argument carefully, then your parents offered a list of objections, and you replied with a one-liner such as "But I want to!" you could not expect to succeed. That's an assertion, not a *counterargument*. Only when you have mentally anticipated your parents' objections, carefully assembled a list of reasons, and organized your reasons into a counterargument do you have a *strategy* for successfully overcoming your parents' fears.

Overcoming possible objections to your argument can thus take several forms. You might try to win your parents over entirely to your view, or you might find some way of accommodating their argument while still getting to have your car at school. You might, for instance, compromise on some parts of their concerns by conceding that your parents' worries are justified, or by agreeing to install an alarm system to prevent burglary. Counterarguing, then, may involve some of all of the following:

- Anticipating your readers' concerns: to persuade readers that your argument is reasonable, you need to begin by anticipating how they might think differently from you. What questions or doubts might they have? What alternative interpretations or arguments might they be tempted to find convincing?
- Refuting those concerns: You might argue strongly against the premises or the reasoning of an argument in order to convince someone that your position is preferable.
- Accommodating those concerns: You might find a way to agree with part of someone's opposing argument without weakening your own argument.
- Conceding a point in light of those concerns: You might concede that someone's concerns are justified and yet go on to show why those concerns need not matter or need not damage your main argument.

In all cases, an effective counterargument will strengthen your argument and increase your readers' willingness to take it seriously.