

Refuting Readers' Objections

Your readers' possible objections and views cannot always be accommodated. Sometimes they must be refuted. When you **refute readers' objections**, you assert that they are wrong and argue against them. Refutation does not have to be delivered arrogantly or dismissively, however. Because differences are inevitable, reasoned argument provides a peaceful and constructive way for informed, well-intentioned people who disagree strongly to air their differences.

In the following example, a social sciences professor refutes one argument for giving college students the opportunity to purchase lecture notes prepared by someone else.

Now, it may well be argued that universities are already shortchanging their students by stuffing them into huge lecture halls where, unlike at rock concerts or basketball games, the lecturer can't even be seen on a giant screen in real time. If they're already shortchanged with impersonal instruction, what's the harm in offering canned lecture notes?

The amphitheater lecture is indeed, for all but the most engaging professors, a lesser form of instruction, and scarcely to be idealized. Still, Education by Download misses one of the keys to learning. Education is a meeting of minds, a process through which the student educes, draws from within, a response to what the teacher teaches.

The very act of taking notes — not reading someone else's notes, no matter how stellar — is a way of engaging the material, wrestling with it, struggling to comprehend or take issue, but in any case entering into the work. The point is to decide, while you are listening, what matters in the presentation. And while I don't believe that most of life consists of showing up, education does begin with that — with immersing yourself in the activity at hand, listening, thinking, judging, offering active responses. A download is a poor substitute.

— TODD GITLIN, "Disappearing Ink"

As this selection illustrates, writers cannot simply dismiss readers' possible concerns with a wave of their hand. Gitlin states a potential objection fully and fairly but then goes on to refute it by claiming that students need to take their own lecture notes to engage and comprehend the material that is being presented to them.

Effective refutation requires a restrained tone and careful argument. Although you may not accept this particular refutation, you can agree that it is well reasoned and supported. You need not feel attacked personally because the writer disagrees with you.

Exercise 13.10

Evaluate Robert Kuttner's use of refutation in paragraphs 11–12, 14–16, and 20–21 of "Good Jobs for Americans Who Help Americans" (Chapter 6). In each case, how does Kuttner signal or announce the refutation? How does he support the refutation? What is the tone of the refutation, and how effective do you think the tone would be in convincing readers to take the writer's argument seriously?

You might think that acknowledging readers' objections in this way — addressing readers directly, listing their possible objections, and discussing each one — would weaken your argument. It might even seem reckless to suggest objections that not all readers would think of. On the contrary, however, most readers respond positively to this strategy because it makes you seem thoughtful and reasonable. By researching your subject and your readers, you will be able to use this strategy confidently in your own argument essays. And you will learn to look for it in arguments you read and use it to make judgments about the writer's credibility.

Accommodating Readers' Concerns

To argue effectively, you must often take special care to **accommodate readers' concerns** by acknowledging their objections, questions, and alternative positions, causes, or solutions. Occasionally, however, you may have to go even further. Instead of merely acknowledging your readers' concerns, you may decide to accept some of them and incorporate them into your own argument. This strategy can be very disarming to readers. It is sometimes referred to as **concession**, for it seems to concede that opposing views have merit. The following example comes from an essay enthusiastically endorsing e-mail.

To be sure, egalitarianism has its limits. The ease and economy of sending email, especially to multiple recipients, makes us all vulnerable to any bore, loony, or commercial or political salesman who can get our email address. It's still a lot less intrusive than the telephone, since you can read and answer or ignore email at your own convenience. But as normal people's email starts mounting into the hundreds daily, which is bound to happen, filtering mechanisms and conventions of etiquette that are still in their primitive stage will be desperately needed.

Another supposed disadvantage of email is that it discourages face-to-face communication. At Microsoft, where people routinely send email back and forth all day to the person in the next office, this is certainly true. Some people believe this tendency has more to do with the underdeveloped social skills of computer geeks than with Microsoft's role in developing the technology email relies on. I wouldn't presume to comment on that. Whether you think email replacing live conversation is a good or bad thing depends, I guess, on how much of a misanthrope you are. I like it.

— MICHAEL KINSLEY, "Email Culture"

Notice that Kinsley's accommodation or concession is not grudging. He readily concedes that e-mail brings users a lot of unwanted messages and may discourage conversation in the workplace.

Exercise 13.9

How does Patrick O'Malley attempt to accommodate readers in paragraphs 8 and 9 of his Chapter 6 essay arguing for more frequent exams? What seems successful or unsuccessful in his argument? How do his efforts at accommodation make his argument seem more convincing?

uses, and then try to identify the phrases or sentences that comment on or explain this evidence. Consider whether Romano's evidence in these two paragraphs seems relevant to her thesis and reasons, appropriately selective, well balanced between quotes and paraphrases, integrated smoothly into the sentences she creates, and explained helpfully.

Counterarguing

Asserting a thesis and backing it with reasons and support are essential to a successful argument. Thoughtful writers go further, however, by **counterarguing** — anticipating and responding to their readers' objections and questions, their alternative position, or preferred solution to a problem.

To counterargue, writers rely on three basic strategies: acknowledging, accommodating or conceding, and refuting. Writers show they are aware of readers' objections and questions (acknowledge), modify their position to accept readers' concerns they think are legitimate (concede), or explicitly argue that readers' objections may be invalid or that their concerns may be irrelevant (refute). Writers may use one or more of these three strategies in the same essay. Readers find arguments more convincing when writers have anticipated their concerns in these ways.

Acknowledging Readers' Concerns

When you **acknowledge readers' questions or objections**, you show that you are aware of their point of view and that you take it seriously even if you do not agree with it, as in the following example.

The homeless, it seems, can be roughly divided into two groups: those who have had marginality and homelessness forced upon them and want nothing more than to escape them, and a smaller number who have at least in part chosen marginality, and now accept, or, in a few cases, embrace it.

I understand how dangerous it can be to introduce the idea of choice into a discussion of homelessness. It can all too easily be used for all the wrong reasons by all the wrong people to justify indifference or brutality toward the homeless, or to argue that they are getting only what they deserve.

And I understand, too, how complicated the notion can become: Many of the veterans on the street, or battered women, or abused and runaway children, have chosen this life only as the lesser of evils, and because, in this society, there is often no place else to go.

And finally, I understand how much that happens on the street can combine to create an apparent acceptance of homelessness that is nothing more than the absolute absence of hope.

Nonetheless we must learn to accept that there may indeed be people on the street who have seen so much of our world, or have seen it so clearly, that to live in it becomes impossible.

— PETER MARIN, "Go Ask Alice"

Textual Evidence

When you argue claims of value (Chapter 7), **textual evidence** will be very important. In your college courses, if you are asked to evaluate a controversial article, you must quote, paraphrase, or summarize passages so that readers can understand why you think the author's argument is or is not credible. If you are analyzing a novel, you must include numerous excerpts to show just how you arrived at your conclusion.

For textual evidence to be considered effective support for an argument, it must be carefully selected to be relevant. You must help readers see the connection between each piece of evidence and the reason it supports. Textual evidence must also be highly selective — that is, chosen from among all the available evidence to provide the support needed without overwhelming the reader or weakening the argument with marginally relevant evidence. Textual evidence usually has more impact if it is balanced between quotation and paraphrase, and it must be smoothly integrated into the sentences of the argument.

The following example comes from a student essay in which the writer argues that the main character (referred to as “the boy”) in the short story “Araby” by James Joyce is so self-absorbed that he learns nothing about himself or other people.

The story opens and closes with images of blindness — a framing device that shows the boy does not change but ends up with the same lack of understanding that he began with. The street is “blind” with an “uninhabited house . . . at the blind end” (par. 1). As he spies on Mangan’s sister, from his own house, the boy intentionally limits what he is able to see by lowering the “blind” until it is only an inch from the window sash (par. 4). At the bazaar in the closing scene, the “light was out,” and the upper part of the hall was “completely dark” (par. 36). The boy is left “gazing up into the darkness,” seeing nothing but an inner torment that burns his eyes (par. 37).

The boy’s blindness appears to be caused by his obsession with Mangan’s sister. When he tries to read at night, for example, the girl’s “image [comes] between [him] and the page,” in effect blinding him (par. 12). In fact, he seems blind to everything except this “image” of the “brown-clad figure cast by [his] imagination” (par. 16). The girl’s “brown-clad figure” is also associated with the houses on “blind” North Richmond Street, with their “brown imperturbable faces” (par. 1). The houses stare back at the boy, unaffected by his presence and gaze.

— SALLY CRANE, “Gazing into the Darkness”

Notice how the writer quotes selected words and phrases about blindness to support her reasoning that the boy learns nothing because he is blinded. There are twelve smoothly integrated quotations in these two paragraphs, along with a number of paraphrases, all of them relevant. The writer does not assume that the evidence speaks for itself; she comments and interprets throughout.

For more information on paraphrasing, see pp. 340–41 in Chapter 9.

Exercise 13.8

Analyze the use of evidence in paragraphs 4 and 5 of Christine Romano’s essay “‘Children Need to Play, Not Compete,’ by Jessica Statsky: An Evaluation” in Chapter 7. If you have not read this essay, read it now. Identify the quotes and paraphrases Romano