

# Essays with counter-arguments

## Academic English argumentation

Academic writing generally expresses a point of view or a position, and is thus generally argumentative. It may be in the form of a critique, a persuasive essay, or a review. Even content that we don't think of as argumentative is material that is, or once was, debated in the academic world. Sometimes professors may ask you to defend or articulate a view or interpretation, for the sake of your understanding of the material, to develop your analytical skills, or to show that you understand the material. Even informative papers about accepted scientific facts may require providing evidence or proof for the facts presented, and are thus argumentative as well. Other scientific papers may present factual findings (e.g., results of an experiment), but with the purpose of proving their truthfulness, validity, or their scientific worth, i.e., that the research reported is of scientific value.

Such papers involving making claims, in the form of the main objective or thesis of the paper (usually a thesis statement in the introductory paragraph), as well as main supporting arguments, which are often expressed as topic sentences in the body paragraphs. Each of your various claims must be supported with evidence and/or further explanation. Support or evidence can include supporting data, supporting details, examples, information or ideas from other sources, theoretical arguments, persuasive explanation, or other kinds of support, depending on the academic field. In the process, you must anticipate and address potential counter-arguments. Here you must take the perspective of a skeptical reader, and try to formulate counter-arguments against your claims, and then address them.

## Counter-argumentation style

Korean writers traditionally followed a more indirect argumentation style, which follows a pattern roughly like this:

- |                                     |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1a. General introduction            | (intro ¶)                                |
| 1b. Statement of the issue          | (intro ¶)                                |
| 2. Summary of one side of the issue | (first body section)                     |
| 3. Summary of opposing side         | (second body section)                    |
| 4. Writer's evaluation and position | (final body section and/or conclusion ¶) |

However, this style is much less effective in English or Western academic writing. A general introduction will seem non-relevant and non-informative to Western academic readers, so the introduction should begin with a specific introduction, such as background information that is specific to the main topic and thesis statement, or that is otherwise specific and interesting enough to gain the reader's attention.

The style whereby arguments for one side, then the opposing side, are summarized, is much less common in English academic writing, and runs the risk of sounding general and lacking coherence to native English readers. This is because summarizing arguments for each side may sound like general information, and thus less informative, and this fails to present the author's main arguments in the process. The writer instead summarizes two positions, without making clear his/her rhetorical objectives, his/her own positions, and his/her own specific claims. For an English academic reader, this line of thought will be difficult to follow, and the reader may think that the writer has nothing specific or interesting to say, or is avoiding commitment to a particular position or rhetorical objective.

Instead, English essays lay out a specific position in the introduction (thesis statement) and specific supporting arguments in each of the following body paragraphs. In the process of presenting specific arguments, within each paragraph or section the writer then notes and addresses potential counter-arguments to his/her arguments. In fact, most often this is done within body paragraphs, in the context of a related argument. More generally, though, there are several ways of dealing with counter-arguments in the organization of the essay.

### **Framing of main arguments**

Frame specific arguments to address potential counter-arguments, without necessarily mentioning those counter-arguments explicitly – especially if those counter-arguments are fairly obvious or commonly known to the readers or potential audience. This is the most common method, and it avoids repeated ideas or specific information that the reader may already be familiar with.

For example, the following two topic sentences anticipate claims made by some politicians about economics and government; an educated, politically aware person would probably recognize that these sentences directly contradict some commonly argued claims by advocates of neoliberal economic policies; even though their neoliberal claims are not stated, these sentences implicitly argue against them.

The neoliberal laissez-faire economic policies of American conservatives falsely assume that humans are rational economic agents who act in their best long-term interests.

...

These political philosophies also operate on false assumptions about the virtue of human nature, and ignore the realities and complexities of human moral behavior and decision making processes.

### **Within body paragraphs**

After the topic sentences (and often after some sentences providing positive arguments for the topic sentence), then you can turn to a potential counter-argument related to the topic sentence, and deal with that.\*

A mixed market economy with sufficient government controls and regulation is more consistent with the realities of human nature. Humans often make economic decisions based on short-term goals and simple heuristic decision making mechanisms. Although libertarian conservatives believe that markets act as rational entities that “police themselves”, in that human agents act in their own self-interest to preserve market stability, their self-interest actually leads to non-rational behavior that is focused on short-term gains. This, then, leads to reliance on quick psychological heuristics in decision making, which bypass careful, analytical, thoughtful decision making. ... Conservatives also mistakenly view markets as an organic entity, which ignores modern understandings of markets as fluctuating dynamic systems that adhere to complex mathematical and behavioral patterns, as understood in game theory and chaos theory.

## Separate paragraph

After a body paragraph presenting positive arguments for a claim, a separate, full paragraph may follow up by presenting and dealing with a counter-argument, much like the within-paragraph examples above. Also, a final body paragraph or section before the conclusion may likewise envision a major counter-argument and deal with it there. For example, one of these statement from above could be turned into a separate paragraph:

Although libertarian conservatives believe that markets act as rational entities that “police themselves”, in that human agents act in their own self-interest to preserve market stability, their self-interest actually leads to non-rational behavior that is focused on short-term gains.

Conservatives also mistakenly view markets as organic entities, which ignores modern understandings of markets as fluctuating dynamic systems that adhere to complex mathematical and behavioral patterns, as understood in game theory and chaos theory.

## Introductions

In the introduction, before the thesis statement, such that addressing an opposing argument becomes the rationale for the essay or thesis itself. (See example below.)

## Example

The following sample<sup>1</sup> shows counter-arguments highlighted within the introduction and one body paragraph. (Note that this has some more informal elements and word choice, e.g., a rather generally worded initial sentence in the introduction, and vague, general words like “bad”).

## Argumentative essay: The Dangers of Dams (freshman level example)

**Introduction** (Uses counter-argument to make lead into a clear thesis argument)

**Thesis statement** (Includes three main arguments which will in turn become three body topics)

Around the world, there are hundreds of dams of different sizes. Dams are used for irrigation, flood defenses, water supply, and hydroelectric power. Despite these positive elements, however, there are also many bad elements related to dams. Dams have a negative global impact because they eat up valuable land resources, ruin wildlife habitats, effects endangered species, and create damaging greenhouse gases.

---

1 From is from <http://www.fanshawec.ca/assets/the~learning~centre~-~tlc/sample1argument.pdf>.

**First argument**

(Presents the counter opinion; incorporates the use of research to

Firstly, dams take up areas of land rich with valuable resources. Dams require large areas of land as flood plains for the reservoir of water. Man-made lakes are created this way often at the cost of valuable farmland, livable land, and plentiful forests. Although there are enjoyable aspects of a man-made lake, these lakes are not always practical. In Texas, a proposed reservoir could take over 50,000 acres of forest and family farms (“Texas Water”). Not only will local populations lose natural resources, but people will also lose income due to a loss of exportable materials.

**Second argument**

(Firmly indicates 2nd supporting

Secondly, dams ruin natural habitats for wildlife. Dam reservoirs hold water and release water slowly through a forced opening. Water lying dormant in one area begins to heat on the surface. Eventually, the water stagnates due to a lack of movement and becomes low in oxygen supply. Plants that need this oxygen for survival die off. In addition, fish that depend on the flow of the river as a form of transportation to spawning areas are not able to move past the reservoir. This disruption affects the ecosystem with dire consequences for the food chain.

**Third argument**

(Firmly indicates 3rd supporting argument with a smooth transition into final argument)

Thirdly, endangered species are further threatened by a dam system. Natural systems are often so significantly affected by dams that they are either destroyed or negatively modified. Weeds that flourish in low-oxygenated areas begin to choke up the water system and absorb the remaining valuable resources. In the Amazon River’s Balbina reservoir, “even the introduction of a herd of grazing manatees has failed to staunch the spread of weeds” (Pearce). These weeds eventually begin to rot leading to the devastating effects of greenhouse gases.

**Fourth argument**

(Linked directly to argument two)

Greenhouse gases dangerously affect the atmosphere through climate change. According to Bioscience, a North American science journal, “reservoirs create one-fifth of all man-made methane in the atmosphere”. Climatic change drastically effects life on earth. Polar ice caps, for example, are melting because of rising global temperatures. Coastal cities are beginning to lose land as the water levels rise in the ocean. Horrendous tidal waves have formed because of the shift in atmospheric conditions. These occurrences come together to create the greenhouse effect, which is in desperate need of reversal. According to the World Commission on Dams, “there is no justification for claiming that hydroelectricity does not contribute significantly to global warming”. With such data available, the creation of dams seems deadly.

**Conclusion** (Offers a possible solution to the problem)

Today, society is learning of the dangers that come with hydroelectric dams. As alternatives, solar and wind power are both green energy sources that have no foreseeable dangers. It is hopeful that these sources can come into use in the future to replace the need for dams.

## Transitionals and expressions

Counter-arguments can be referred to and refuted with expressions like these:

Although {summary of idea}, .... {your refutation}

It {may/could/might} be {argued/asserted/claimed/contended/maintained/said} that... However, ...

One / Some {claim, etc.} that... However, ....

It is sometimes claimed / etc....

It {is / has been} {argued, etc.} that ... However, ...

Counter-arguments should be discussed in an objective tone, so unprofessional or aggressive language should be avoided, e.g., referring to counter-claims or ideas as “foolish, dumb” or such. An essay writer usually problematizes them, that is, the counter-arguments are discussed objectively as problems. In your refutation the essay should objectively explain why the opposition is wrong, your position is better, or where the opposition's argument falls short.

### More examples

Here's a brief example on end-of-life issues<sup>2</sup>.

argument	The primary focus in medical end-of-life decisions should be on patient consent, rather than doctor intention, because it is not a breach against a patient's rights if s/he consents to the termination of their life.
counter-argument	Terminally ill patients are likely to be depressed, and therefore unable to consent to their hastened death in a balanced or acceptable way.
refutation	Depression can be managed. The relevance of depression must be made on a case-by-case basis. Depression does not warrant a general rule prohibiting patients from consenting to a hastened death.

Here is a sketch of another possible example.

---

<b>Title, intro, thesis Statement</b>	<b>“Learning” English</b> Korean parents, caught up in the spirit of educational competitiveness, devote considerable resources to ensuring that their children will learn English, from an increasingly earlier age. However, the push for learning English has become increasingly counter-productive, and may negatively impact their ability to learn English meaningfully, as well as other negative effects on their learning motivation, learning habits, and self-esteem.
---------------------------------------	--

---

2 From <http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/llonline/writing/law/legal-process/2.3.3.xml>.

<b>Argument 1</b>	<p>Korean children are sent to private learning academies and private tutors, where they increasingly focus on memorizing grammar rules and vocabulary.</p> <p><i>[More statistical evidence will be provided here, from governmental sources or other studies.]</i></p> <p>Parents believe that their children are learning English, when in fact, they are merely learning facts about English.</p> <p><i>[Further points will be elaborated here, first about the nature of language learning, and then the inadequacy of the contents that are often memorized by children as supposedly “English”.]</i></p>
<b>Argument 2</b>	<p>A number of observational examples show that middle and high school children who have learned English in a mechanical, rote-based manner are unable to use their knowledge in any meaningful way, in conversational interactions in the classroom, or especially outside the classroom when they encounter foreigners.</p> <p><i>[Various examples from observational studies are provided here.]</i></p>
<b>Counter-argument / Rebuttal 1</b>	<p>Some might claim that this kind of focus on studying English will enable students to succeed in college and in their careers. However, the focus on rote learning of non-communicative knowledge of English in fact leaves students very poorly prepared for the demands of college and careers. Increasingly, Korean universities are moving toward English-mediated courses [EMC] or English-mediate instruction, where courses are taught in English, be it by a Korean or foreign professor. The traditional approach leaves students without practical comprehension skills or communication skills, and thus, they will have serious difficulties adjusting to real English in a real context.</p> <p><i>[More data and details here]</i></p> <p>The same will carry over to their future careers, where they will have difficulties communicating with non-Koreans, or in dealing with English-language materials or contexts in their vocation.</p> <p><i>[More data and details here]</i></p>
<b>Counter-argument / Rebuttals 2 &amp; 3</b>	<p>Some will point to data from test scores. However, no meaningful correlation can be found between test scores (TOEFL, TOEIC, or the Korean <i>sunung</i> college entrance exam) with the increasing financial resources or study times devoted to studying English.</p> <p><i>[More data and details here]</i></p> <p>More significantly, however, is the lack of linguistic validity to these exams – these typical exams do not provide reliable measures of meaningful, communicative English ability, and such exams are not trusted by many in language education or linguistics.</p> <p><i>[More data and details here]</i></p>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<p>[Summary of problem and implication for Korean educational policy]</p>