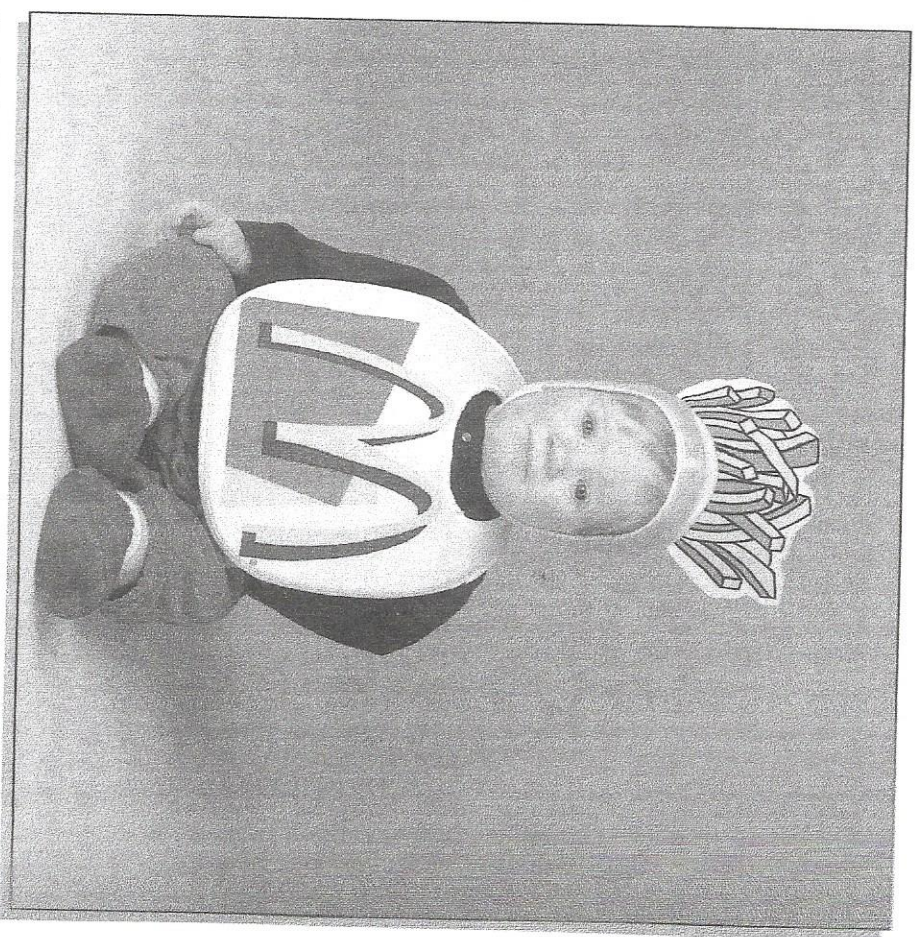


Rebuttal Arguments

*Triple, Foster and Jack
Soper. Good Reasons:
Designing and Writing
Effective Arguments.
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Benjamin, 2006. 173-188*



The Media Foundation, a Canadian media activist organization, challenges advertising it sees as harmful by subverting it. The Media Foundation publishes an ad-free magazine, *Adbusters*, and it supports the Adbusters Web site, both of which take on specific advertising campaigns with clever spoofs.

Then you hear the word *rebuttal*, you might think of a debate team or the art of a trial when the attorney for the defense answers the plaintiff's accusations. Although rebuttal has those definitions, a **rebuttal argument** can be thought of in much larger terms. Indeed, much of what people know about the world today is the result of centuries of arguments of rebuttal.

In high school and college, you no doubt have taken many courses that required the memorization of knowledge and evidence, which you demonstrated by repeating these facts on tests. You probably didn't think much about how the knowledge came about. Once in a while, though, something happens that makes people think consciously about a piece of knowledge that they have learned. For example, in elementary school, you learned that the earth rotates on its axis once a day. Maybe you didn't think about it much at the time, but once,

Effective rebuttal arguments depend on critical thinking.

years later, you were out on a clear night and noticed the Big Dipper in one part of the sky, and then you looked for it later and found it in another part of the sky. Perhaps you became interested enough that you watched the stars for a few hours. If you've ever spent a clear night out stargazing, you have observed that the North Star, called Polaris, stays in the same place. The stars near Polaris appear to move in a circle around Polaris, and the stars farther away move from east to west until they disappear below the horizon.

If you are lucky enough to live in a place where the night sky is often clear, you can see the same pattern repeated night after night. And if you stop to think about why you see the stars circling around Polaris, you remember what you were taught long ago—that you live on a rotating ball, so the stars appear to move across the sky, but in fact, stars are so distant from the earth that their actual movement is not visible to humans over a short term.

An alternative explanation for these facts not only is possible but is the one that people believed from ancient times until about five hundred years ago. People assumed that their position on the earth was fixed and that the entire sky rotated on an axis connecting Polaris and the earth. The flaw in this theory for people in ancient times is the movement of the planets. If you watch the path of Mars over several nights, you will observe that it also moves across the sky from east to west, but it makes an anomalous backward movement during its journey and then goes forward again. The other planets also seem to wander back and forth as they cross the night sky. The ancient Greeks developed an explanation of the strange wanderings of the planets by theorizing that the planets move in small circles imposed on

larger orbits. By graphing little circles on top of circles, the course of planets could be plotted and predicted. This theory culminated in the work of Ptolemy, who lived in Alexandria in the second century AD. Ptolemy proposed displaced centers for the small circles called *epicycles*, which gave a better fit for predicting the path of planets.

Because Ptolemy's model of the universe was numerically accurate in its predictions, educated people for centuries assumed its validity, even though there was evidence to the contrary. For example, Aristarchus of Samos, who lived in the fourth century BCE, used the size of the earth's shadow cast on the moon during a lunar eclipse to compute the sizes of the moon and sun and their distances from the earth. Even though his calculations were inaccurate, Aristarchus recognized that the sun is much bigger than the earth, and he advanced the heliocentric hypothesis: that the earth orbits the sun.

Many centuries passed, however, before educated people believed that the sun, not the earth, was the center of the solar system. In the early sixteenth century, the Polish astronomer Nicolas Copernicus recognized that Ptolemy's model could be greatly simplified if the sun was at the center of the solar system. He kept his theory a secret for much of his life and saw the published account of his work only a few hours before his death in 1543. Even though Copernicus made a major breakthrough, he was not able to take full advantage of the heliocentric hypothesis because he followed the tradition that orbits are perfect circles; thus, he still needed circles on top of circles to explain the motion of the planets but far fewer than did Ptolemy.

The definitive rebuttal of Ptolemy came a century later with the work of the German astronomer Johannes Kepler. Kepler performed many tedious calculations, which were complicated by the fact that he had to first assume an orbit for the earth before he could compute orbits for the planets. Finally he made a stunning discovery: All the orbits of the planets could be described as an ellipse with the sun at the center. The dominance of the Ptolemaic model of the universe was finally over.

Critical Thinking

The relationship of facts and theories lies at the heart of the scientific method. Both Ptolemy's theory and Kepler's theory explain why the stars appear to move around Polaris at night. Kepler made a convincing argument by rebuttal to the Ptolemaic model because he could give a much

npler analysis. The history of astronomy is a history of arguments of rebuttal. Modern astronomy was made possible because Copernicus challenged the established relationship of theory and evidence in astronomy. His awareness of the relationship of factual and theoretical claims in science is one definition of *critical thinking* in the sciences. What is true for the story of astronomy is true for the sciences; critical thinking in the sciences lies on arguments of rebuttal.

Similar kinds of arguments of rebuttal are presented today in the debate over global warming. One of the main sources of data for arguments of rebuttal against global warming is the twenty-year record of temperature readings from NASA weather satellites orbiting the earth at the North and South Poles. These satellites use microwave sensors to measure temperature variation in the atmosphere from the surface to about six miles above the earth. Computer models predict a gradual warming in the earth's lower atmosphere along with the surface because of the buildup of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases, the gases produced from burning fossil fuels. At while temperatures measured on the earth's surface have gradually increased, the corresponding rises in the atmosphere as recorded by satellites don't appear to happen. In August 1998, however, two scientists discovered a flaw in the satellites that was making them lose altitude and therefore misreport temperature data. When adjusted, the satellite data confirm what thermometers on the ground tell us: The earth is getting warmer.

In some cases, particular disciplines have specialized training to assess the relationship of theory and evidence. But more often, people must engage in *general critical thinking* to assess the validity of claims based on evidence. Often, one has to weigh competing claims of people who have excellent qualifications. One group of nutritional experts says that people could take calcium supplements to strengthen their bones. Another group argues that people are in danger of suffering from kidney stones if they take too much calcium. Critical thinking is involved in all the kinds of arguments that are discussed in this book, but it is especially important in arguments of rebuttal.

Two Ways of Rebutting

When you rebut the argument of someone else, you can do one of two things. You can *refute* the argument, or you can *counterargue*. In the first case, refutation, you emphasize the shortcomings of the argument that you wish

to undermine without really making a positive case of your own. In the second case, counterargument, you emphasize not so much the shortcomings of the argument that you are rebutting but the positive strengths of the position you wish to support. Often there is considerable overlap between refutation and counterargument, and often both are present in a rebuttal.

Refutation

If you think back to the basic model of how arguments work, you can quickly see that there are two primary strategies for refutation arguments. First, *you can challenge the assumptions* on which a claim is based. Copernicus did not question Ptolemy's data concerning how the stars and planets appear in the sky to an observer on the earth. Instead, he questioned Ptolemy's central assumption that the earth is the center of the solar system.

Second, *you can question the evidence* supporting the claim. Sometimes, the evidence presented is simply wrong, as was the case for the satellites that lost altitude and reported faulty temperature data. Sometimes, the evidence is incomplete or unrepresentative, and sometimes, counterevidence can be found. Often when you refute an argument, you make the case that your opponent has been guilty of one or more fallacies of arguments (see pages 51–52). Your opponent has engaged in the either-or fallacy, or jumped to a hasty generalization, or created a straw man. So you indicate how the conclusions do not follow from the reasons offered, or you show that the evidence in support of the reasons is faulty or incomplete.

Take, for example, the case of arguments about drug policy in the United States. Today, almost everyone who writes about illegal drugs in the United States says that the current drug policy is flawed in some way. Even though U.S. jails and prisons are bursting with people who have been convicted and sentenced for drug offenses, millions of people still use illegal drugs. The social, political, and economic costs of illegal drugs are staggering, and the debate continues over what to do about these substances. On one side are those who want more police, more drug users in jail, and military forces sent to other countries to stop the drug traffic. On the other are those who compare current efforts to stop the flow of drugs to those of failed efforts under Prohibition (1919–1933) to halt the sale of alcohol. They want most illegal drugs to be legalized or decriminalized.

On September 7, 1989, Nobel prize-winning economist Milton Friedman published in the *Wall Street Journal* an open letter to William Bennett, then the drug czar (director of the Office of National Drug Policy) under President George H. W. Bush. Friedman wrote this as his refutation:

Dear Bill:

In Oliver Cromwell's eloquent words, "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken" about the course you and President Bush urge us to adopt to fight drugs. The path you propose of more police, more jails, use of the military in foreign countries, harsh penalties for drug users, and a whole panoply of repressive measures can only make a bad situation worse. The drug war cannot be won by those tactics without undermining the human liberty and individual freedom that you and I cherish.

You are not mistaken in believing that drugs are a scourge that is devastating our society. You are not mistaken in believing that drugs are tearing asunder our social fabric, ruining the lives of many young people, and imposing heavy costs on some of the most disadvantaged among us. You are not mistaken in believing that the majority of the public share your concerns. In short, you are not mistaken in the end you seek to achieve.

Your mistake is failing to recognize that the very measures you favor are a major source of the evils you deplore. Of course the problem is demand, but it is not only demand, it is demand that must operate through repressed and illegal channels. Illegality creates obscene profits that finance the murderous tactics of the drug lords; illegality leads to the corruption of law enforcement officials; illegality monopolizes the efforts of honest law forces so they are starved for resources to fight the simpler crimes of robbery, theft and assault.

Drugs are a tragedy for addicts. But criminalizing their use converts that tragedy into a disaster for society, for users and non-users alike. Our experience with the prohibition of drugs is a replay of our experience with the prohibition of alcoholic beverages....

Had drugs been decriminalized 17 years ago [when Friedman first made an appeal that drugs be decriminalized], "crack" would never have been invented (it was invented because the high cost of illegal drugs made it profitable to provide a cheaper version) and there would today be far fewer addicts. The lives of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of innocent victims would have been saved, and not only in the U.S. The ghettos of our major cities would not be drug-and-crime-infested no-man's-lands. Fewer people would be in jails, and fewer jails would have been built. Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru would not be suffering from narco-terror, and we would not be distorting our foreign policy because of narco-terror. Hell would not, in the words with which Billy Sunday welcomed Prohibition, "be forever for rent," but it would be a lot emptier.

In the first two paragraphs, Friedman carefully identifies the common ground he shares with Bennett. Both are political conservatives, as Friedman reminds Bennett when he mentions the "human liberty and individual freedom that you and I cherish." Friedman also agrees with Bennett about the severity of the drug problem, noting that it is "tearing

asunder our social fabric, ruining the lives of many young people, and imposing heavy costs on some of the most disadvantaged among us."

Where Friedman differs from Bennett is in Bennett's central assumption: Friedman feels that Bennett's conclusion—"more police, more jails, use of the military in foreign countries, harsh penalties for drug users, and a whole panoply of repressive measures"—does not follow from the evidence about drugs. Bennett has cause and effect reversed, says Friedman: "Your mistake is failing to recognize that the very measures you favor are a major source of the evils you deplore." If drugs are now illegal and still being used, then how can the solution be to make them even more illegal by increasing penalties and extending law enforcement beyond U.S. borders? Friedman calls attention to the centrality of Bennett's assumptions when he quotes Oliver Cromwell's famous words: "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken." If, in fact, Bennett's central assumption is flawed, then the reason to spend millions of dollars, to violate civil liberties, and to antagonize other nations is suddenly taken away.

William Bennett responded to Friedman quickly. On September 19, 1989, the *Wall Street Journal* published another refutation, an open letter of reply from Bennett to Friedman. Here is part of Bennett's response, which has a much more strident tone than Friedman's letter:

Dear Milton:

There was little, if anything, new in your open letter to me calling for the legalization of drugs. As your 1972 article made clear, the legalization argument is an old and familiar one, which has recently been revived by a small number of journalists and academics who insist that the only solution to the drug problem is no solution at all. What surprises me is that you would continue to advocate so unrealistic a proposal without pausing to consider seriously its consequences.

If the argument for drug legalization has one virtue it is its sheer simplicity. Eliminate laws against drugs, and street crime will disappear. Take the profit out of the black market through decriminalization and regulation, and poor neighborhoods will no longer be victimized by drug dealers. Cut back on drug enforcement, and use the money to wage a public health campaign against drugs, as we do with tobacco and alcohol.

The basic premise of all these propositions is that using our nation's laws to fight drugs is too costly. To be sure, our attempts to reduce drug use do carry with them enormous costs. But the question that must be asked—and which is totally ignored by the legalization advocates—is, what are the costs of *not* enforcing laws against drugs?

In my judgment, and in the judgment of virtually every serious scholar in this field, the potential costs of legalizing drugs would be so large as to make it a public policy disaster.

Of course, no one, including you, can say with certainty what would happen in the U.S. if drugs were suddenly to become a readily purchased product. We do know, however, that wherever drugs have become cheaper and more easily obtained, drug use—and addiction—has skyrocketed. In opium and cocaine producing countries, addiction is rampant among the peasants involved in drug production.

Professor James Q. Wilson tells us that during the years in which heroin could be legally prescribed by doctors in Britain, the number of addicts increased forty-fold. And after the repeal of Prohibition—an analogy favored but misunderstood by legalization advocates—consumption of alcohol soared by 350%.

Could we afford such dramatic increases in drug use? I doubt it. Already the toll of drug use on American society—measured in lost productivity, in rising health insurance costs, in hospitals flooded with drug overdose emergencies, in drug caused accidents, and in premature death—is surely more than we would like to bear.

You seem to believe that by spending just a little more money on treatment and rehabilitation, the costs of increased addiction can be avoided. That hope betrays a basic misunderstanding of the problems facing drug treatment. Most addicts don't suddenly decide to get help. They remain addicts either because treatment isn't available or because they don't seek it out. . . .

As for the connection between drugs and crime, your unswerving commitment to a legalization solution prevents you from appreciating the complexity of the drug market. Contrary to your claim, most addicts do not turn to crime to support their habit. Research shows that many of them were involved in criminal activity before they turned to drugs. Many former addicts who have received treatment continue to commit crimes during their recovery. And even if drugs were legal, what evidence do you have that the habitual drug user wouldn't continue to rob and steal to get money for clothes, food or shelter? Drug addicts always want more drugs than they can afford, and no legalization scheme has yet come up with a way of satisfying that appetite.

In refuting Friedman, Bennett contends that Friedman has not told the whole story. He has omitted important information, namely the likelihood that drug use would increase (and with tragic consequences) if drugs were legalized: "the potential costs of legalizing drugs would be so large as to make it a public policy disaster."

Bennett goes on to maintain that "a true friend of freedom understands that government has a responsibility to craft and uphold laws that help educate citizens about right and wrong. That, at any rate, was the Founders' view of our system of government." He ends by describing Friedman's proposal as "irresponsible and reckless public policy."

Friedman was not content to let Bennett have the last word, so he in turn wrote another reply—yet another refutation—that appeared on September 29, 1989, in the *Wall Street Journal*. At this point, Friedman drops the open-letter strategy and writes instead a more conventional response, referring to Bennett as *he* instead of *you*:

William Bennett is entirely right (editorial page, Sept. 19) that "there was little, if anything, new in" my open letter to him—just as there is little, if anything, new in his proposed program to rid this nation of the scourge of drugs. That is why I am so disturbed by that program. It flies in the face of decades of experience. More police, more jails, more-stringent penalties, increased efforts at interception, increased publicity about the evils of drugs—all this has been accompanied by more, not fewer, drug addicts; more, not fewer, crimes and murders; more, not less, corruption; more, not fewer, innocent victims.

Like Mr. Bennett, his predecessors were "committed to fighting the problem on several fronts through imaginative policies and hard work over a long period of time." What evidence convinces him that the same policies on a larger scale will end the drug scourge? He offers none in his response to me, only assertion and the conjecture that legalizing drugs would produce "a public policy disaster"—as if that is not exactly what we already have.

Friedman, that is, challenges Bennett's lack of evidence: "What evidence convinces him that the same policies on a larger scale will end the drug scourge? He offers none in his response to me." Friedman then adds that "legalizing drugs is not equivalent to surrender" but rather the precondition for an effective fight against drug use. He concedes that the number of addicts might increase, but he argues that it is certain that the total number of innocent victims would drop drastically, including innocent victims in foreign nations when we base our foreign policy on drug control.

Friedman's sharpest refutation of Bennett comes over Bennett's claim to represent the tradition of the Founders of the United States. Friedman completely rejects Bennett's assertion that the Founders wanted government to educate citizens about what is right and what is wrong. Friedman says "that is a totalitarian view utterly unacceptable to the Founders. I do not believe, and neither did they, that it is the responsibility of government to tell free citizens what is right and wrong."

counterargument

buttals, therefore, frequently involve refutation: a demonstration of where an argument has gone wrong. Refuters say, in effect, “I hear your argument, and here is where you are in error.” What follows that thesis in refutation is a challenge to the reasoning process (to show that a conclusion does not necessarily follow from the premises offered) or a challenge to the evidence that supports the premises (to show that the premise itself is not necessarily true). A person who engages in refutation does not necessarily say what is right—though certainly Bennett and Iedman leave no doubt about what they think is right—only that the other party is wrong.

Another way to rebut, however, is to counterargue. In a counterargument, you do not really show the shortcomings of your opponent’s point of view; you may not refer to the details of the other argument at all. Rather, you offer an argument of the other point of view, in the hope that it will outweigh the argument that is being rebutted. A counterarguer, in effect, says “I hear your argument. But there is more to it than that. Now listen while I explain why another position is stronger.” Counterargument offered to Friedman might go this way, in effect: hear your argument about the benefits of decriminalizing illegal drugs. You contend that the war on drugs threatens civil liberties and creates time problems when drug abusers need money to support their bad habits. I accept your argument, as far as it goes. But what you have not called sufficient attention to is the negative consequences of legalizing drugs. Now listen as I explain how a policy of decriminalization will be a disaster, especially because it will encourage many, many more people to abuse harmful substances.”

The counterarguer depends on the wisdom of audience members to hear all sides of an issue and to make up their minds about the merits of the case. In the following short poem, Wilfred Owen, a veteran of the horrors of World War I trench warfare, offers a counterargument to those who argue that war is noble, to those who believe along with the Latin poet Horace that *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*—that it is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country. This poem gains in popularity whenever there is an unpopular war, for it rebuts the belief that it is noble to die for one’s country in modern warfare.

Dulce Et Decorum Est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,

And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of disappointed shells that dropped behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And floundering like a man in fire or lime.—
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

Wilfred Owen does not summarize the argument in favor of being willing to die for one’s country and then refute that argument, premise by premise. Rather, his poem presents an opposing argument, supported by a narrative of the speaker’s experience in a poison gas attack, that he hopes will move than counterbalance what he calls “the old lie.” Owen simply ignores the good reasons that people give for being willing to die for one’s country and essentially argues instead that there are also good reasons not to do so. And he hopes that the evidence that he summons for his countering position will outweigh for his audience (“My friend”) the evidence in support of the other side.

Of course, this example, like the Friedman-Bennett exchange, shows that it can be artificial to oppose refutation and counterargument, particularly because all arguments, in a broad sense, are counterarguments. Rebuttal arguments commonly frequently offer both refutation and counterargument. In short, people who write rebuttals work like attorneys do in a trial: They make their own cases with good reasons and hard evidence, but they also do what they can to undermine their opponent’s arguments. In the end, therefore, the audience decides.

LINDA CHAVEZ

The “Separation of Church and State” Myth

Linda Chavez (1947–), the author of An Unlikely Conservative: The Transformation of an Ex-Liberal (2002) and Out of the Barrio: Toward a New Politics of Hispanic Assimilation (1991), has been outspoken in the service of contemporary conservatism for many years. Director of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights from 1983 to 1985, she frequently appears on television talk shows and news programs, and she writes for a variety of publications about affirmative action, immigration, bilingual education, voting rights, and other issues. The following rebuttal essay appeared in the Jewish World Review in July 2002 after a federal appeals court ruled that the words “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance ought to be stricken because they are forbidden by the First Amendment clause that requires a separation of church and state. (In 2004, the Supreme Court reversed that court of appeals judgment, as Chavez had hoped.)

As soon as the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals handed down its decision on the Pledge of Allegiance last week, the e-mails started pouring into my mailbox. Most railed against the idea that a couple of judges on “the Left Coast,” as one person put it, could strike down the words “under God,” which Congress added to the pledge in 1954. But a few, mostly from readers of my column, suggested that if I didn’t like the decision, maybe I should try thinking about how I’d feel if Congress had inserted the words “under no God” instead—a sentiment echoed by the Ninth Circuit. In order to protect religious liberty, they implied, we have to make sure government divorces itself from any expression of religious belief.

“Why did the Founding Fathers, a group of basically conservative, property-owning religious men find it necessary at all to put the separation of Church and State into the Constitution, if not because of the persecution suffered in the lands they left from those who felt that only they knew the truth?” wrote one of my interlocutors.

Good question, because it exposes one of the most widely held myths in modern America.

Ask most Americans what the First Amendment says about religion, and you’ll get the standard reply (if you’re lucky enough to get any answer at all) that it guarantees the separation of church and state.

It says no such thing, of course. What it says is careful and precise: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

6 The First Amendment guarantees the freedom of religion, not from religion.

7 The Founders understood that religious belief was not incidental to the American experiment in liberty but was the foundation on which it was built. The whole idea that individuals were entitled to liberty rests on the Judeo-Christian conception of man. When the colonists rebelled against their king—an action that risked their very lives—they did so with the belief that they were answering to a higher law than the king’s. They were emboldened by “the laws of nature and nature’s God,” in Thomas Jefferson’s memorable phrase to declare their independence.

8 “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,” he wrote.

9 It is impossible to overstate how important the Judeo-Christian tradition was guiding the Founder’s deliberations. Yet, in recent years, we’ve virtually ignored this aspect of our history.

10 As scholar Michael Novak points out in his excellent little book *On Two Wings: Humble Faith and Common Sense at the American Founding*, “Professor Donald Lutz counted 3,154 citations in the writings of the founders; of these nearly 1,100 references (34 percent) are to the Bible, and about 300 each to Montesquieu and Blackstone, followed at considerable distance by Locke and Hume and Plutarch.”

11 Perhaps the most eloquent argument on behalf of the role of religion in preserving our democracy was George Washington’s, who cautioned in his Farewell Address on Sept. 19, 1794, that virtue and morality were necessary to popular government.

12 “And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion” he said. “Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.”

13 The Constitutional Convention of 1787 opened with a prayer, as does each session of Congress today. The motto “In God We Trust” is on our currency, and similar expressions adorn public buildings across the Nation. Even the U.S. Supreme Court, which has been the locus of so much recent confusion on the First Amendment, begins its proceedings with the phrase “God save the United States and this honorable court.”

14 Perhaps our plea should be “God save us from the courts.”

15 As Jefferson, perhaps the least devout of our Founders, once said to the Rev. Ethan Allen, as recorded in Allen’s diary now in the Library of Congress, and quoted by Michael Novak: “No nation has ever yet existed or been governed without religion. Nor can be.”

16 Let us hope the Supreme Court in reviewing the Ninth Circuit’s opinion does not insist on testing whether Jefferson was right. ■

Steps to a Rebuttal Argument

Step 1 Identify an argument to argue against as well as its main claim(s)

- What exactly are you arguing against?
- Are there secondary claims attached to the main claim?
- A fair summary of your opponent's position should be included in your finished rebuttal.

Example

- If you are taking on affirmative action admissions policies for colleges and universities, then what do those policies involve and whom do they affect?

Step 2 Examine the facts on which the claim is based

- Are the facts accurate?
- Are the facts a truly representative sample?
- Are the facts current?
- Is there another body of facts that you can present as counterevidence?
- If the author uses statistics, is evidence for the validity of those statistics presented?
- Can the statistics be interpreted differently?
- If the author quotes from sources, how reliable are those sources?
- Are the sources treated fairly, or are quotations taken out of context?
- If the author cites outside authority, how much trust can you place in that authority?

Step 3 Examine the assumptions on which the claim is based

- What is the primary assumption of the claim you are rejecting?
- What other assumptions support that claim?
- How are those assumptions flawed?
- If you are arguing against a specific piece of writing, then how does the author fall short?
- Does the author resort to name calling? use faulty reasoning? ignore key facts?
- What fallacies is the author guilty of committing?

Step 4 Analyze your potential readers

- To what extent do your potential readers support the claim that you are rejecting?
- If they strongly support that claim, then how might you appeal to them to change their minds?
- What common assumptions and beliefs do you share with them?

Step 5 Decide whether to write a refutation, a counterargument—or both

- Make your aim clear in your thesis statement.
- For example, a thesis statement like this one promises a refutation and a counterargument: "Friedman's argument is flawed in several ways. Not only that, he ignores the fact that laws in the United States are frequently developed in order to protect individuals against themselves."

Step 6 Write a draft

Identify the issue and the argument you are rejecting

- If the issue is not familiar to most of your readers, you might need to provide some background.
- Even if it is familiar, it might be helpful to give a quick summary of the competing positions.
- Remember that offering a fair and accurate summary is a good way to build credibility with your audience.

Take on the argument that you are rejecting

- You might want to question the evidence that is used to support the argument.
- You can challenge the facts, present counterevidence and counter testimony, cast doubt on the representativeness of the sample, cast doubt on the currency and relevance of the examples, challenge the credibility of any authorities cited, question the way in which statistical evidence is presented and interpreted, and argue that quotations are taken out of context.

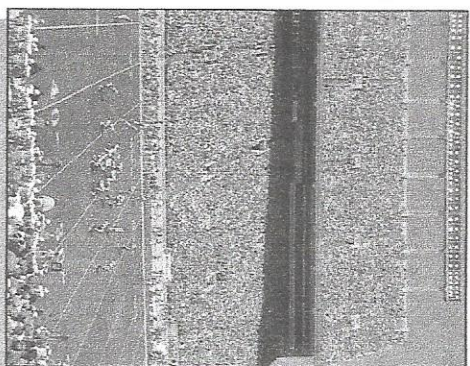
Conclude on a firm note

- In your conclusion you should have a strong argument that underscores your objections.
- You might wish to close with a counterargument or counterproposal.

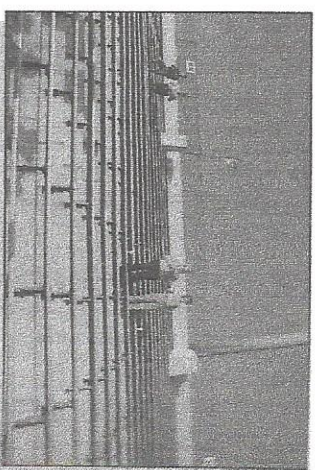
Step 7 Revise, edit, proofread

- For detailed instructions, see Chapter 12.
- For a checklist to use to evaluate your draft, see pages 217–222.

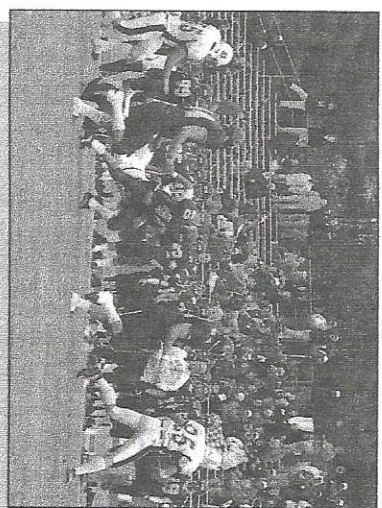
Proposal Arguments



The major football programs in NCAA Division I generate millions of dollars in ticket and television revenue.



Not all NCAA Division I football programs are financially successful. Some lose millions every year.



The amateur tradition in college athletics continues at colleges in NCAA Division III, which do not offer athletic scholarships. The Williams College Ephs compete against the Tufts University Jumbos in a Division III game on a crisp fall Saturday in Williamston, Massachusetts.

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Rebuttal Sections

Summary:

This resource outlines the generally accepted structure for introductions, body paragraphs, and conclusions in an academic argument paper. Keep in mind that this resource contains guidelines and not strict rules about organization. Your structure needs to be flexible enough to meet the requirements of your purpose and audience.

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In order to present a fair and convincing message, you may need to anticipate, research, and outline some of the common positions (arguments) that dispute your thesis. If the situation (purpose) calls for you to do this, you will present and then refute these other positions in the rebuttal section of your essay.

It is important to consider other positions because in most cases, your primary audience will be fence-sitters. Fence-sitters are people who have not decided which side of the argument to support.

People who are on your side of the argument will not need a lot of information to align with your position. People who are completely against your argument—perhaps for ethical or religious reasons—will probably never align with your position no matter how much information you provide. Therefore, the audience you should consider most important are those people who haven't decided which side of the argument they will support—the fence-sitters.

In many cases, these fence-sitters have not decided which side to align with because they see value in both positions. Therefore, to not consider opposing positions to your own in a fair manner may alienate fence-sitters when they see that you are not addressing their concerns or discussion opposing positions at all.

Organizing your rebuttal section

Following the TTEB method outlined in the Body Paragraph section, forecast all the information that will follow in the rebuttal section and then move point by point through the other positions addressing each one as you go. The outline below, adapted from Seyler's *Understanding Argument*, is an example of a rebuttal section from a thesis essay.

When you rebut or refute an opposing position, use the following three-part organization:

The opponent's argument: Usually, you should not assume that your reader has read or remembered the argument you are refuting. Thus at the beginning of your paragraph, you need to state, accurately and fairly, the main points of the argument you will refute.

Your position: Next, make clear the nature of your disagreement with the argument or position you are refuting. Your position might assert, for example, that a writer has not proved his assertion because he has provided evidence that is outdated, or that the argument is filled with fallacies.