

What's in a Name?
The Counter Argument Revisited

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Abstract

This discussion paper makes the case that the term counter-argument should be replaced with the term *alternative point of view*, as the counter-argument, in an essay, implies that it is the opposite of the argument put forth by the writer, and, in fact, it isn't. It, also, looks at the root of the word counter and how that word is often paired with other words that do not necessarily mean the opposite. The paper goes into depth about why the name should be changed so that students are better able to grasp what their instructors are expecting when they ask them to include a counter-argument in their essay. The lack of understanding about what is meant by the term counter-argument often leads students to question why they have to go against their own argument in their essay. The issue is that presenting the opposite of their stance should not be the purpose of including an alternative point of view in their essays. As long as the words counter-argument are used, students are going to question the validity of including one in their essays. Therefore, I make the case that the name should be changed to *alternative point of view* to better reflect its purpose in an essay.

Introduction

If you have ever tried to argue with a two year old child then you know what I mean when I say that they are not willing to listen to anybody else's point of view. If they want to go on one more merry-go-round ride and you think you can distract them by offering them alternatives like perhaps a hotdog, or an ice cream cone, then you know the futility of such maneuvers. They will not be dissuaded from what they want. It is the same concept when writing an argumentative essay that is designed to convince someone, the reader, about your point of view on a topic. If you do not include another point of view, in your essay, then you are like that toddler who doesn't want to listen to anyone else.

The problem with only including one side of an argument is that it tells the reader that you are not confident in your thinking and are therefore not interested in even entertaining an opposing view. This serves to weaken the argument, you are putting forth, because it tells your reader that you did not bother to look at both sides of your topic. Without anticipating what your reader may say about the argument, you are leaving yourself open to an accusation of bias. When readers think that the author is only showing one side of an argument they may get suspicious that the author is not disclosing everything they discovered about the topic and they may wonder what the writer is hiding and why. Therefore, the argument is weakened because the reader, rightly, will come to the conclusion that the writer does not trust their stance or their evidence.

The other problem is that by including a counter-argument, in an argumentative essay, you are assuming that the writer and the reader are going to have an argument about the topic. You know arguments. You know that they sometimes escalate into both participants expressing their opinion at the top of their lungs because most arguments, at some point, become personal

with a great deal of emotion involved. You can't have a really good argument unless the person you are speaking to is expressing a different point of view from your own. If you are both on the same side then there is no argument. Typically, if both people are on the same side it becomes a lecture with one person pontificating and the other person agreeing. These types of communication are not satisfactory especially if you are looking to have a discussion not a lecture.

There is something satisfying about arguing with someone about a topic you both care about because it makes you think and keeps you on your toes. As one person proffers their side of the argument, the other person has to think of a rebuttal. This is a counter-argument. It is a rebuttal for a point made by the speaker. In written work, the reader is the one who says "yes I agree", but also asks "what if this happened, then what"? If the person who you are talking to does not disagree with what you are saying then the whole process becomes a matter of one person giving their opinion and the other agreeing. In order for a writer, or speaker, to fully comprehend a topic they have to be able to see both sides. The problem, with essays billed as argumentative, is that students think that they should only present their side. However, students have to understand that an argument entails two or more people discussing a topic. Each person will have their own point of view, if they are adults, and they will be willing to listen to the other person's point of view. This is an alternative point of view.

I personally enjoy discussing a topic, with more than one side, with a reasonable person. Not someone who takes everything personally but someone who is willing to listen and provide an alternate point of view. I learn a lot about myself and my pre-existing notions when I listen to someone else give their point of view. Without this discussion I would be left thinking only about my own point of view which can be restricting. I don't want someone to just agree with

me, I want them to push me to critically think about a topic. It is only through this process of give and take that I can begin to formulate my own ideas about a topic. Without this other person questioning my long-held beliefs I can't begin to grow as an independent critical thinker.

The purpose of education should be to get our students to think for themselves and not just accept whatever we tell them in the classroom. When students have to put their ideas down in written form it forces them to think. And, they can only begin to think for themselves if they understand that the purpose of education is not just to confirm what they already know. This is what we, as educators, need to stress to our students. Students have to understand that their point of view may be limiting based on their values and personal experiences. It is through the process of writing and reading that will give them a different perspective than the one they are used to having. This is the purpose of getting students to look at *alternative points of view*.

The Discussion about the Limitations of the term Counter-Argument

I teach writing, as a profession, which means I get to talk about writing whenever I want to and I usually like to talk about it a lot as long as I have people willing to listen and participate. One of the terms I have been struggling with for the past few years is the term counter-argument. I tell my students that a counter-argument is important to include in an argumentative essay because it shows the reader that the writer is not biased and was willing to look at both sides of the argument. I explain that the counter-argument makes the writer's argument stronger. Students are often baffled by this concept. They don't understand why a writer would choose to put in an argument that goes against their own argument. The real answer is they wouldn't. What writers should include is an *alternative point of view* regarding their argument. They should ask themselves what another person might think about the topic as they read the argument. I inform my students that it does not have to be the opposite of one of their claims. In

fact, I discourage this. What I tell my students is to think of a reasonable person that they know. Now imagine having an argument with that person. What would they say about your argument, what point might they make? It is typically not the opposite, but in fact, it is a different perspective on the topic.

When students first hear the word counter-argument they immediately think that it has to be the opposite of their own argument. It is not their fault. The very nature of the words counter-argument mean that it should counter the argument. For example, I have had students write on the topic of pollution. They argue that *pollution is harmful to the environment because it can affect the ecosystem, it can cause health problems, and it can contribute to climate change*. On this topic, students could not successfully argue the opposite which would be that pollution is *not* harmful to the environment. That's not a viable argument to make because who is going to agree with the student that pollution is not harmful. However, in a discussion of an alternative point of view the students could look at the individual claims such as claim two. In claim two the students discussed the health problems that can be caused by pollution such as respiratory diseases. In this claim they discussed asthma, lung cancer, and emphysema. The student could argue that there are other reasons for health problems, like genetics or lifestyle, which are not related to pollution. This would be a reasonable alternative to the claim that pollution can cause health problems. Another alternative point of view for an essay on pollution could be made for claim three. The writer could argue that the earth's temperature rises and cools on a cycle so it is not necessarily caused by pollution. Do you see the difference between the opposite of the argument and an alternative point of view?

Counter is from the Latin root *contra* which means opposite, against, or in return (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2018). However, the word has multiple meanings when paired

with other words. For example, a kitchen counter does not mean it is the opposite of kitchen, nor does it mean someone who goes around counting kitchens. It is a place, in a kitchen, that holds items such as toasters and coffee makers. A counter punch means that if someone punches you, you can react, and the reaction usually means that you would punch back. You counter the punch with one of your own or you could counter the punch by running away. Either solution works. The problem with throwing a counter-punch is that it will often lead to an all-out fight which might not be what you want. If you run away you effectively remove yourself from the situation and thus that is your counter-punch.

A counter-attack is usually used to indicate a means of retaliation. Simply put it means that if someone attacks you, you can attack back. It doesn't have to be the same type of attack nor does it have to be the opposite of the attack. For example, if someone throws an egg at you it does not follow that you have to throw an egg back. You could throw spaghetti, bread, a rock, or a well-placed insult. Do you see what I mean? It doesn't necessarily have to be the opposite. The words counter-strike are similar to counter-attack as they are usually used to forestall an escalation of violence. For example, if a country is thinking about starting a war with another country, the threat of a counter-strike is usually enough to stop them from acting in the first place as they know that any action they take will result in a strike from the other country. For example, if someone bombs your country you can bomb their country or worse. This is striking back for what happened to you but it is usually not the opposite. If someone bombed Canada, then the counter-strike should be not to bomb the country who bombed Canada as that would be the opposite of bombing.

Directions are often given according to the clock, so counter-clockwise means going against the way the hands of the clock normally move. They go to the right but counter-

clockwise would mean going left. This does not indicate a struggle with the clock. It doesn't mean that the two words are opposing each other. It indicates direction and nothing more. Like many of the words in our language, the word counter-clockwise is losing its meaning as clocks are now digital so there is no clockwise and if there is no clockwise, there can be no counter-clockwise.

You can see from these examples that counter does not have to mean opposite. In fact, most of the ways that counter is used in other applications, besides writing, do not mean the opposite. They are just different definitions for the same word - counter. But, each time the word is used it means that someone can take action against another person or country because of differing views, beliefs, or ideologies. This then implies that one person is going to disagree with what the other person said or did. This is what a good counter-argument should do. It should show the reader that the writer is simply admitting that another person might see the topic in a different way. It does not necessarily have to be the opposite, it can simple be a different point of view.

If you consider opposites you know they are usually extremes of each other. Opposites include things like hot and cold; weak and strong; high and low; up and down; yes and no; accept and reject; before and after; alike and different; all and none; apart and together; awake and asleep; good and bad; big and small; black and white. You get the picture. These words represent the complete and direct opposition to each other. They are diametrically opposed. But, a good counter-argument is not diametrically opposed to the whole argument. In fact, the reader might agree with most of what you said but have a different point of view on only one point. If we keep thinking opposites then that means the reader is against everything in the essay which is not necessarily true.

Purpose of an Alternative Point of View

When a writer acknowledges that there are more points of view than the one they have chosen it tells the reader that the writer has thought about the topic in great detail. It shows that the writer is willing to admit that another person may have a different opinion on the topic. It is just like when we argue with friends or family members. If we refused to accept that someone else may have another opinion, then the one we give, then we would be arguing forever because neither side would back down. However, if in an academic essay, the writer says that they understand that someone else may present a different claim or reason than the ones proffered by the writer then that tells the reader that the writer is not so biased that they can only see their own side of the argument. Think back to that self-centred child who refused to listen to anyone else. If writers, or readers, do not accept the premise of an alternative point of view they are like that child.

If you reflect on controversial topics, which are based on beliefs, you will see what I mean about readers who are not willing to listen to anyone who has a different opinion than they do. If someone was arguing that abortion is sometimes acceptable based on the circumstances but the reader has already come to the conclusion that abortion is never acceptable then the reader will not accept any evidence provided by the writer. This inherent bias does not allow the reader to entertain the notion that the writer might have an alternative point of view. The problem with these types of topics is that people hold a certain viewpoint based on their beliefs and beliefs are hard to support, and hard to disprove, because they are often held in the absence of evidence. I tell my students to avoid topics that cannot be supported by unbiased articles. For example, let's use the topic of abortion again. If a student was to go online to find evidence to support their stand on abortion the majority of the articles would be one-sided. That is, they will

either be pro-abortion or anti-abortion. The evidence they use will come from their own beliefs in the sanctity of life or their beliefs in the right of the woman to choose what she does with her own body. The problem with these types of arguments is that neither side is willing to listen to the other side.

A counter-argument, or alternative point of view, is not meant to attack another point of view. The difficulty with thinking it has to be an attack is that it becomes personal. And when an argument becomes personal there can be no detachment between the arguer, the argument, and the person providing the differing point of view. This is why people who have arguments that become personal often won't speak to the person, they had the argument with, again especially about that topic because of the hurt inflicted from both sides. They might agree to disagree but they will never bring it up again because it will only lead to another argument that neither side can win. And, if winning is the goal of an argument then no one wins because the goal of any argument should not be to score a victory against the other person. Trying to win is a very narcissistic way of looking at a topic because the arguer does not acknowledge another point of view. If the conclusion is already accepted then the people involved cannot enter into a discussion. Without a discussion the argument is never resolved which is why not providing an alternative point of view is so limiting to the writer and to the reader.

Norms of Society

When people argue they often argue from the values they grew up with. They adhere to the norms of the society they live in. For example, if someone was to argue that the death penalty was a good deterrent of crime they would likely base their argument on what is acceptable in their society. Some societies, like the United States, accept that capital punishment is an appropriate way to punish someone who has been convicted of a crime. If the writer lived

in the United States and accepted this conclusion then their essay would reflect those views. However, if that person were to move to a country where the citizens did not believe in the death penalty, then they might change their point of view based on the society they are now living in because the new society would have a different point of view on the death penalty than the one they grew up with. The new information and values could lead to an alternative point of view.

It is interesting to think about the values we all grew up with and how those values affect how we write but also how we read about other people's points of view. As I said, if we come from cultures that do not condone certain things then our reading of the argument and the reasons for that argument will be biased. A good example of this is the gun culture of the United States. People who live in the United States are not willing to accept that every citizen in the country does not need to own a gun. This culture has been passed down through the generations and now it is accepted without question and without any evidence. There is no evidence that owning a gun will protect one from crime. In fact, the statistics have shown that gun owners face more gun related injuries than people who do not own guns (Children's Hospital of Philadelphia Research Institute, 2018). But, when culture is involved people are not willing to look at another point of view. In this instance, any mention of curtailing what kinds of guns can be bought and sold in the United States is seen as an attack on their constitution and their rights as citizens. As far as they are concerned there is no alternative point of view to gun ownership. The majority of the citizens of the United States subscribe to the false dilemma fallacy where either you are with them in protecting their rights or you are against them by asking them to consider not owning guns. The problem, as they see it, is you are asking them to go against something that is so engrained in their society that to accept any other point of view is grounds to dismiss the argument on the spot without any critical thought.

Roles

There are also, as part of culture, certain roles that people have that limit what they can and can't do or say. For example, in Canada, we accept that our law enforcement officers will be fair and unbiased when dealing with vulnerable populations. We don't question this so it is always a shock when we hear about police brutality because we have been socially conditioned to accept that this is not the norm, in Canada, for that profession. However, if you grew up in a culture where police officers were corrupt then you would have a different point of view from Canadians. Similarly, a great many people have come to believe that all lawyers are unscrupulous and will do anything for money. This view is largely based on the roles we see depicted on television or in movies. Our faith in doctors, priests, and ministers has also been shaken by questionable conduct on their part. The roles we assign people based on our values can sometimes make it difficult to accept arguments for, and against, a person based on how we grew up. This is why it is so important to look at alternative points of view when you are aware that your own personal biases may be acting against your ability to think critically about a topic.

Convincing the Reader

In an academic essay the writer is attempting to convince the reader of their opinion on a topic and therefore, the writer needs to find evidence to support their opinion. The evidence must be scholarly which means that it was written by an expert in the field and the evidence can be verified by other experts in the field. When this burden of support is provided it leads to an objective view of the topic that is not based on beliefs, culture, or assumptions. These can all lead to a biased way of looking at a topic. A writer, of an academic essay, would not try to argue that the whole premise of their essay is wrong by bringing up a strong counter-argument to show that their opinion is not a good one. Instead, what the counter-argument should do is anticipate

what a reasonable person might say about the topic. In other words, they tell the reader “look I know what you might say, but the evidence supports my thinking more than it supports your thinking”.

Exploring a dissenting opinion is necessary because it makes the writer think about their topic. Sometimes writers start out on one side of the argument and then after doing research they switch to the other side. This shows a level of critical thinking as it means the writer has entered the topic willing to be persuaded by either side. For example, if someone thought bullies should be prosecuted but after reading the relevant literature they came to the realization that bullies need help, not punishment, then they would change their whole argument based on their ability to critically analyze the evidence.

When writers ignore another person’s point of view then they are setting themselves up to have their reader disagree with them which could lead to a conflict. However, if the writer can anticipate that other points of view exist, they show their reader that they are trying to be as objective as possible and while they are willing to concede that someone else may disagree with them, their side of the argument is still the strongest because they have provided evidence to support their facts and those facts can be verified. Without allowing for an alternative point of view, the writer is showing that they don’t care if someone else disagrees with them because this is what they think. This shows a level of immature thought that is not acceptable in university level papers.

Not a Debate

As mentioned, the name counter-argument conjures up people arguing and fighting over a topic. This is not the reality of reading an essay on any topic. An alternative point of view is not meant to result in a debate. Debates are argued from opposing sides and debates are usually

settled with a vote as to the merits of the discussion. An essay is not voted on and the majority do not win. Indeed there is no winning and losing in an argumentative essay. What the writer is attempting to do is convince a reader that their side of the argument is a solid one with supporting evidence. It is not meant to convince the majority of a group. That is a debate. Political opponents often take part in debates about the issues of the time.

In a debate, at the beginning, each side is responsible for establishing a claim for their position. They are allowed a set amount of time to present their case. In the initial stages they do not worry about what the other side will present. They will, of course, have thought about what their opponent will talk about based on research they conducted before the debate but they do not worry about that in the opening statement. In the opening statement, they must support their claims with enough evidence to convince an intelligent person that they have a reasonable argument. They must rely on facts and not opinions, personal experience, personal observation, or personal testimonials. These are not acceptable pieces of evidence in a debate. Once the statement has been provided and the evidence presented, it is open to questioning by the other side. The person doing the questioning must ask fair and clear questions that have been raised in the position statement. They cannot make unsubstantiated statements or comment on something that was not raised by the other side. The question phase can be used to strengthen their own side, to undermine their opponents view, or to get more information on their opponent's position on the issues.

A counter-argument is not a debate because the writer and the reader are not debating the topic. The reader is not there when the writer is writing and the writer is not present when the reader is reading the document. This lack of dialogue alone disqualifies it from a debate format. The reader cannot ask questions of the writer for the same reason. So, having an alternative

point of view has to be discussed by the writer so that the reader can see that the writer is willing to enter into a discussion of the topic but in an essay the writer has all of the control. In a debate both parties have equal access to present their respective cases. Not so in an essay.

Change of Name

Now that I have established that a counter-argument is not the opposite of the argument, it is influenced by cultural values and assumptions, and it is not a debate then the logical conclusion is that the name has to change. The name counter-argument is not indicative of what it is students should be thinking of when they write their essays. Instead, I propose that we call it what it is, *an alternative point of view*. Students will be able to write more convincing arguments if they know they are not looking to debunk their argument but are instead looking for what a reasonable person might say about one of their claims. Students understand alternative points of view. They know that from discussions with their friends and families. They know arguments do not have to lead to shouting matches where there is a winner declared. As mentioned previously, there are no winners and losers in an argumentative essay.

Conclusion

As in everything that I teach in the classroom I am always looking for ways to make things more straight-forward for my students when they are learning how to write. One of the things, I have noticed, through the years is the confusion surrounding the term counter-argument. When I explain that it is just a different perspective on the topic the students begin to understand what I am expecting from them. Without clear expectations students are left to try to figure out what they are meant to do with very little guidance. In learning how to write, in a university setting, students have to be taught how to be critical thinkers. They have to understand that just because someone disagrees with them does not mean that their argument is not a valid one or

that the reader is inherently evil for not accepting their argument. When students understand that they will be using the alternative point of view to acknowledge that another person might have a different perspective it frees them to look for those alternative viewpoints. This teaches them more about how to read critically than anything else that they do in the writing classroom. The next time you are teaching students how to write an academic essay consider dispensing with the term counter-argument and call it what it really is - an alternative point of view.

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