

A charge related to the claim that your evidence is unrepresentative is that it is *anecdotal*. It *might* be representative but, then again, it might not. If your claim depends on one or two examples, however well-chosen to be representative, there is a risk that your evidence will be dismissed as a form of cherry-picking. Of course, anecdotal evidence can be persuasive in ways that statistical representations of data are not. The very persuasiveness of the telling example, the case study, or the exception that proves the rule makes argument by anecdote attractive but also risky because an argument is only as strong as its evidence.

9.4.4 Consider the Weight of Authority

Different fields define and evaluate evidence differently. If you're a beginner, you'll need time to learn the kinds of evidence that readers in your field accept and reject. The most painful way to gain that experience is to be the object of their criticism. Less painful is to seek examples of arguments that failed because their evidence was judged unreliable. Listen to lectures and class discussions for the kinds of arguments that your instructors criticize because they think that the evidence is weak. Failed arguments help you understand what counts as reliable better than do successful ones.

A particular kind of weak evidence comes from sources that readers do not consider authoritative. Early in the twentieth century, New Yorkers accepted the word of a local newspaper: "If you see it in the *Sun*, it's so." In general, readers assign degrees of authority to sources based on their reputation for rigor and objectivity. For example, most people will accept data on the transmission of viruses that a researcher obtains from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control as credible evidence, even allowing for the possibility of error. However, evidence from *Wikipedia* will not be accepted in many circles because *Wikipedia* is not regarded as authoritative. "Consider the source" is the skeptic's rebuttal to evidence dismissed for lack of authority.

10 Acknowledgments and Responses

An argument is not complete if it fails to recognize other points of view. This chapter shows how you can make your argument more convincing by acknowledging and responding to questions, objections, and alternatives your readers might raise.

The core of your argument is a claim backed by reasons based on evidence. You thicken it with more reasons, perhaps supporting each with additional subreasons and evidence. But if you give your readers only claims, reasons, and evidence—no matter how compelling these are to you—they may still find your argument thin or, worse, ignorant or dismissive of their views. To craft a successful argument, you must do more than assemble a sound edifice of claims, reasons, and evidence; you must also position those claims as contributions to an ongoing conversation in which your readers are invested (see chapter 7).

You can do this in your introduction by presenting your main claim as a solution to a problem your readers care about (we'll talk more about introductions in chapter 16). But you can do it throughout your argument as well by anticipating, acknowledging, and responding to questions, objections, and alternatives that your readers are likely to raise along the way. As you plan and draft your paper, your readers won't be there to question you or to offer their own views. So you have to *imagine* their questions and views and take them into account. That's how you establish a cooperative relationship with readers, by imagining yourself conversing with them.

In this chapter, we show you how to imagine and address two kinds of questions that readers may ask about your argument:

- They may question its *intrinsic* soundness by challenging the clarity of your claim, the relevance of your reasons, or the quality of your evidence.
- They may question its *extrinsic* soundness by asking you to consider alternatives—different ways of framing the problem; evidence you’ve overlooked, or what others have written on your topic.

When you anticipate, acknowledge, and respond to both kinds of questions, you create an argument that readers are more likely to trust and accept.

10.1 QUESTIONING YOUR ARGUMENT AS YOUR READERS WILL

When planning and drafting your argument, you may freeze up if you try from the outset to imagine every possible reaction to it. Therefore, focus first on what you yourself want to say, on the claims, reasons, and evidence that make up your argument’s core. Once you have that core, try to imagine readers’ responses to it. Doing this may be hard, because you know your own argument too well and may believe in it too much to seriously challenge it. If you can share the core of your argument with a friend, mentor, or colleague you trust, do it. That will help you identify questions, objections, and alternatives that other readers might raise. If you can’t, then imagine a group of particularly skeptical hypothetical readers questioning your argument more sharply than you hope your actual readers will.

For this exercise, you might suspend your conception of argument as collaborative inquiry and imagine it not quite as warfare, but as something close to a warm debate. View your argument through the eyes of someone who has a stake in a different outcome, someone who *wants* you to be wrong.

First, examine your problem. Here are some questions with possible answers from an imagined reader:

1. *Why do you think there’s a problem at all?* “The costs or consequences of the situation you are responding to don’t seem that significant.”

2. *Have you properly defined the problem? Is it practical or conceptual?* “Maybe the problem involves not the issue you raise but another one.”

Then consider your solution:

3. *Is your solution practical or conceptual? That is, does it ask readers to do something or to understand something? And does it match the problem (practical problems demand practical solutions; conceptual problems conceptual ones)?* “You explain what’s wrong, but you don’t say how we can change it.” “You assert that our current understanding falls short, but you don’t offer a new way of looking at the issue.”
4. *Have you stated your claim too strongly?* “I can think of exceptions and limitations.”
- 5a. *Why is your practical solution better than others?* “I think that what you propose will cost too much and create new problems.”
- 5b. *Why is your conceptual solution better than others?* “It doesn’t seem to fit with all this other well-established knowledge.”

If you come up with a question that you can’t answer, decide whether you can find the answer before you go on. Don’t go easy on yourself with this one; the time to fix a problem with your argument is when you find it.

Note where your argument might seem weak but actually isn’t. If, for example, you anticipate that readers will think your solution has costs that it does not, you can defuse that concern by acknowledging and responding to it:

It might seem that by focusing on the actions of specific banks, we are minimizing the systemic forces that contributed to the financial crisis, but, in fact, our case studies will show . . .

Next, question your support. Imagine a reader challenging your evidence. A reader might question its nature:

1. “I want to see a different *sort* of evidence—hard numbers, not anecdotes (or stories about real people, not cold numbers).”

If you present the right kind of evidence, a reader might still question its quality:

2. "It isn't accurate. The numbers don't add up."
3. "It isn't precise enough. What do you mean by 'many'?"
4. "It isn't current. There's newer research than this."
5. "It isn't representative. You didn't get data on all the groups."
6. "It isn't authoritative. Smith is no expert on this matter."

The toughest objection, however, is usually this one:

7. "You need more evidence. One data point (quotation/number/anecdote) is not sufficient."

Most researchers have difficulty finding enough good evidence to make a solid case, especially those working on short deadlines. But teachers grumble most about students who seem to think that the evidence they find first is all they need.

Readers can be particularly skeptical when they have a stake in a solution that differs from yours. So if you feel your evidence is less than unassailable, you may want to admit its limitations candidly, before readers reject your argument because you overstated it.

Finally, readers may not see how your reasons support your claims, or how your claim follows from your reasons. We devote all of chapter 11 to this problem.

In sum, when assembling your argument, test your claims, reasons, and evidence as your most skeptical readers will—and even in ways they might not. You can then address at least the most important objections that you can imagine them raising. Show readers that you put your argument through your own wringer before they put it through theirs.

10.2 IMAGINING ALTERNATIVES TO YOUR ARGUMENT

When you recognize your own argument's limitations, you build credibility by showing readers that you are making an honest case and dealing with them fairly. But that's just a defensive move. You will seem even more credible if you show not just that you understand the strengths and limitations of your own argument, but that

you also understand and have thought about the alternatives to it. To do that, you have to bring those alternative views into your argument by acknowledging and responding to them.

If you know your subject and readers very well, you can try to imagine those alternatives yourself. But usually the best way to identify alternative views is to look to your sources. In chapter 6, we encouraged you to actively *engage* your sources during your research, to use them not just for data but to stimulate your own thinking. Your sources also offer a ready supply of alternative views that you can respond to in your own argument.

You can think of your secondary sources as a written record of the conversation about your topic, question, or problem. Knowing that conversation allows you to contribute to it. When you read your sources, note where they advance claims different from yours, take different approaches, focus on different aspects of the problem, and so on. Note especially where—and why—you and your sources disagree. Also note where one source disagrees with another. All those disagreements can help you identify alternatives to acknowledge in your own argument. If you know how you would respond to a particular source, add that response to your notes as you read.

You can respond not only to your sources' claims but also to their evidence. If you find a source's evidence unreliable or irrelevant, don't simply ignore it. If your readers might take it seriously, you can acknowledge it but explain why you didn't use it.

Finally, your sources also help you imagine your readers and anticipate their reactions to your argument. Often your readers will be like your sources' authors; sometimes they may even include them.

10.3 DECIDING WHAT TO ACKNOWLEDGE

If you can imagine just a few of the questions, alternatives, and objections that your readers might have, you'll face a Goldilocks moment: acknowledge too many and you distract readers from the core of your argument; acknowledge too few and you seem indifferent to or even ignorant of their views. You need to figure out how many acknowledgments will feel "just right."

10.3.1 Choosing What to Respond To

To narrow your list of alternatives or objections, consider these priorities:

- plausible charges of weaknesses that you can rebut
- alternative lines of argument important in your field
- alternative conclusions that readers *want* to be true
- alternative evidence that readers know
- important counterexamples that you have to address

Look for alternatives that let you repeat a part of your argument. For example, if readers might think of exceptions to a definition that in fact are not, acknowledge them and use the response to reinforce your point:

Some have argued that even food can be addictive, but remember we are concerned here only with substances for which addiction is the norm, not those . . .

Or if readers might think of an alternative solution close to yours, use it to reiterate the virtues of your solution:

Most researchers argue that rules and other forms of formal writing advice degrade rather than improve performance because writing “is a non-conscious act of making meaning, not a conscious process of following rules.” That is true for parts of the process: writers should not consult rules as they draft sentences. But writing involves not just drafting but many conscious processes as well. What we show here is what kinds of formal advice do and do not work for *conscious* aspects of writing . . .

Finally, acknowledge alternatives that may particularly appeal to your readers, but only if you can respond without seeming to be dismissive. Better to ignore what your readers like than to disparage it.

10.3.2 Acknowledging Flaws in Your Argument

If you discover a flaw in your argument that you cannot fix or explain away, try to redefine your problem or rebuild your argument

to avoid it. But if you cannot, you face a tough decision. You could just ignore the flaw and hope your readers don't notice it. But that's dishonest. If they do notice it, they will doubt your competence, and if they think you tried to hide it, they will question your honesty. Our advice may seem naive, but it works: candidly acknowledge the issue and respond that

- the rest of your argument more than balances the flaw.
- while the flaw is serious, more research will show a way around it.
- while the flaw makes it impossible to accept your claim fully, your argument offers important insight into the question and suggests what a better answer would need.

Occasionally researchers turn failure into success by treating a claim they wanted to support but couldn't as a hypothesis that others might find reasonable. Then they show why it isn't:

It might seem that when jurors hear the facts of a case in a form that focuses on the victim and emphasizes her suffering, they will be more likely to blame the accused. That is, after all, the standard practice of plaintiffs' lawyers. But in fact, we found no correlation between . . .

10.3.3 Acknowledging Questions You Can't Answer

Beginning researchers sometimes think that their goal is to have the last word on a topic, that is, to make an argument that allows for no response but total assent. But that's a mistake. Experienced researchers and teachers understand that no argument is entirely unassailable and that any one version of the truth is often complicated and always contestable. In fact, the most stimulating research is often that which provides not answers to questions we already know, but new sets of questions we haven't yet thought to ask. This is especially true for research addressing conceptual problems, but it can be true for applied research as well.

Knowledgeable readers will think better of your argument and of you if, rather than pretending you have all the answers, you acknowledge your argument's limits, especially those that squeeze

you more than you like. Concessions invite readers into the conversation by legitimizing their views, always a gesture that helps sustain a community of researchers. And they will be especially grateful if you can give them new and interesting questions to think about. That's what keeps the conversation going.

10.4 FRAMING YOUR RESPONSES AS SUBORDINATE ARGUMENTS

Acknowledging alternatives and objections gives you an opportunity to respond. But you can't just offer a competing claim. Even a minimal response gives a reason to limit or reject what you have acknowledged:

Some have argued that food can be addictive,*acknowledgment of objection* but we are concerned here only with substances for which addiction is the norm.*reason why objection is irrelevant*

That initial response may be enough, but only if readers recognize the basis for it, either because it's obvious or because you've made the argument before. Otherwise, explain its basis using additional reasons and evidence:

Some have argued that food can be addictive,*acknowledgment of objection* but we are concerned here only with substances for which addiction is the norm.*reason why objection is irrelevant* Some who taste chocolate once may be unable to resist it thereafter, but their number is a fraction of those who are immediately addicted to crack cocaine after a single exposure.*subreason* Chernowitz (1998) found that just one exposure resulted in...*report of evidence*

For more substantial responses, you need a full argument, with multiple reasons, evidence, and perhaps even warrants and additional acknowledgments and responses. (At this point, add acknowledgments and responses to the appropriate places in the working plan of your argument. In chapter 12 we'll discuss where to put them in the plan of your first draft.) Again, when responding to alternatives, you face a Goldilocks choice: not too much, not too little. Only experience can teach you how to find this balance. So notice how experts achieve it and do likewise.

10.5 THE VOCABULARY OF ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND RESPONSE

Some writers fail to acknowledge alternatives because they can't think of any. The strategies in this chapter will help you overcome that problem. Others can think of views to acknowledge, but fear that if they do, they weaken their argument. In fact, most readers think that such acknowledgments enhance a writer's credibility. Writers also shy away from acknowledging and responding to objections and alternatives because they don't know how to do those things in writing, on the page or screen. This section shows you how.

When you want to acknowledge and respond to an objection or alternative, you have to decide how much credence to give it: options range from just mentioning an objection and dismissing it to addressing it at length. We present our advice roughly in that order, from most dismissive to most respectful. (Brackets and slashes indicate alternative choices.)

10.5.1 Acknowledging Objections and Alternatives

Acknowledge an objection or alternative in language that shows how much weight you give it. Here are some options.

1. You can downplay an objection or alternative by introducing it with *despite*, *regardless of*, or *notwithstanding*:

[**Despite/Regardless of/Notwithstanding**] Congress's claims that it wants to cut taxes,*acknowledgment* the latest budget proposals suggest that...*response*

Use *although*, *while*, and *even though* in the same way:

[**Although/While/Even though**] Hong Kong is experiencing economic problems,*acknowledgment* Southeast Asia remains a strong...*response*

2. You can signal an acknowledgment indirectly with *seem*, *appear*, *may*, or *could*, or with an adverb like *plausibly*, *justifiably*, *reasonably*, *surprisingly*, or even *certainly*:

In his letters Lincoln expresses what [**seems/appears**] to be depression.*acknowledgment* But those who observed him...*response*

This proposal [**may have/plausibly has**] some merit,*acknowledgment*
but we...*response*

3. You can attribute an objection or alternative to an unnamed source, which gives it a little weight:

It is easy to [**think/imagine/say/claim/argue**] that taxes should...*acknowledgment* But there is [**another/alternative/possible**] [**explanation/line of argument/account/possibility**].*response*

Some evidence [**might/may/can/could/does**] [**suggest/indicate/point to/lead some to think**] that we should...*acknowledgment* but...*response*

4. You can attribute an objection or alternative to a generic interlocutor, giving it more weight:

There are [**some/many/a few**] who [**might/may/could/would**] [**say/think/argue/claim/charge/object**] that Cuba is not...*acknowledgment* But, in fact...*response*

Although [**some researchers/critics/scholars**] have argued that...*acknowledgment* our research shows...

Note that you can weaken your case if you prematurely denigrate those you disagree with:

Some **naive** researchers have claimed that...

The **occasionally careless** historian H has even claimed that...

Save criticism for the response, and direct it at the work rather than the person.

5. You can acknowledge an objection or alternative in your own voice, using *I* or *we*, a passive verb, or a word or phrase such as *admittedly*, *granted*, *to be sure*, and so on, which concedes it some validity:

I [**understand/know/realize**] that liberals believe in...*acknowledgment* but...*response*

It is [**true/possible/likely**] that electronic cigarettes are less carcinogenic than conventional cigarettes.*acknowledgment* However...*response*

It [**must/should/can**] be [**admitted/acknowledged/noted/conceded**] that no good evidence proves that...*acknowledgment* Nevertheless...

[**Granted/Certainly/Admittedly/True/To be sure/Of course**], Adams has claimed...*acknowledgment* However...*response*

We [**would/could/can/might/may**] [**say/argue/claim/think**] that public health programs such as needle exchanges encourage...*acknowledgment* but these effects are outweighed by...*response*

10.5.2 Responding to Objections and Alternatives

Begin your response with a term or phrase that signals disagreement, such as *but*, *however*, or *on the other hand*. If readers do not already know the basis for that response, support it with at least one reason or even with a complete subordinate argument.

You can respond in ways that range from tactful to blunt.

1. You can regret not that the source is unclear, but that *you* don't entirely understand:

But [**I do not quite understand how/I find it difficult to see how/It is not clear to me how**] X can claim that, when...*response*

2. Or you can note that there are unsettled issues:

But there are **other issues here**.../But there **remains the problem of**...*response*

3. You can respond more forcefully, claiming the acknowledged position is irrelevant or unreliable:

But as insightful as that may be,*acknowledgment* it [**ignores/is irrelevant to/does not bear on**] the issue at hand.*response*

But the [**evidence/reasoning**] is [**unreliable/shaky/thin**].*response*

But the argument is [**untenable/weak/confused/simplistic**].*response*

But the argument [**overlooks/ignores/misses**] key factors.*response*

You have to decide how blunt your response should be. If an alternative seems obviously flawed, say so, but focus on the work rather than the person.

4. When you think another researcher seems to have not thought through an issue carefully, you usually should say so civilly. Here are a few possibilities:

Smith's evidence is important,*acknowledgment* **but we must look at all the available evidence.***response*

That explains some of the problem,*acknowledgment* **but it is too complex for a single explanation.***response*

That principle holds in many cases,*acknowledgment* **but not in all.***response*

QUICK TIP Three Predictable Disagreements

There are three kinds of alternatives that at least some readers are likely to think of.

1. **There are causes in addition to the one you claim.** If your argument is about cause and effect, remember that no effect has a single cause and no cause has a single effect. If you argue that X causes Y, every reader will think of other causes. European honeybee colonies may be collapsing because of pesticide use, but an informed reader could also list other possible factors, including loss of habitat, disease, genetically modified crops, and parasites. So if you focus on one cause out of many, acknowledge the others. And if you feel readers might think that some cause deserves more attention than you give it, acknowledge that view and explain why you deemphasized it.
2. **What about these counterexamples?** No matter how rich your evidence, readers are likely to think of exceptions and counterexamples that they believe undermine your argument. So you must think of them first, acknowledge the more plausible ones, especially if they are vivid, and then explain why you don't consider them as damaging as your reader might. Be particularly wary when you make claims about a phenomenon with a wide range of variation, such as the climate. Readers who do not understand statistical reasoning will focus on an aberrant case, even though it falls within a normal distribution: a cold Fourth of July in Florida does not disprove a claim about global warming, any more than a warm New England Christmas proves it.
3. **I don't define X as you do. To me, X means . . .** To accept your claim, readers must accept your definitions, because definitions are crucial warrants (see the next chapter): if you are researching nicotine addiction, your readers must understand what you mean by that term. Does it mean just a strong craving, a craving that some people can't resist, or a craving that *no one* can? You can find definitions ranging from a few lines in a dictionary to pages in a medical reference work. But regardless of what those sources

say, readers tend to redefine terms they encounter to suit their own views. Cigarette manufacturers long argued that cigarettes are not addictive because some people can quit; their critics argued that cigarettes are addictive because more people can't.

When your argument hinges on the meaning of a term, define it to support your solution and offer a subordinate argument for your definition. Don't treat a dictionary definition as authoritative (never begin, "According to *Webster's*, 'addiction' means . . ."). Be aware of plausible alternative definitions that you may need to acknowledge. If you use a technical term that also has a common meaning (like *social class* or *theory*), acknowledge that common meaning and explain why you have adopted the technical one. Conversely, if you do not use a technical term as expert readers expect you to, acknowledge that and explain why you've opted for another meaning.

11 Warrants

Warrants are general principles that connect reasons to claims. This chapter explains when and how to use them. In general, you should state your warrants only when your readers will not understand your argument without them or when you expect your readers to challenge your reasoning. When you write for experts in a field, you can leave most of your warrants unstated, because your readers will usually know them already and take them for granted.

Consider this argument:

The Russian Federation faces a falling standard of living,*claim* because its birthrate is only 13.2 per 1,000 and life expectancy for men is only about 63 years.*reason*

Someone responds:

Well, you're right about Russia's birthrate and life expectancy, but I don't see how that's relevant to your claim that its standard of living will fall. What's the connection?

How would the person making the argument answer? More important, if that argument were in writing, how would she know that she had to answer that question *before it was asked*? Such questions address the fifth and most complex element of an argument: its warrants. A warrant is a principle that connects a reason to a claim. Warrants are important because readers may challenge not just the validity of a reason but its *relevance* as well.

In this chapter, we explain how warrants work, how to test them, and when and when not to state them. The basic principle is this: state your warrants only if your readers will not be able to understand your reasoning without them, or if you anticipate that your reasoning will be challenged.

But as we get started, a word of caution: everyone struggles to