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A Rhetoric of Argument

Second Edition

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McGraw-Hill Publishing Company

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Hamburg Lisbon London Madrid Mexico Milan Montreal
New Delhi Oklahoma City Paris San Juan São Paulo
Singapore Sydney Tokyo Toronto

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The Indispensable Refutation

REFUTATION

The refutation of opposing positions is not a mere afterthought in argument. Discussion of refutation has been built into every chapter of this book because refutation is an indispensable part of all positive argument. To begin with, refutation affects your first consideration of audience; you have nothing more than an easy demonstration argument (like "Running is popular") unless you see at least the possibility of an opposition. In fact, if no one has expressed an argument against yours, you should go through the mental exercise of inventing opposing premises yourself, just to articulate other ways your subject might be approached.

Second, refutation influences the content and structure of almost any argument. If you are arguing to characterize something in a certain way and your opponent defines a key word differently, you will have to spend more time on your counterdefinition than you would if you were unchallenged. Similarly, if your opponent emphasizes one cause and you emphasize another, you must refute that other cause and show why yours is the more likely candidate. And if your proposal faces objections or a rival, you must

show how your idea is more feasible, practical, fair, or sensible and your opponent's less so. All of this is refutation, a necessary part of the support for any proposition, especially one likely to meet resistance from its audience.

BUILDING ARGUMENTS WITH REFUTATION IN MIND

Writing in *On Liberty* in 1859, John Stuart Mill described the ideal arguer as one who can imagine and articulate all the possible arguments against a position.

He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side, if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion. . . . Nor is it enough that he should hear the arguments of adversaries from his own teachers, presented as they state them, and accompanied by what they offer as refutations. . . . He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them, who defend them in earnest and do their very utmost for them. . . . So essential is this discipline to a real understanding of moral and human subjects that, if opponents of all-important truths do not exist, it is indispensable to imagine them and supply them with the strongest arguments which the most skillful devil's advocate can conjure up.

One device that can help you achieve Mill's goal of fairness and fullness is listing the pro and con arguments on an issue. Such a list can be generated in many ways. You might put down all your own points first and then think of opposing ones. Or you might do the reverse and imagine all the points in a strong argument against yours. Either way, you will eventually come up with some arguments that are directly opposed to each other and some that have no counterparts. Here is an example of such a list of pro and con arguments on the subject of colorizing old movies.

Colorizing Rejuvenates Old Movies

1. The technology of computer colorization is good and getting better.
2. Colorization improves the TV and VCR markets for old movies.

Colorizing Ruins Old Movies

1. The colors imposed on movies look unnatural and bleed into one another.

3. The original directors would have used color had it been available.
4. Colorizing makes movies accessible to audiences that would otherwise not see them.
5. Colorization makes movies appear less dated.
7. You can always turn the color off.
8. These movies are in the public domain.
3. Black-and-white film is an aesthetic medium in its own right.
4. These audiences are not seeing the movies as they were meant to be seen.
5. Colorization distorts film history.
6. Prominent directors, actors, and critics object to colorization.

Suppose you are developing the con argument on this issue, trying to convince readers of the entertainment section of your local newspaper that colorization ruins old movies. Some of your arguments are directly refuted by the other side; others on both sides cannot be contradicted directly. In supporting any argument for which the opposition does have a counterpoint, you will inevitably try to refute your opponent. A paragraph on contested point 3 above might look like the following:

Colorizers often claim that directors of the 1930s and '40s would have used more color had it been available or less expensive. Perhaps some directors might have preferred color, but the fact remains that their achievement is in black and white, that they mastered the medium available to them and created great effects with it. Color is not an inherently superior medium for film. As all photographers know, black-and-white film offers unique opportunities for the composition of light, shadow, and line. Movies like *Citizen Kane*, *Mildred Pierce*, *Spellbound*, and *The Maltese Falcon* exploit the graininess and high contrast of the black-and-white medium. Even after color was widely available, many filmmakers still chose black and white as the best vehicle for certain kinds of movies: Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, Wilder's *Some Like It Hot*, Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate*, Hitchcock's *Psycho*, Allen's *Manhattan*, and Scorsese's *Raging Bull*.

Some points on each side go unmatched. However, you can refute your opponent's point even without a direct rebuttal from a matched point of your own, and you can of course develop your own independent line of argument.

In our colorization example, the pro side cannot muster the authorities to counterbalance the objections of all the directors, actors, and critics who have been appalled by colorization. On the other hand, the con side may have no rejoinder to the suggestion that people offended by colorization can simply adjust their TV sets, but still that argument need not pass without comment.

Colorizers claim that the rest of us can simply adjust our dials to get rid of the unwanted tint. But that is not the real issue. Anyone who respects film and its creative history resents any tampering with the integrity of artifacts from the past. Colorizing films is like painting the Washington Monument or modernizing Shakespeare's language.

Certainly most directors, actors, and critics agree that movies should be left in their original state. Siskel and Ebert of *At the Movies* fame have registered their disdain for the practice, and an outraged Woody Allen even sought legal means to prevent colorizations. The only ones supporting colorizations are those who stand to make a profit from the practice.

Even though one side may generate more supporting points than the other in an initial list of pro and con arguments, the side with more points is not necessarily the better case. One strongly weighted reason can seem more compelling to an audience than any number of lesser ones. In our colorization example, the con side might rest its whole case on the aesthetic merits of black-and-white film, dismissing all appeals to wider audiences or the feasibility of colorizing technology.

HOW EXPLICIT SHOULD REFUTATION BE?

Although an awareness of opposing views is necessary to help an arguer construct a more convincing case, it does not follow that all the opposing views should be articulated in one's own argument. Actually there are dangers in including either too much or too little refutation. How much of a voice you should give opponents in your own argument depends on your audience's initial resistance to your view and their awareness of opposing views. If a neutral or uncommitted audience hears your meticulous elaboration and heroic refutation of all possible objections to your thesis, they may begin to doubt the force of your case. You may have planted in their minds objections that would never have occurred to them; they will begin to have an "argument with your argument." At the other extreme, it can be strategically unwise to ignore the objections your audience knows and will raise, if not aloud then in their minds. Once again the arguer has no simple recipe to follow, only sensitive choices to make.

EXERCISE

The following is a list of controversial issues. Make a table of at least three points on each side (that is, definition, causal, comparative, evaluative propositions). Match up any that directly oppose each other, and put the unmatched ones at the bottom of each list.

1. The United States should/should not reinstitute the draft.
2. Employers should/should not assign specific vacation times.
3. Private secondary schools are better/worse preparation for college than public high schools.
4. Soccer will/will never be really popular in the United States.
5. Senior citizens are an asset/liability to the economic health of the country.
6. Smoking should/should not be banned in public places.

Take two matched points under any issue and write a paragraph refuting one side and making a counterpoint on the other.

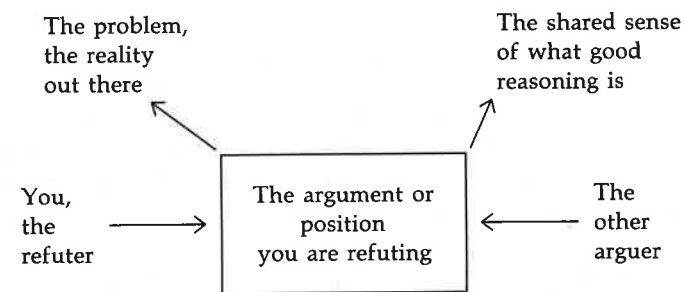
Repeat the above, taking the other side.

Take one of the unmatched points on either side and try to dismiss it.

THE ARGUMENT THAT IS WHOLLY REFUTATION

It sometimes happens that you have no sustained argument you want to make yourself, but you have a great deal to say against another argument or position that you have heard of or read. Admittedly, arguments against one position can often be flipped over into arguments for another, as the discussion above reveals. But still, your main purpose in writing may be to show the inadequacy of another argument. For example, you are angered by the stupidity of an editorial or column in the newspaper, so you write a letter to the editor listing all the things wrong with it. Or someone in your company has come up with a proposal and your boss asks you for a written critique; that is, you are expected to find every flaw. Or your seminar professor hands you a book or article to review and you have only negative things to say about it. All of these situations call for refutation. They do not ask you to come up with or defend any position of your own.

You may think that refutation is an impolite or even a dirty business, an attack that results in hurt feelings and bitter enemies, but it doesn't have to be if you keep the following principles of refutation in mind.



Refuters need not attack the other arguer at all. You can define your activity as that of comparing the other argument or position against two possible standards. The first is the audience's sense of facts and assumptions that give rise to the issue the argument addresses. The second is the audience's sense of what good reasoning is, the ways we agree to draw conclusions from evidence. You can fault an argument on either ground or both, and you can even indicate which standard you are referring to: "The information is incorrect." "The argument overlooks these important facts." "The conclusion does not follow." "The reasoning in this article is confused." Such criticisms need never directly attack the personality of the other arguer.

Imagine yourself framing the refutation to an argument you have just read criticizing the students of today for being politically inactive. The magazine article uses three extended examples of undergraduates, one from a prestigious private university, one from a large state university, and one from a small college. It points out the dwindling membership in politically activist groups and even in the Young Democrats and the Young Republicans, and it claims that no new student political groups have been formed in the last several years. As further, if less direct evidence, it also points to the increasing enrollments in vocational majors, especially business.

You may not be in a position to support the counterargument that students are politically active. You don't have the information, and you're not even honestly convinced it is so. Still, you are convinced that this article's characterization of students is too extreme, that its author has not earned the right to make such a large claim on the basis of such small evidence. So although you cannot uproot this argument and plant your own, you can prune it back.

First, you might take up the reasoning. The arguer has cited dwindling student membership in political organizations as a sign of apathy. You cannot deny that fact; enrollment in such organizations certainly has declined. But perhaps you can criticize the significance of that fact. You might argue, "Of course the membership in activist organizations like SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) has declined. But that was always a

fringe movement designed to meet the needs of a particular political situation, America's involvement in Vietnam. Once the war ended, SDS was inevitably defunct. Therefore, the decline in SDS membership is no sign of political apathy."

You can also criticize the reasoning that increased enrollment in business courses and other vocational majors is a sign of political apathy. Again, you are not denying the fact, only questioning its significance. You might point out that what students major in reflects the job market more than their political commitment. And who is to say that a business or engineering student cannot be politically committed and active? Imagine further that one statement in this argument falsifies the reality you know, the statement about no new student political organizations forming lately. You know of two on your campus alone, one that organized to campaign for a professor running for the city council and another nonpartisan group, SBG (Students for Better Government), which organized to encourage good people to go into politics. You will certainly emphasize these exceptions because the argument you are refuting seems to be making a very general claim. If the argument does not mention any exceptions or qualify its thesis in any way with a "basically," "largely," or "generally" (that is, "Students are generally politically inactive"), you certainly can criticize it for exaggeration.

To summarize: You have found several ways to refute the argument supporting the proposition "Students are politically inactive." When you compared the argument to what you knew, you found that it overlooked some facts. And when you examined its reasoning, you found that the arguer failed to qualify the thesis and jumped to conclusions from facts about declining memberships and increasing vocational enrollments. Thus, your refutation has pruned back the thesis from "[All] students are politically inactive" to "most" or "many," and after digging around in the roots, left it with less certain support.

PARTS OF A REFUTATION

Every refutation can begin by identifying the type of argument being refuted, for each type has its inherent weaknesses. In earlier chapters we have already indicated what can go wrong in definition, comparison, causal, evaluation, and proposal arguments. A full refutation can also consist of the following elements:

1. What is the issue?
Summarize the controversy, the events, whatever reality the argument responds to.

2. What does the other argument have to say about the issue?
Summarize the argument you are going to refute or state the position you are calling into question.
3. Does this argument have all the relevant and accurate information?
Test the argument against reality; ask for verification of the facts given.
4. Does this argument violate a standard of good reasoning your audience should hold?
Consider the type of argument and question whether the arguer uses inapplicable or insufficient support.
5. Are there any flaws in accommodation?
Look for imprecisions in word choice, meretricious emotional appeals, mistakes in emphasis or ordering, and offensive audience manipulation.

Like the ideal proposal outline, this list is a full format you can select from. Which parts you choose to put in or leave out will depend on your audience, their state of knowledge or ignorance of the position or argument you are refuting, and of course their attitude toward it.

What Is the Issue?

If your audience is unfamiliar with the issue behind the argument you are refuting, you will have to inform them right at the start. Suppose you are refuting an argument in favor of mainstreaming retarded and handicapped children. Suppose further that you cannot count on your audience being aware that this policy has been mandated by law in many school districts, let alone that much controversy has arisen over the wisdom of it. So a little background information is called for. The information you give can take at least two forms. You can answer the question "What events have brought about this controversy?" or the question "What positions have people taken on it?" or both.

What Does the Other Argument Have to Say About the Issue?

A refutation has to take off from something. It makes no sense to go on the attack without an object to attack, and that object can be anything from a one-sentence restatement of an argument or position on an issue to a paragraph or longer summary of the other arguer's whole line of thought. Once again, how much summary or quotation is necessary depends on your readers' awareness.

Very often you may be refuting not a specific written argument but a general position held by many people. So long as your audience does not include the people you are refuting, you can open your refutation by stating what others believe and then go on to tell why they are wrong. This tactic is not quite the same as simply using an opponent's view as a springboard to your own. In that case you have a positive argument to make. Here you are only refuting.

If you are refuting a written argument that your readers do not have in front of them, then you must do them the favor of summarizing or quoting from it. And you must summarize fairly; you don't help your side by misrepresenting the other or by presenting their position as one only fools could hold. You might put this constraint on yourself: "My readers have not seen the argument I am summarizing, but if they did, would they think my summary fair?"

Letters to an editor and editorials that refute other editorials often omit this opening summary because they assume that readers of the paper have been following current controversies and remember the piece being refuted. Therefore it is always difficult to pick up cold a refutation in a newspaper.

Does This Argument Have All the Relevant and Accurate Information?

Now you are getting to the meat of refutation. Any argument that has its facts wrong, or not enough of them, or does not verify where necessary deserves severe criticism. Of course, you can recognize errors in fact only if you have greater knowledge yourself, and if you don't have that knowledge to begin with, you must patiently try to verify the facts in the argument you want to refute. You probably would not even try to refute an argument on a subject you knew nothing about, but you may still need to check out specific pieces of information. For example, "Opponent"—the arguer you are refuting—claims that no one ever scored a perfect ten in international gymnastics competition; you check that fact in a book of sports statistics. "Opponent" says that Alexander Hamilton was once a candidate for the presidency; you find a biography of Hamilton and look that up. "Opponent" says that the FDA regulates the use of dyes in cosmetics and has banned some; you can try to verify that statement by finding the government publication that gives FDA regulations on cosmetics. Checking out facts is not terribly difficult if the writer has provided sufficient documentation or mentioned necessary sources. If not, you may have something else to complain about. It is less likely that facts will be wrong than that they will be stated in an imprecise way, in a way that you believe gives them more or less significance than they deserve.

You might also consider if there are facts the writer has ignored. It is possible for an argument to have all the facts it does give straight, yet to have left out important information. Suppose that "Opponent" is arguing that there is no unemployment problem today because more people are working than ever before. You must agree with that fact—yes, in sheer numbers, more people are working. But you point out that the population is also larger now, and therefore the percentage of employed in the whole population is less than before. How do you know when facts are missing or inadequate? There is no magic test. We recommend a "show-me" attitude, a little common sense and skepticism, as well as background reading on the issue.

Does This Argument Violate a Standard of Reasoning the Audience Should Hold?

From the point of view of rhetoric, if you are going to refute an arguer for poor reasoning, you can judge that reasoning only in relation to the argument's audience and situation. Different audiences and situations call for different standards of reasoning. Whole textbooks are devoted to detecting presumably absolute flaws in reasoning called fallacies. But what is a fallacious argument to one audience may be persuasive to another. So to criticize or refute the reasoning in an argument really amounts to arguing that it fails to meet a standard of reasoning its audience has or ought to have. The refuter tries, in effect, to convince an audience that they are "too good" for an argument.

An article in a checkout counter tabloid once claimed in screaming headlines "Elvis Lives!" The evidence cited to support this claim consisted of a tape-recorded voice of unknown origin and authenticity (though supposedly recent and supposedly of Elvis), a film clip of a shadowy figure behind a screen door at Graceland during Elvis's funeral, and, most important, the fact that Elvis's middle name (Aron) is misspelled (Aaron) on his tombstone. Just to seize on this last item, a refuter might ask by what chain of "good reasoning" a misspelled name on a tombstone could signify that the person allegedly buried under it is not really dead. Perhaps the tabloid writer's reasoning went something like the following: "It is highly unlikely that a person's name will be misspelled on a tombstone. Therefore if it is misspelled, the misspelling is probably intentional and highly significant. Knowing he is alive, Elvis's family probably did not want his real name on his tombstone, so they had it deliberately misspelled. Therefore Elvis is not dead."

Needless to say, most people would find this leap from physical evidence to subsequent inference unreasonable. A few people, however, will still be persuaded, especially those who want to believe Elvis lives. For

them the reasoning in this article is acceptable, so we could say that this argument meets the standards of reasoning demanded by tabloid readers. If we refute this argument on the basis of its reasoning, we are really trying to convince an audience that they ought to have a different or higher standard of reasoning than the one it offers.

Are There Any Flaws in Accommodation?

Aside from errors in the reasoning and inaccuracies in the facts, minor matters of format, word choice, and correctness may offend you and deserve mention in your refutation. For example, does the author consistently misspell important names like "Michael Anjello," "Minnieapplis," or the "Midevil Period"? Does the writer misuse pretentious foreign words or phrases, saying *faux pas* instead of *coup d'état*? Does she make grammatical errors? Or any slips in taste or accommodation such as dwelling too long on the gory details of some example or insulting the intelligence of the audience by belaboring an obvious point? Professional reviewers in magazines and newspapers love to pick on these ants at the picnic.

You should never make such cavils the entire substance of your refutation. Then the reader could turn criticism on you for being picky, instead of on the piece you are refuting. Nevertheless, a writer's credibility is certainly undermined by signs of carelessness or insensitivity.

FOR YOU TO ANALYZE OR WRITE ABOUT

Here are paired pro and con arguments; you may support a counterargument to either side or refute one side or the other. Remember that you can agree with the overall thesis, but still find flaws in the argument for it. If none of these arguments engages your criticism, find one that does. Good places to look are the editorial and letters-to-the-editor pages of newspapers and magazines, the signed columns of your campus newspaper, and the articles in special-interest magazines such as *Ms.*, *Psychology Today*, *Mother Jones*, *Sports Illustrated*, *The New Republic*, and *The National Review*.

EXCERPTS FROM JUSTICES' OPINIONS ON SEARCHES OF CURBSIDE TRASH BY POLICE

Following are excerpts from the opinions in the Supreme Court's decision . . . that the police may freely search through garbage left outside homes for collection. Justice Byron R. White wrote the majority opinion, joined by Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist and Justices Harry A.