

Title of Module: Acknowledgment and Response
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Outline of Module

- 1) What is acknowledgement and response?
 - a. Why to acknowledge and respond to differing viewpoints
 - b. in the final version of your essay
 - c. while drafting
- 2) How to carry out acknowledgement and response
 - a. acknowledging objections
 - b. responding to them
- 3) Where to acknowledge and respond to other viewpoints
 - a. at the beginning of the essay
 - b. in the last body paragraph of the essay
 - c. within body paragraphs

Video 1: Acknowledgement and Response

What is acknowledgment and response?

By now, you might have been talking in class about how writing is a way of entering the conversation – of engaging with your readers and with other people who have also thought about the issues you're thinking about. When you write an essay, you consider what other people have said before deciding how you're going to take a stand – and you consider how the people reading your work might respond to your argument. Acknowledgment and response is the term we use to describe how you can explicitly identify, within your essay, how people *have* disagreed with you and how people *might* disagree with you, and explain why you're still right. Some people call this two-part process, the acknowledgment of the possible or actual objection to your argument and your response to that objection, “counterargument” for short, and I'll be using both terms in these videos.

In this module, we'll first go over why to acknowledge and respond to differing viewpoints; then we'll talk about how to actually carry out both the acknowledgement and the response; and last, we'll discuss different options for placing counterarguments within your essay.

Why make a counterargument?

There are some kinds of writing where you might want to downplay complexity and ignore disagreement. If you were writing a closing argument for a trial, for example, you might want to smooth over information that didn't support your case. But academic writing generally embraces complications, because the goal is really to figure out what's true – what the best thing to think or what the best thing to do might be. In order to do that, you have to consider other alternatives,

possible objections, different definitions or values or interpretations, and respond to them thoughtfully.

In your final essay, acknowledgement and response is critical for two reasons.

- First, it allows you to anticipate and address your reader's objections or doubts. That way, they don't leave your essay still thinking about their objection, or thinking that you haven't thought of it yourself, or that you have no answer to it.
- Just as importantly, it presents you as a certain kind of person to your reader: someone who'd rather face a problem head-on than ignore it; someone who cares about discovering the truth, rather than simply arguing for a position regardless of its merits; someone who thinks about different possibilities before settling on an argument. Acknowledgement and response makes you seem like a more trustworthy writer, which in turns makes your essay more persuasive.

But acknowledgment and response are also essential to the drafting process. Counterarguments allow you to test your ideas when you still have time to revise them. Often, imagining a good counterargument shows you a way to make your original claim more complex or nuanced. In my own writing, I know that the best essays I've written have come when there was a piece of evidence that just didn't fit with my original argument – and I was forced to change and complicate my argument as a result.

Video 2: How to Acknowledge and Respond to Other Viewpoints

When you write an academic essay, you make an argument: you advance a claim and offer some reasons, supported by evidence, that suggest why the claim is true. When you counter-argue, you consider a possible argument *against* your claim or some aspect of your reasoning.

Counterargument in an essay has two parts: first, you **acknowledge** how others might challenge or have challenged your argument, and second, you **respond** to those challenges and reaffirm your own argument.

Acknowledging other points of view

The acknowledgment part of acknowledgment and response takes two main forms. At the simplest level, you can imagine a skeptical reader who points out:

- a problem with your argument, for example that you're ignoring or minimizing crucial evidence that doesn't fit with your claim, or that other people might define a key term differently than you're defining it;
- one or more disadvantages or practical drawbacks to what you propose;
- or even, an alternative explanation or proposal that makes more sense.

You introduce this counterargument with a signal phrase to cue your reader that you are now turning against your argument:

- *One might object here that...*
- *It might seem that...*
- *While it's true that...*

- *Admittedly,...*
- *Of course,...*

You can also ask a challenging question:

- *But what about...?*
- *But isn't this just...?*

Then you state the case against yourself as briefly but as clearly and forcefully as you can, pointing to evidence where possible.

Most often, though, in your reading and research around your topic, you will find an actual source who objects to your argument in the ways I've just described, and whom you can cite directly. Remember that, as Turabian says, this is a good time to quote, rather than summarize or paraphrase, your source: you want your reader to feel confident that you are describing the other position fairly.

Avoid these pitfalls

Beware, though, of including a counterargument just for the sake of including one! If the counterargument is very weak, which is to say that it can easily be dismissed by the reader, or that it isn't really relevant to the original argument, you'll have the opposite effect: you'll come across as the kind of writer who views the essay as a checklist and acknowledgement and response as one of the boxes to check off, and your reader will be less inclined to trust you.

Responding to counterarguments

After you've acknowledged the other point of view, you must respond to it and reaffirm your own argument. Here, you have three main options.

1. You can refute the counterargument by showing why your imagined or real critic is wrong;
2. You can acknowledge the validity of the counterargument, but explain why on balance your claim is still better or more likely to be true;
3. You can concede the force of the counterargument and use it to complicate your original idea. If you adopt this strategy, you explain why you find the argument persuasive and how it brings nuance to your original claim. You then restate **your** argument in a new way that takes the objection into account, and then continue with your essay. Note that this approach only works if you can actually reconcile your argument with the new ideas brought forward by the counterargument. If the counterargument invalidates your thesis, you need a different approach.

Usually, your response will begin with "However" or "But" to signal to your reader that you are turning away from the counterargument and back to your own argument.

Avoid these pitfalls

When the "response" part of acknowledgment and response goes wrong, it's often a problem with balance. You don't want to dismiss the counterargument too quickly or superficially, without showing that you are seriously considering its merits. At the same time, you don't want

to spend more time on the turn against your argument than you do on reaffirming your own argument. In general, the more significant the objection, the longer and more thorough your response needs to be. Make sure that you don't simply state *that* the opposing viewpoint is wrong, but fully explain *why* it is wrong.

Another common mistake is thinking that you have to respond to every possible objection or alternative explanation. If you do that, you risk running out of space to make your own argument, and your writerly voice might get swallowed up by the chorus of naysayers. Instead, choose the counterarguments that you think will be most significant for your readers.

The last pitfall with acknowledgment and response is the one I mentioned a moment ago: when the counterargument is so powerful and relevant to such a large portion of your essay that it undermines your argument as a whole. In that case, you need a new central claim. This can be really exciting if it happens early on in the drafting process, but it can feel awful if it happens right before the essay is due. Avoiding such crises is another good reason to get started on drafting as early as possible.

Video 3: Where to acknowledge and respond to other viewpoints

There are four main places where you would insert a counterargument in a shorter academic essay:

- As part of your introduction;
- As a section or paragraph right after the introduction;
- As a section or paragraph at the end of the essay, just before the conclusion;
- Within a body paragraph

Note that you don't have to pick just one! In most good essays, acknowledgement and response happens in multiple locations. Now let's look at these options in a bit more detail.

A common place to introduce a counterargument is **at the very beginning of your essay**. This approach allows you to lay out the consensus or expected position, or in the case of a topic on which scholars disagree, one side of the debate, before turning away to develop your own argument for the rest of the essay. If you take this approach, one option is to sketch out the counterargument **in the first body paragraph of your essay**, after you're presented your research question and your claim. That way, the rest of the essay, in which you affirmatively build your own position, is effectively the response to the counterargument. The other option is to include the acknowledgment **in your introduction**, as part of the current situation or set up of your essay. We'll end this module by taking a closer look at that option.

If you're imagining the counterargument as a response to your own argument, though, you'll have to wait until you've actually made your argument. One common place to introduce a substantial acknowledgment of a different viewpoint is **just before the conclusion of your essay**, after you've made your case. You imagine how someone who's read your essay might object to your argument, and respond to that objection. Note that this is a place where it's really

quite important to spend enough time on reaffirming your view: you want to leave your reader remembering your argument, not the objection to it.

Last, you might be familiar with acknowledgment and response **within a body paragraph** of your essay. Usually, this takes the form of a quick gesture that anticipates an objection that your reader might have to the specific part of your argument or evidence being addressed in that paragraph. It occupies no more than a couple lines. It does not take your reader's attention too far away from the arc of your own argument.

Acknowledgment and Response in Introductions

Opening your introduction by acknowledging other points of view is quite common in academic essays. That's because academic writing is all about entering a conversation that already exists among scholars. Starting by discussing what others have said about your topic shows your readers that you're aware of the conversation, and that you have a good sense of the impact your own contribution might make.

When you begin your essay by acknowledging a point of view with which you will disagree, especially, or whose limitations you're going to point out, the existence of that different point of view is what motivates the essay. Correcting it – showing your readers why it's wrong and, in most cases, what they should think instead – becomes the reason why you're writing the essay — and why your readers will want to read it.

Conclusion

All in all, acknowledgment and response is a key tool in academic writing. When done well, it preemptively addresses your readers' concerns and convinces them that you're operating in good faith – which makes your argument all the more persuasive.

Adapted from:

Colomb, Greg, and Jon D'Errico. *Grounds for Argument*. University of Virginia, groundsforargument.org. Accessed 18 October 2019.

Graff, Gerald, et al. *They Say / I Say*. 3rd ed., W.W. Norton, 2015.

Harvey, Gordon. "Counterargument." Harvard College Writing Center, <https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/counter-argument>. Accessed 1 October 2019.

Turabian, Kate L. *Student's Guide to Writing College Papers*. 5th ed., University of Chicago Press, 2019.

Williams, Joseph M., and Colomb, Gregory C. *A Guide to Teaching The Craft of Argument*. Pearson, 2007.

Notes and Additional Instructions for the module:

Instructors might want to refer students to pp. 81-83 in Turabian or ch. 4, 5, and especially 6 in “*They Say / I Say*” for Acknowledgement and Response templates. The Grounds for Argument website is also an excellent resource for templates: see

<http://www.groundsforargument.org/drupal/AandR/sidebar/language>.