

Assignment #4: Refutation

Purpose

As anyone who's ever watched the 24-hour news circuit knows, it's common for people to disagree. (In fact, rhetorical exchanges are the cause and the result of much dissent.) At its best, rhetoric can be a way to reconcile differences productively and towards a mutually satisfactory solution. Unfortunately, this isn't always the case, and refutations and counter-arguments sometimes emerge as strategies not only to win an argument but to destroy or humiliate an adversary. As you probably know, aggressive confrontation like this does little to convince an opponent to adopt a new position.



But in sophisticated refutations—like the one I want you to produce—those who disagree listen and concede positions to each other and search for common ground. “Winning” an argument is *not* the objective of this refutation; instead, your writing should seek understanding, new insights, and an outcome that is best for everyone (you, your adversary, your audience, and the community as a whole). Respectful refutation is willing to engage with others. Its tone is positive, not destructive, and encourages collaboration, rather than mocking or scorning it. By sincerely working to connect with those who disagree with you, illuminating shared goals and assumptions, and actively listening, you can engage in deliberations that are mutually productive and creative.

The purpose of this assignment is to rehearse and refine your ability to disagree well—and to continue to employ the rhetorical strategies you have learned thus far.

Assignment

Read a selection of opinion editorials, position papers, and mission statements, and find a *specific* argument with which you disagree. Then, refute that argument, perhaps countering with your own, stronger argument. The argument that you choose to refute might be an item you find in a newspaper, magazine, online forum, or organization website; it may also be found in the form of a video (i.e., TED talks), a blog entry, an open letter, or even a law or court decision. Your refutation might be written as a conventional essay, a newspaper editorial, a personal letter, an open letter, or something else. When deciding on the form it will take, consider who your audience to be (are you trying to change the mind of the person with whom you disagree, or is there a larger audience at stake?), and consider what type of forum might work best for a productive disagreement.

Keep in mind these common elements of refutations:

- Identify the specific claim(s) against which you will argue, and find specific points of disagreement.
- Responsibly synopsize the position you intend to refute. Be fair and generous and strive to summarize in a way that your opponent would accept.
- Establish common ground.

- Explain good reasons for disagreement, counter-argue, or do both. (Note that you will probably be taking issue with someone else's definition, evaluation, or proposal—which means you will be effectively counter-defining, counter-evaluation, or counter-proposing.)
- Explore other ideas, arguments, and possibilities that your opponent might have overlooked or discounted.
- Think about how you'll persuade your audience (who may agree with your opponent or be neutral, or even indifferent, towards the entire conversation) to join you in adopting your point of view.

Length: 4 full pages, no more than 5.

Proposal due: July 25

Rough draft due: July 27

Final draft and additional materials due: July 30