

Considering the Opposing Side

By Stephanie Phillips

The Importance of Using a Counterargument

While researching and formulating an argumentative essay, it is important to consider counterarguments. A counterargument is a claim that opposes your own claim. If I want to argue, for example, that women should be allowed to play in the National Hockey League (NHL), I would want to look for a source that reveals why women are currently not allowed to play in the NHL. It would be difficult to make an argument in favor of a co-ed league without understanding why women are currently excluded. Thus, finding, understanding, and utilizing a counterargument is important in order to get a complete picture of the complex issue you are arguing for or against and strengthens your credibility as an author.

Let's look at an example of an argument and counterargument about women playing in the NHL:

In 1992 Manon Rhéaume, a Canadian ice hockey goaltender, took the ice for the Tampa Bay Lightning, a National Hockey League team. Rhéaume became the first, and currently only woman to play in an NHL game. Though she was moved to the minor league system after her short appearance, Rhéaume became an example for women playing in a "league of their own," suggesting that women could feasibly compete with men's athletic abilities. Rhéaume's example of breaking the gender boundary in professional sports put the issue of discrimination by professional athletic associations in the spotlight. Women are given ice, jerseys, and teams, but they are segregated from their male counterparts.

While the story of Rhéaume's game with the Lightning suggests the possibility of developing an argument in favor of co-ed professional sports, it would be unfair to make the assumption that women are unjustly excluded without first understanding *why* women are excluded. Women's ice hockey has identical rules to men's hockey with one glaring exception: women are not allowed to body check or hit an opponent. The no-checking rule makes it harder for women to compete at a professional level. Women are not allowed to check due to the supposed physical differences between themselves and male athletes. While it is possible for women athletes to achieve a large, muscular body type, in many cases men will still have a height and weight advantage over the female players, which would make body checking extremely dangerous in a co-ed league (Beacham).

These physical differences would exist across many different sports, making competition unequal, no matter how skilled a female player may become. The issue of women playing in a professional sporting league, then, is a very complicated one, and any argument in favor of coed sports would have to address this complexity. I began this discussion about women playing professional hockey to demonstrate how complex an argument can become when we consider counterarguments. The counterargument to my point about discrimination in the NHL is that women playing in a checking league would face considerable physical danger. In this case, the counterargument makes a very good point about why women should be excluded. As a writer, you may even find the counterargument convincing. This is okay and shows that your ability to analyze and consider evidence is becoming more mature. Showing your readers that you have considered all viewpoints about your argument will only increase the strength of your argument and your reliability as a writer.

Allowing the counterargument space within your paper will also show that you are confident about your

own argument. For example, I respect the viewpoint of those who wish to exclude women from professional sports because of the large injury risk. The article I have been referencing, however, has not changed my opinion as a writer or a female athlete and I still feel that sports will inevitably include a risk of injury whether all female, all male, or co-ed. I am confident enough about my own argument that I could include the counterargument to show that I am aware of the opposing viewpoint. If I am able to incorporate the counterargument within my paper, my argument will be strengthened because I will be able to show my awareness of other ideas while also defending my ideas against the opposition. Ignoring the opposing viewpoint within your paper could lead your readers to wonder if your exclusion of the opposition indicates a lack of confidence in your argument or a lack of research and could weaken your position. Arguments, such as women's right to play in professional, male athletic leagues, are complex, multi-sided arguments that cannot adequately be discussed by focusing solely on your own opinion of the matter. Integrating a counterargument demonstrates both confidence in your argument and your maturity as a writer to research and integrate the opposing viewpoint while working with complex arguments and opinions.

Addressing the Counterargument

Confronting a counterargument about a topic we are personally invested in can be difficult because, instinctively, we have a bias against the counterargument. As a female hockey player, I want to believe that women are just as skilled as men. The truth is, however, that physically, women are built a little differently, and this may cause some issues when integrating professional sporting leagues. It would feel very natural for me to call the counterargument "ridiculous" because I disagree with it. However, disrespecting the counterargument by simply dismissing it would discredit me as a writer; it would show that, although I found a counterargument, I was not open to the new information that this opposing viewpoint suggested. Therefore, when approaching a counterargument, you should keep an open mind. You should ask yourselves:

- **Who is making this argument and what group of interests is the author representing?**

It is helpful to know about the person (or people) making the counterargument. Is the author a male, is he an athlete, is he attributed to a particular religious or political group? For the sake of my argument about women in sports, it would be helpful to consider the gender of the author and whether he or she is accurately representing the viewpoints of male or female athletes.

- **Who is the author's audience?**

Based on the author's rhetoric, does it sound like he is appealing to a particular group of people? Try to consider how this knowledge would be relevant to your piece. Is the author writing to persuade children, or people of specific religious or political affiliations?

- **What point is the author trying to convey to this audience?**

We want to identify what message the author wants to convey to his audience. This means identifying his arguments and his reasons for making this argument.

- **What methods does the author use to convey this message?**

Is the author using sources or examples to prove his point? When talking about women playing ice hockey, for example, it might be helpful to see whether the author of your counterargument offers any examples

of women being badly injured due to co-ed competition. You can also consider what kinds of evidence (outside statistics or studies) the author uses and how he uses these points to support his argument. For example, the article I consulted when researching counterarguments against women playing in the NHL interviewed female ice hockey players who support gender-segregated leagues. In the case of this counterargument, the author's inclusion of these interviews greatly strengthens his argument because he has now given support from both male and female athletes for his argument.

When approaching the counterargument, considering the above questions will help to keep an open mind. You always want to make sure that you treat the counterargument with respect. Your goal as a writer is, of course, to formulate your own opinion on a subject, but this does not mean that you use harsh or inappropriate rhetoric to refer to the opposing viewpoints. When discussing a counterargument in an essay, give it enough space to adequately disclose its perspective. Discuss the counterclaim with empathy and understanding and try to identify a place or time in which this counterargument would be valid.

Integrating a Counterargument

When integrating a counterargument, you don't want to allow the counterargument to take up the entire essay and overshadow your own argument. Transitioning phrases such as "however," "although," "conversely," or "on the other hand" will help to indicate where you are beginning a discussion about the counterargument and when you are *transitioning* back to your own argument. Consider the following introduction to a counterargument:

While many women feel discriminated against for not being allowed to compete at a professional level, many doctors and coaches believe that the physical risk associated with women and men competing together are too great.

This sentence shows a transition from an argument about why women should be allowed to play in professional sporting leagues, to an introduction of the counterargument. I used the word "while" as my transitional word to indicate to my reader that I am transitioning between ideas. Moving from the counterargument section back into my argument in favor of gender equality may sound something like this:

Although women are typically smaller than men, and competing with them athletically comes with a high risk of injury, female athletes understand these risks and believe that their skills will outweigh the possibility of becoming injured.

This sentence shows a segue, or transition, from the counterargument back to the argument that women accept the possibility of injury and still want the chance to play professionally with men. Here, I used the word "although" as my transition word. Notice that my transition back to my personal argument did not discredit the counterargument. My transition actually acknowledges that the counterargument has a point and, while it was considered, I still believe in my side of the argument and will continue to develop my claim that women should be allowed into sporting leagues with men.

Combining our knowledge about how to address a counterargument, let's look at an example of the entire counterargument section:

While many women feel discriminated against for not being allowed to compete at a professional level, many doctors and coaches believe that the physical risks associated with women and men competing together are too great. In an article titled "To check or not to check? Women's hockey debates," author Greg Beacham interviews women hockey players, one of whom claims, "Do we really need to see girls crushing each other? I really like my teeth, and I think one day in a wedding photo, having no scars would be a bonus" (qtd. in Beacham). The female hockey player interviewed is five foot four and less than 200 pounds, which is far smaller than most male ice hockey players.

Beacham also cites to female athletes who feel that their skill on the ice is not diminished by the no checking rule. Women hockey players, claims Beacham, are not interested in playing in a checking league due to the associated physical risks. Without checking, these women athletes still perform at a very high level, without the risk of injury, and clearly demonstrate that they are exceptional hockey players and athletes.

This paragraph about a counterargument to why women should be allowed to play in professional men's hockey leagues addresses the counterargument respectfully and considers Beacham's point of view as relevant. I used examples and arguments from Beacham's article to show instances during which Beacham's claim that women should not play in a checking league would be valid. I try to demonstrate that I am empathetic to the views that Beacham, and others who are against women in checking leagues, express.

Addressing a counterargument in your essay only demonstrates your abilities as a researcher and writer. If your views evolve and change from reading and considering the counterargument, this only shows the maturity of your viewpoints because you are able to consider multiple possibilities for your topic. In summary, when integrating the counterargument, remember to:

- Use transitional words and phrases
- Attempt to empathize with the counterargument
- Always be respectful toward the counterargument