Anticipating Objections:

This handout will help you think about potential objections to your argument or the way that you’ve developed and supported that argument. Use this handout if you feel that your paper needs more complexity or if you’ve chosen an especially controversial topic.

An Alternative Approach to

Counter-argumentation

(Handout with Worksheet on Reverse)

In “Elements of the Academic Essay,” Gordon Harvey argues that when you incorporate a counterargument into an essay, you accomplish multiple things:

1. You present yourself “as the kind of person who weighs alternatives before arguing for one.”
2. You present yourself as a writer who “confronts difficulties instead of sweeping them under the rug.”
3. You present yourself as an **authentic** thinker, one “who is more interested in discovering the truth than winning a point.”

Overall, Harvey emphasizes that it is important to exhibit flexibility and open-mindedness as a writer. For that reason, try thinking beyond “the” counterargument, as if there is only one. Instead, **anticipate objections** to both your argument and the way you develop it.

**Anticipating objections to both your argument and the way you’ve developed it allows you to display nuanced, flexible thinking.**

**Instead, try “anticipating objections” to your paper and its execution. This make allows for more, multidimensional, open-ended thinking.**

Questions to Ask About Your Argument or Its Execution

1. **Questions about the topic or focus of your paper**. Did you focus on one aspect of a topic, such as the “hidden costs” of a political policy or the “future potential” of an industry? What gets obscured or downplayed because of your focus? Remember that there is no such thing as a perfectly comprehensive perspective. Every writer sidelines certain issues and sidesteps certain facts. That’s inevitable. But the best writers *know* what they’re leaving out and are aware of how those omissions affect the argument.
2. **Questions about evidence**. Did you cherry-pick evidence to confirm your point, thus providing a misleading sense of the situation as a whole? The answer is probably “yes,” but – again – the best writers are aware of what they overlooked. Even if you didn’t cherry-pick, are there some examples that challenge your argument in some way? What do you have to say about those examples?
3. **Questions about analysis**. Is there more than one way to interpret the evidence? Could different conclusions be drawn from the same evidence?
4. **Questions about conclusions.** Did you make a practical suggestion, even if that suggestion is relatively abstract? (For example, “X group needs to think THIS way, instead of THAT way.”) If so, might there be a problem with or limitation to your suggestion? Who is likeliest to resist your suggestion and why?)

* **What is a piece of evidence in your paper that could be interpreted another way?** Do you find this alternative interpretation persuasive? Why or why not?
* **Is there any evidence in your paper that comes from a partisan source?** For example, does your paper quote a publication that is known for its left-leaning sentiments? Alternatively, does your paper draw data from a website with a clear social mission? Why should we trust the information anyway?
* **Is there a key term or concept in your paper that could be defined differently,** and does that alternate definition pose any difficulties for your argument? For instance, suppose you have defined “nonviolent criminals” in a certain way. Are there people who might have a different view of what a violent or nonviolent crime really is? Why is this alternative definition unconvincing or irrelevant?
* **Are there any pragmatic limitations to your argument?** For instance, suppose you argue that the United States government should devote much more money to the construction of homeless shelters. Where might such an argument run into resistance and why?

Once you have developed answers to all of the above questions, decide which points seem the most valid. Then figure out where to weave those ideas into the body of your essay. Bear in mind that it often works better to anticipate and address objections throughout the essay, rather than lumping everything together in a standalone “counterargument” section. If you modulate steadily between what you believe and what other people might believe, you lend the essay an even-handed, conversational feel.