

# Planting a Naysayer in Your Text

## Crafting Counterarguments

Although it's naturally tempting to ignore criticism of our ideas when crafting an argument, doing so may in fact be a big mistake, since our writing improves when we not only listen to these objections but give them an explicit hearing in our writing. In fact, no single device more quickly improves a piece of persuasive writing and the credibility of the author (ethos) than planting a "naysayer" in the text— in other words, imagining what others might say against your argument and addressing those objections head-on. Planting a naysayer in your text has the following advantages:

- Enhances your credibility as a writer by coming across as an open-minded, confident person
- Disarms the critics by identifying the problems with your argument before others can point them out to you
- Shows respect for your readers by treating them as independent, critical thinkers who are aware that your view is not the only one in town.

### Templates for planting the naysayer:

- Yet some readers may challenge this view by insisting that \_\_\_\_\_.
- Of course, many will probably disagree on the grounds that \_\_\_\_\_.
- Here many \_\_\_\_\_ would probably object that \_\_\_\_\_.
- But \_\_\_\_\_ would certainly take issue with the argument that \_\_\_\_\_.
- \_\_\_\_\_, of course, may want to question whether \_\_\_\_\_.
- Nevertheless, both followers and critics of \_\_\_\_\_ will probably suggest otherwise and argue that \_\_\_\_\_.
- Yet is it necessarily true that \_\_\_\_\_? Is it always the case that \_\_\_\_\_?
- However, does the evidence prove conclusively that \_\_\_\_\_?
- "Impossible," some will say. "You must be reading the research selectively."

### Answering the Naysayer: Rebuttal

Once you've decided to introduce a differing or opposing view into your writing, your work has only just begun, since you still need to represent and explain that view with fairness and generosity. Whenever you entertain objections in your writing, stay with them for several sentences, or even paragraphs if necessary. Avoid mocking an opposing point of view as it will likely alienate those readers who don't agree with you.

Once you have represented an objection successfully, you still need to be able to answer it persuasively. Often the best way to overcome an objection is not to try to refute it completely but to agree with part of it while challenging only the part you dispute. Rather than build your argument into a fortress, it is often best to make concessions while still standing your ground, as Kim Chernin does in the following passage from a book complaining about the pressure on American women to lose weight and be thin. While entertaining the counterargument, she writes: "Admit it. You like yourself better when you've lost weight." In response, Chernin replies:

Can I deny these things? No woman who has managed to lose weight would wish to argue with this. Most people feel better about themselves when they become slender. And yet, upon reflection, it seems to me that there is something precarious about this well-being. After all, 98 percent of people who lost weight gain it back. Indeed, 90 percent of those who have dieted "successfully" gain back more than they ever lost. Then, of course, we can no longer bear to look at ourselves in the mirror.

## Templates for Making Concessions

- Although it may be granted that \_\_\_\_\_, it still can be maintained that \_\_\_\_\_.
- Proponents of X are right to argue that \_\_\_\_\_. But they exaggerate when the claim that \_\_\_\_\_.
- While it is true that \_\_\_\_\_, it does not necessarily follow that \_\_\_\_\_.

## Exercises

1. **To practice imagining a naysayer, choose one of the topics below that you feel strongly about and write a brief and persuasive summary of your belief regarding that topic; then, write a summary of the opposite point of view. Give both summaries to a classmate and see if they can tell which position you endorse. If you've done your job, they won't be able to tell.**

- We need to own guns to protect ourselves against criminals.
- Parents should have complete access to their children's cell phones and computers.
- Immigrants to the United States should be required to speak English.
- The use of cell phones should be banned in public places like restaurants and theaters.
- The legal driving age should be raised to 18.
- Professional athletes are paid way too much, and their salaries should have a cap.
- Students should be allowed to grade their teachers.

2. **Read the following passage by the cultural critic Eric Schlosser. As you'll see, he hasn't planted any naysayers in this text. Do it for him. Insert a brief paragraph stating an objection to his argument and then responding to the objection as he might. Use the templates as you see fit.**

The United States must declare an end to war on drugs. This war has filled the nation's prisons with poor drug addicts and small-time drug dealers. It has created a multibillion-dollar black market, enriched organized crime groups and promoted the corruption of government officials throughout the world. And it has not stemmed the widespread use of illegal drugs. By any rational measure, this war has been a total failure.

We must develop public policies on substance abuse that are guided not my moral righteousness or political expediency but by common sense. The United States should immediately decriminalize the cultivation and possession of small amounts of marijuana for personal use. Marijuana should no longer be classified as a Schedule I narcotic, and those who seek to use marijuana as medicine should no longer face criminal sanctions. We must shift our entire approach to drug abuse from the criminal justice system to the public health system. Congress should appoint an independent commission to study the harm-reduction policies that have been adopted in Switzerland, Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands. The commission should recommend policies for the United States based on one important criterion: what works.

In a nation where pharmaceutical companies advertise powerful antidepressants on billboards and where alcohol companies run amusing beer ads during the Super Bowl, the idea of a "drug-free society" is absurd. Like the rest of American society, our drug policy would greatly benefit from less punishment and more compassion.

--Eric Schlosser, "A People's Democratic Platform"

Sample naysayer:

Each American citizen has a right, guaranteed by the Constitution, to own a gun to protect himself and his family. If guns are controlled, then only criminals will own guns.

Guns are dangerous and deadly weapons that kill thousands of innocent victims every year. This killing epidemic must be addressed. The best place to start is doing what we can as a society to control who has guns.

Sample counterargument paragraph

Proponents of the war on drugs are right to argue that we as a nation must take a firm stance on drugs. But they exaggerate when they claim that declaring a "War on Drugs" is the best solution; if it were, we as a nation would see a decrease in drug use. Einstein once said that insanity is doing the same thing over and over while expecting different results. It's time to stop the insanity.