Teaching Counter-Argument

1. Open by prompting students to consider *arguing in person* alongside *arguing on the page*.

   - Note that in person we rarely argue in a vacuum; usually the motive for asserting an argument emerges from an ongoing conversation, a current event or controversy, a response to someone else or to something we see or hear or read, and so on. In other words, spoken argument is usually motivated by and intimately connected to its context, its *exigency*. It is part of an ongoing exchange, whether with another person or with various voices in the culture. Yet writers often need to *create* or *remind* readers of the context that motivates their argument. Written arguments disconnected from any sense of involvement in a conversation usually fall flat. It is the writer's job to set the context, introduce the relevant voices in play, and motivate readers to care about the matter. (I also remind them that *text* derives from the same root at *textile*—both have to do with *weaving*. And we need to weave the voices of both our allies and critics into our texts.)

   - Note that when arguing with someone in person, we have multiple opportunities to advance our case, as well as to respond to concerns our audience raises. We can redirect our approach if it doesn't seem to be working; we can refute the objections that others introduce; we can improvise. Yet in writing, we only get one shot. Therefore we need to *anticipate* potential objections and answer them in the text. If we don't, we lose the confidence of our readers if at some point while reading they think, "Hey, but you don't consider…" And there is no winning back that reader, because you're not there to improvise a response. That means you need to *anticipate* the potential objections of your readers and work them into your text.

2. Ask students if they have been taught to introduce opposing arguments into their essays. Why bring in the opposition? Why not play it safe and only include evidence that supports your own case? Why give your critics any air time? The dangers? The advantages? How to do it?

3. Propose that there are differences between *arguing* and *persuading*, between trying to bull-doze your audience and trying to engage them in a conversation (in the course of which you will press your case). Ask them to think of people they find particularly persuasive, people who really get them to change their minds, consider new perspectives, or take action. Are these the most forceful, relentless, bull-dozer types? Don't we usually respond better to those who listen to our side respectfully and respond to our concerns, even as they advance their views and present evidence? Also ask them to consider the nature of academic/scholarly exchange.

4. A few different ways to think about all this (I run through these fairly quickly):

   - Classical rhetoric. A long history of persuading through dialogue (i.e., Plato, Boethius), teaching rhetoric by arguing opposite sides of the same issue (sophists, Renaissance schooling, contemporary courtrooms), and building refutation into one's larger case (i.e. Quintilian's recommended arrangement

for oratory: *exordium*/intro, *narratio*/history & context, *confirmatio*/main argument, *refutatio*/anticipating & answering critics, *peroratitio*/conclusion & recommendations).

- --Gerald Graff's "planting a naysayer in the text." I usually read a few key passages from his "Why Johnny Can't Argue" chapter, including his *Things Fall Apart* example of a flat thesis statement compared with the same thesis with naysayer woven in.

- Anticipation

- Counter-argument/counter-interpretation

- Rogerian therapy: "What I hear you saying is…" Respectfully and fully acknowledging the position of the other before moving on.

- Some typical academic moves (i.e., opening an essay by setting one's main claim against that of an established authority, or against the typical understanding of something, or against the prevailing interpretation of a text; doing a literature review; admitting the viability of opposing views but explicitly limiting the scope of one's argument; etc.). It's worth showing students how these strategies are at work in a published scholarly article or a good sample student essay. Graff's "argument templates" can be a helpful, even if a bit simplistic, in showing typical opening moves for academic essays.

5. If students are in the process of planning or composing their own essays, ask each to take 5 minutes to list at least two potential counter-arguments to their own working thesis, or viable counter-interpretations to their preferred interpretation of a primary text. They can also flesh out potential refutations of their sub-claims, assumptions, or evidence. Then have them pair up and share for 5 minutes. Invite partners to play devil's advocate to each others' theses, as well as to brainstorm ways that they might anticipate, introduce, and address counter-arguments. Then pairs can share with the larger class.

6. Tell them that if they're having trouble finding any viable counter-argument/naysayer/refutation, then they probably don't have a promising thesis. If no intelligent person would disagree with your main claim, are you preaching to the choir? Are you being too general, hiding behind vagueness and hoping for the best? Playing it too safe? Also alert them to the temptation of setting up a straw man, and assure them that readers will see this as a cheap ploy. We should imagine our potential critics as smart people who disagree on with us in a principled way.

7. If time, discuss *where* in the text one might introduce counter-arguments (the advantages/disadvantages of various positions) and speculate together about *how* to answer one's potential critics (without letting them overshadow your own thesis).

8. End by affirming that if our goal is *persuasion*--and not just listing points in one's favor and piling on evidence--we need to attend to counter-arguments.