

Dear LITR 592 Students, This writing exercise (from the Krause textbook) serves several purposes, but the most important of these is that it helps you to test your thesis by making sure that it is indeed arguable and that it is thorough. For example, if you can't find any antithetical arguments to counter your thesis, chances are that your thesis is not arguable: It is hard, for example, to argue against a statement of fact like, "These three books all have elves as protagonists," which means this isn't much of a thesis and it needs to be revised. Also, anticipating counter-arguments, different angles, and different theoretical approaches, ultimately works to make your thesis stronger. This assignment should be about seven pages long, must include a bibliography of sources cited, and must be in MLA format. –AW

## Chapter Eight

# The Antithesis Exercise

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- Revisiting the Working (and inevitably changing) Thesis
- Why Write an Antithesis Essay?
- Generating Antithetical Points in Five Easy Steps
- Finding Antithetical Points on the Internet
- Strategies for Answering Antithetical Arguments
- But You Still Can't Convince Everyone...
- Assignment: Writing the Antithesis Essay
  - \* Questions to consider as you write your first draft
  - \* Revision and Review
  - \* "A Student Example: "Are Casinos Good for Las Vegas? Defending Legalized Gambling," by Kerry Oaks

If you are coming to this chapter after working through some of the earlier exercises in this part of the book, you might find yourself quite attached to your topic and your working thesis. Perhaps you are so attached and focused on your topic that you have a hard time imagining why anyone would disagree with you.

This attachment is certainly understandable. After you have done so much hunting in the library and on the Internet and thinking about your working thesis, you might have a hard time imagining how anyone could possibly disagree with your position, or why they would want to.

But it is important to remember that not all of your potential readers are going to automatically agree with you. If your topic or take on an issue is particularly controversial, you might have to work hard at convincing almost all of your readers about the validity of your argument.

The process of considering opposing viewpoints is the goal of this exercise, the Antithesis essay. Think about this exercise as a way of exploring the variety of different and opposing views to the main argument you are trying to make with your research project.

### **Revisiting the working (and inevitably changing) thesis**

Chapter Five, “The Working Thesis Exercise,” describes the process of developing a working thesis. Here is a quick review of the characteristics of a good thesis:

- **A thesis advocates a specific and debatable issue.**
- **A thesis can either be directly stated (as is often the case in academic writing) or implied.**
- **A thesis is NOT a statement of fact, a series of questions, or a summary of events.**
- **A thesis answers the two most basic reader questions “What’s your point?” and “Why should I care?”**

While it is important that you start your research project with a working thesis that is as clear as you can possibly make it, it is also important to remember that **your working thesis is temporary and it will inevitably change as you learn more about your topic and as you conduct more research.**

Here are examples of some working theses:

- While some computer hackers are harmless, most of them commit serious computer crimes and represent a serious Internet security problem.
- The international community should enact strict conservation measures to preserve fisheries and save endangered fish species around the world.
- *The Great Gatsby’s* depiction of the connection between material goods and the American dream is still relevant today.

Chances are, if you started off with a working thesis similar to one of these, your current working thesis has changed a bit. For example, let’s consider the working thesis “While some computer hackers are harmless, most of them commit serious computer crimes and represent a serious Internet security problem.” While the researcher may have begun with this thesis in mind, perhaps she changed it slightly, based on interactions with other students, her instructor, and her research.

Suppose she discovered journal articles and Web sites that suggested that, while many computer hackers are dangerous, many are also helpful in preventing computer crimes. She might be inclined then to shift her emphasis slightly, perhaps to a working thesis like, “While many hackers commit serious computer crimes and represent a serious Internet security problem, they can also help law enforcement officials to solve and prevent crime.” This change is the same topic as the original working thesis (both are still about hackers and computer crime, after all), but it does suggest a different emphasis, from “hackers as threat and problem” to “hackers as potentially helpful.”

Of course, these changes in the working thesis are not the only changes that were possible. The original working thesis could have just as easily stayed the same as it was at the beginning of the process or research. Further, just because the emphasis of the working thesis may be in the process of changing doesn’t mean that other related points won’t find their way into the research project when it is put together. While this research writer might change her emphasis to write about “good” hackers as crime solvers, she still would probably need to discuss the fact that there are “bad” hackers who commit crimes.

The point here is simple: **your working thesis is likely to change in small and even large ways based on the research you do, and that’s good.** Changing the way you think about your research topic and your working thesis is one of the main ways the process of research writing becomes educational, interesting, and even kind of fun.

### **Why Write an Antithesis Essay?**

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One of the key tests of a working thesis is the presence of logical points of disagreement. There’s not much point in researching and writing about how “computer crime is bad” or “fisheries are important” or similar broad arguments because everyone more or less would agree with these assertions. Generating an antithesis essay will help you:

- **test how “debatable” your working thesis actually is.** If you are able to arrive at and write about the ways in which readers might disagree with your working thesis, then chances are, your working thesis is one that readers need to be persuaded about and need evidence to prove.
- **consider ways of addressing the anticipated objections to your thesis.** There’s nothing wrong with reasonable readers disagreeing with your point of view on a topic, but if you hope to persuade at least some of them with your research, you will also need to satisfy the objections some of these readers might have.

- **revise your working thesis into a stronger position.** If you're having a hard time coming up with any opposition to your working thesis, you probably have to do more work on shaping and forming your working thesis into a more arguable position.

## Generating Antithetical Points in Five Easy Steps

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Generating potential objections to your working thesis – the points you can use to develop your antithesis essay – is a simple process. In fact, if your working thesis is on a controversial topic and you've already done a fair amount of research, you might need very little help generating antithetical points. If you are doing research on gun control, you have undoubtedly found credible research on both sides of the issue, evidence that probably supports or rejects your working thesis.

In addition to those points that seem straight-forward and obvious to you already, consider these five basic steps for generating ideas to consider your antithesis: have a working thesis, think about opposing viewpoints, think about the alternatives, and imagine hostile audiences. Once you have generated some plausible antithetical arguments, you can consider different ways to counter these positions. I offer some ideas on how to do that in the section "Strategies for Answering Antithetical Arguments."

- **Step 1: Have a working thesis you have begun researching and thinking about.**

If you are coming to this chapter before working through the working thesis essay exercises in chapter five, you might want to take a look at that chapter now.

You also need to have at least some preliminary research and thinking about your working thesis done before you consider the antithesis. This research is likely to turn up evidence that will suggest more clearly what the arguments against your working thesis might actually be.

- **Step 2: Consider the direct opposite of your working thesis.** Assuming you do have a working thesis that you've begun to research and think about, the next step in generating ideas for a working thesis is to consider the opposite point of view. Sometimes, this can be as simple as changing the verb or modifying term from positive to negative (or vice-versa). Consider these working theses and their opposites:

### **Working Thesis**

Drug companies *should* be allowed to advertise prescription drugs on TV.

### **The Opposite**

Drug companies *should not* be allowed to advertise prescription drugs on TV.

The international community *should not* enact strict conservation measures to preserve fisheries.

The international community *should* enact strict conservation measures to preserve fisheries.

This sort of simple change of qualifiers can also be useful in exposing weak working theses because, generally speaking, the opposite of positions that everyone simply accepts as true are ones that everyone accepts as false. If you were to change the qualifying terms in the weak working theses “Drunk driving is bad” or “Teen violence is bad” to their opposites, you end up with theses for positions that are difficult to hold. After all, just as most people in modern America need little convincing that drunk driving or teen violence are “bad” things, few credible people could argue that drunk driving or teen violence are “good” things.

Usually, considering the opposite of a working thesis is more complex than simply changing the verb or modifying term from positive to negative (or vice-versa). For example:

**Working Thesis**

While many hackers commit serious computer crimes and represent a serious Internet security problem, they can also help law enforcement officials to solve and prevent crime.

**The Opposite(s)**

Computer hackers do not represent a serious threat or Internet security problem.

There is little hackers can do to help law enforcement officials solve and prevent computer crime.

Both opposites are examples that counter the working thesis, but each takes a slightly different emphasis. The first one questions the first premise of the working thesis about the “threat” of computer hackers in the first place. The second takes the opposite view of the second premise.

- **Step 3: Ask “why” about possible antithetical arguments.** Of course, these examples of creating oppositions with simple changes demand more explanation than the simple opposite. You need to dig further than that by asking and then answering-- the question of *why*. For example:

*Why* should drug companies not be allowed to advertise prescription drugs? Because...

- The high cost of television advertising needlessly drives up the costs of prescriptions.

- Television commercials too frequently provide confusing or misleading information about the drugs.
- The advertisements too frequently contradict and confuse the advice that doctors give to their patients.

*Why* should the international community enact strict conservation measures to preserve fisheries? Because...

- Without international cooperation, many different kinds of fish will become extinct in the coming decades.
  - Preventing over-fishing now will preserve fish populations for the future.
  - Unchecked commercial fishing causes pollution and other damage to the oceans' ecosystems.
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- **Step 4: Examine alternatives to your working thesis.** For example, consider the working thesis "Drug companies should not be allowed to advertise prescription drugs on television because the commercials too often contradict and confuse the advice that doctors give their patients." This working thesis assumes that drug ads are an important cause of problems between doctors and patients. However, someone could logically argue that there are other more important causes of bad communication between doctors and patients. For example, the number of patients doctors see each day and the shortness of each visit certainly causes communication problems. The billing and bureaucracy of insurance companies also often complicates doctor/patient communication.

Now, unlike the direct opposite of your working thesis, the alternatives do not necessarily completely invalidate your working thesis. There's no reason why a reader couldn't believe that *both* drug advertisements on television *and* the bureaucracy of the insurance companies are the cause of bad doctor/patient communication. But it is important to consider the alternatives within your research project in order to convince your readers that the position that you are advocating in your working thesis is more accurate (see especially the "Weighing Your Position Against the Opposition" strategy on page xx for answering these sorts of antithetical arguments).

- **Step 5: Imagine hostile audiences.** Whenever you are trying to develop a clearer understanding of the antithesis of your working thesis, you need to think about the kinds of audiences who would disagree with you. By thinking about the opposites and alternatives to your working thesis, you are already starting to do this because the opposites and the alternatives are what a hostile audience might think.

Sometimes, potential readers are hostile to a particular working thesis because of ideals, values, or affiliations they hold that are at odds with the point being advocated by the working thesis. For example, people who identify themselves as being “pro-choice” on the issue of abortion would certainly be hostile to an argument for laws that restrict access to abortion; people who identify themselves as being “pro-life” on the issue of abortion would certainly be hostile to an argument for laws that provide access to abortion.

At other times, audiences are hostile to the arguments of a working thesis because of more crass and transparent reasons. For example, the pharmaceutical industry disagrees with the premise of the working thesis “Drug companies should not be allowed to advertise prescription drugs on TV” because they stand to lose billions of dollars in lost sales. Advertising companies and television broadcasters would also be against this working thesis because they too would lose money. You can probably easily imagine some potential hostile audience members who have similarly selfish reasons to oppose your point of view.

Of course, some audiences will oppose your working thesis based on a different interpretation of the evidence and research. This sort of difference of opinion is probably most common with research projects that are focused on more abstract and less definitive subjects. A reader might disagree with a thesis like “*The Great Gatsby’s* depiction of the connection between material goods and the American dream is still relevant today” based on differences about how the book depicts “the American dream,” or about whether or not the novel is still relevant, and so forth.

But there are also different opinions about evidence for topics that you might think would have potentially more concrete “right” and “wrong” interpretations. Different researchers and scholars can look at the same evidence about a subject like conservation of fisheries and arrive at very different conclusions. Some might believe that the evidence indicates that conservation is not necessary and would not be effective, while other researchers and scholars might believe the completely opposite position.

Regardless of the reasons why your audience might be hostile to the argument you are making with your working thesis, it is helpful to try to imagine your audience as clearly as you can. What sort of people are they? What other interests or biases might they have? Are there other political or social factors that you think are influencing their point of view? If you want to persuade at least some members of this hostile audience that your point of view and your interpretation of the research is correct, you need to know as much about your hostile audience as you possibly can. Of course, you’ll never be able to know *everything* about your hostile audience, and you certainly won’t be able to persuade all of them about your point. But the more you know, the better chance you have of convincing at least some of them.

## **Strategies for Answering Antithetical Arguments**

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It might not seem logical, but directly acknowledging and addressing positions that are different from the one you are holding in your research project can actually make your position stronger. When you take on the antithesis in your research project, it shows you have thought carefully about the issue at hand and you acknowledge that there is no clear and easy “right” answer.

There are many different ways you might incorporate the antithesis into your research project to make your own thesis stronger and to address the concerns of those readers who might oppose your point of view. For now, focus on three basic strategies: directly refuting your opposition, weighing your position against the opposition, and making concessions.

- **Directly Refuting Your Opposition.** Perhaps the most obvious approach, one way to address those potential readers who might raise objections to your arguments is to simply refute their objections with better evidence and reasoning. To answer the argument that the international community should not enact measures to preserve fisheries, demonstrate with your evidence that it has indeed been effective. Of course, this is an example of yet another reason why it is so important to have good research that supports your position: when the body of evidence and research is on your side, it is usually a lot easier to make a strong point.

Answering antithetical arguments with the research that supports your point of view is also an example of where you as a researcher might need to provide a more detailed evaluation of your evidence. The sort of questions you should answer about your own research-- who wrote it, where was it published, when was it published, etc.-- are important to raise in countering antithetical arguments that you think come from suspicious sources. For example, chances are that an article about the problems of more strict drunk driving laws that appears in a trade journal for the restaurant industry is going to betray a self-interested bias.

- **Weighing Your Position Against the Opposition.** Readers who oppose the argument you are trying to support with your research might do so because they value or “weigh” the implications of your working thesis differently than you do. Those opposed to a working thesis like “Drug companies should not be allowed to advertise prescription drugs on TV” might think this because they think the advantages of advertising drugs on television – increased sales for pharmaceutical companies, revenue for advertising agencies and television stations, and so forth – are more significant than the disadvantages of advertising drugs on television. Those who would argue against the working thesis “Tougher gun control laws would be of little help in the fight against teen violence” probably think that the advantage of having fewer guns available to

teenagers to use for violence is less important than the disadvantageous effects stronger gun control laws might have on lawful gun owners.

Besides recognizing and acknowledging the different ways of comparing the advantages and disadvantages suggested by your working thesis, the best way of answering these antithetical arguments in your own writing is to clearly explain how you weigh and compare the evidence. In other words, even if the readers who oppose your point of view are in some ways correct, the advantages you advocate in your working thesis are much more significant than the disadvantages.

For example, a writer might argue that any of the loss of profit to pharmaceutical companies, advertising agencies, and television stations would be a small price to pay for the advantages of banning prescription drug TV ads. A writer with a working thesis like “Tougher gun control laws would be of little help in the fight against teen violence” might have to defend his arguments against a hostile audience by suggesting that in the long-run, the costs of infringing the right to bear arms and our other liberties would far outweigh the few instances of teen violence that might be stopped with stronger gun control laws.

- **Making Concessions.** In the course of researching and thinking about the antithesis to your working thesis and its potentially hostile audiences, it may become clear to you that these opposing views have a point. When this is the case, you may want to consider revising your working thesis or your approach to your research to make some concessions to these antithetical arguments.

Sometimes, student researchers “make concessions” to the point of changing sides on their working thesis – that is, in the process of researching, writing, and thinking about their topic, a research moves from arguing a working thesis like “Most computer hackers are criminals and represent a great risk to Internet security” to one like “Most computer hackers are merely curious computer enthusiasts and can help solve problems with Internet security.”

This sort of shift in thought about an issue might seem surprising, but it makes perfect sense when you remember the purpose of research in the first place. When we study the evidence on a particular issue, we often realize that our initial and uninformed impression or feelings on an issue were simply wrong. That’s the role of research: we put more trust in opinions based on research than in things based on “gut instinct” or feelings.

Usually, most concessions to antithetical perspectives on your working thesis are less dramatic and can be accomplished in a variety of ways. You might want to employ some qualifying terms to “hedge” a bit. For example, the working thesis “Drug companies should **not be allowed** to advertise prescription drugs on TV” might be qualified to “Drug companies should **be closely regulated** about what they are allowed to advertise in TV.” The working thesis “The international

community should enact **strict** conservation measures to preserve fisheries and **save** endangered fish species around the world” might be changed to “The international community should enact **stronger** conservation measures to preserve fisheries and **help** endangered fish species around the world.” Both of these are still strong working theses, but they also acknowledge the sort of objections the opposition might have to the original working thesis.

**But be careful in using qualifying terms!** An over-qualified working thesis can be just as bad as a working thesis about something that everyone accepts as true: it can become so watered-down as to not have any real significance anymore. For example, theses like “Drug company television advertising is sometimes bad and sometimes good for patients” and “While there are good reasons for enacting stronger conversation measures for protecting endangered fish species, there are also good reasons to not make new conservation laws” are both over-qualified to the point of taking no real position at all.

### **But You Still Can't Convince Everyone...**

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If you are using research to convince an audience about something, then you must understand the opposite side of the argument you are trying to make. That means you need to include antithetical positions in your on-going research, you should think about the opposites and alternatives to the point you are making with your working thesis, you have to imagine your hostile audience as clearly as possible, and you should employ different strategies to answer your hostile audiences' objections.

But even after all this, you still can't convince everyone that you're “right.” You probably already know this. We have all been in conversations with friends or family members where, as certain as we were that we were right about something and as hard as we tried to prove we were right, our friends or family were simply unwilling to budge from their positions. When we find ourselves in these sorts of deadlocks, we often try to smooth over the dispute with phrases like “You're entitled to your opinion” or “We will have to agree to disagree” and then we change the subject. In polite conversation, this is a good strategy to avoid a fight. But in academic contexts, these deadlocks can be frustrating and difficult to negotiate.

A couple of thousand years ago, the Greek philosopher and rhetorician Aristotle said that all of us respond to arguments based on three basic characteristics or appeals: *logos* or logic, *pathos* or emotional character, and *ethos*, the writer's or speaker's perceived character. Academic writing tends to rely most heavily on *logos* and *ethos* because academics tend to highly value arguments based on logical research and arguments that come from writers with strong “character-building” qualifications – things like education, experience, previous publications, and the like. But it's important to remember that *pathos* is always

there, and particularly strong emotions or feelings on a subject can obscure the best research.

Most academic readers have respect for writers when they successfully argue for positions that they might not necessarily agree with. Along these lines, most college writing instructors can certainly respect and give a positive evaluation to a piece of writing they don't completely agree with as long as it uses sound logic and evidence to support its points. However, all readers – students, instructors, and everyone else – come to your research project with various preconceptions about the point you are trying to make. Some of them will already agree with you and won't need much convincing. Some of them will never *completely* agree with you, but will be open to your argument to a point. And some of your readers, because of the nature of the point you are trying to make and their own feelings and thoughts on the matter, will never agree with you, no matter what research evidence you present or what arguments you make. So, while you need to consider the antithetical arguments to your thesis in your research project to convince as many members of your audience as possible that the point you are trying to make is correct, you should remember that you will likely not convince all of your readers all of the time.

### **Assignment: Writing the Antithesis Essay**

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Based on the most current and most recently revised version of your working thesis, write a brief essay where you identify, explain, and answer the antithesis to your position. Keep in mind that the main goal of this essay is to think about an audience of readers who might not agree with you and to answer at least some of the questions and complaints they might have about your research project. Be sure to include evidence about both the antithesis and your working thesis, and be sure to answer the objections hostile readers might have.

#### *Questions to consider as you write your first draft*

- Have you revisited your working thesis? Based on the research and writing you have done up to this point, how has your working thesis changed?
- Have you done enough research on the antithetical position to have a clear understanding of the objections? (You might want to review the work you've done with your annotated bibliography at this point). What does this research suggest about the opposition's points and your points?
- What sort of brainstorming have you done in considering the antithesis? Have you thought about the "opposite" of your thesis and the reasons why someone might hold that point of view? Have you considered the "alternatives" to your working thesis and why someone might find one or more of these alternative viewpoints more persuasive than your points?

- Have you clearly imagined and considered what your “hostile audience” is like? What sorts of people do you think would object to your working thesis? What kind of motivations would hostile audiences have to disagree with you?
- In considering the objections to your working thesis, do you believe that the evidence is on your side and you can refute hostile audiences’ objections directly with the research you have done?
- When you compare the points raised by the antithesis to the points of your working thesis, do you think that the advantages and values of your working thesis outweigh those of the antithesis?
- Are there some concessions that you’ve made to your working thesis based on the points raised by the antithetical point of view? How have you incorporated these concessions into your revised working thesis?