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The Essential Guide to Building Your Argument

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5

Counterarguments

A key part of engaging with and producing arguments is the ability to test and validate propositions, whether they are your own or others. Thinking about possible challenges and alternatives is a key aspect of this. The process of generating counterarguments is a vital part of the whole academic process – we do it when engaging with the arguments of others, when producing our own arguments and when we consider any position, assertion or assumption.

Counterarguments are not necessarily adversarial in nature. Just as the term ‘arguments’ in an academic context does not only refer to conflicts or debates, but also specific positions taken in response to particular questions, so ‘counterarguments’ in an academic context are not just about proving someone else wrong or ‘winning’ – although that can often be the purpose. Depending on the situation, counterarguments can be about improving upon an existing position, showing that another way of thinking or proceeding is possible, correcting misunderstandings and gaps in evidence, or even just testing an argument or assertion to see if it is valid or has any flaws or issues.

For example:

Argument – Racial equality has still not been achieved in the UK.



Counterargument – The 2010 Equality Act guarantees equality in law and there is much evidence to suggest equality has been achieved, including the most diverse ever parliament in 2019 and much more numerous cultural and supporting figures of colour.



Response to counter – The fact that it was necessary to pass legislation protecting equality as late as 2010 shows precisely that equality has not been achieved,

as if it had, there would be no need for the law to be updated in the first place. Likewise, the make-up of parliament still does not reflect the demography of the country as a whole, and the existence of sporting and cultural figures does demonstrate some progress, but not equality.



Adapted argument – *Despite some improvements, racial equality has still not been achieved in the UK.*¹

Synthesis – Bringing together different elements to produce a new argument that is both reflective of and different from the constituent parts.

We will look in more detail at how counterarguments can be integrated into and used to help structure arguments in Chapter 6. In this section, the focus will instead be on how we generate counterarguments, and use them both to test and evaluate the arguments of others and to produce our own arguments.

In order to do this, this chapter is going to use a framing question as a context. That question is: are you a feminist?

This may be a question that you have given a lot of thought, or it may be a question that you have never considered. Likewise, it may be a term that you are familiar with or one that you are unsure about. However, it is likely that you have some understanding of this label and that you have an immediate response to the question. Therefore, whatever your level of familiarity with the idea, take notes on the question for a few minutes, and think about what is affecting your answer.

QUESTION: Are you a feminist?

TASK 5.1

Take notes on or think about this question and the reasons that support your answer. Think about any issues or experiences that might be shaping your view and how you feel about the question. Does the term provoke a negative or positive response? Why?

ANSWER: Are you a feminist? Yes or no?

It is likely that you had an instant response to this question, whether positive or negative. It is also likely that in thinking about your response you had to answer a lot of other questions. For example: what does it mean to be a feminist? What do I already know about this term and how do I feel about it? Is being a feminist a good thing or a bad thing? Why might some people argue that it is or isn't? How do I feel about those people? What debates or issues in wider society does this question relate to? Can a man be a feminist? And so on.

As we saw in Chapter 1, our response to any question will necessarily involve asking and answering a whole range of associated questions, and at times we may find that our response is actually to one of these secondary questions rather than the original.

You might also have considered some of the questions from Chapter 4 here, or a version of them – namely, why am I being asked this question here, in this context? What is the expected response? What does this have to do with building arguments at university or generating counterarguments?

One answer to that question is that, as we have already seen, we can only get so far by discussing arguments in the abstract. In order to usefully engage in any exploration of how arguments and counterarguments work, we need to engage in real issues and questions. This particular topic – feminism – is intended to be accessible, both to a wide range of individual backgrounds, and also to be relevant to a wide range of disciplinary interests. That is, this is a question that a large number of people should be able to engage in without any specialist prior knowledge, and it is a question that should then usefully relate to their lives and future studies. Whether that supposition is correct, I will leave you to decide.

In other words, we are considering the question 'are you a feminist' as a context in which to explore how we can generate and respond to counterarguments.

Having clarified that, let us consider the overall question and the subordinate questions we have generated to help us think about it.

What does it mean to be a feminist?

There are multiple ways to answer this question, but at its most simple, feminism is the belief in gender equality. What exactly that means depends on how you approach the question. Various versions of feminism, usually referred to as 'waves', have emerged over the last century or so, concerned with, variously, women's political and legal rights; the social roles of men and women; reproductive rights, sexuality and

gender-based violence; exploring the ways in which gender roles are not ‘natural’ but are rather constructed socially; and seeking to either change existing social systems, or break them down all together.

As we saw in Chapter 4, an ideology (according to one definition) is a set of political ideas with a clear medium- to long-term goal. In the case of feminism, that goal is gender equality. Different waves involved different specific goals, different ways of achieving those goals, and different theoretical focuses, but in general the founding principle is the same – equality.

If you believe that men and women are equal and should be treated accordingly, therefore, you are a feminist.

What does all of this have to do with building arguments at university?

In most Western contexts (the term ‘Western’ is a geographically inaccurate one usually used to cover Europe, America, Australia, and assorted ex-colonial outposts) you would expect the average university student to consider themselves a feminist. After all, this is a fairly standard liberal opinion, and at its most basic, seems difficult to object to.

Whenever you were directly asked this question in an academic context, therefore, it is likely that the expected answer would be ‘yes’. But it is worth noting that there are plenty of places in academia where this question would *not* be asked, and the dominant position would not be feminist – although this would be likely to be an implicit rather than an explicit position that suggested that feminism was not relevant to the matter at hand rather than that it was actually wrong.

Consider, for example, how history tends to be dominated by male-focused narratives and authors (see Kahn and Onion, 2016), and how women’s history is an addition, a subset, in the same way as black history is in the UK or US. That is, we talk about ‘women’s history’ but we do not talk about ‘men’s history’, as we do not feel the need to. Men are the norm, and women are therefore different from and subordinate to that norm.

The sciences are equally affected, with medical education texts, for example, tending to use the male form in case studies and anatomical drawings, and only including representations of women when discussing reproductive anatomy (see Parker et al., 2017). This gender bias is reflected in the practice of healthcare professionals and in safety standards in industry, where products are designed based on the male anatomy as a standard. This shows how many things that are often considered ‘facts’ (e.g. ‘this car is safe as it has been scientifically tested’) are often actually a result of a series of choices and assumptions, and

that scientific knowledge (e.g. medical science) is also affected by social and ideological factors, and cannot be considered separate from them.

The university as a whole, and the subjects of study that make up that institution, at least in the developed world, exist within societies that remain predominantly male and white, in worldview if not in actual physical make-up. The knowledge that is produced by the university and the disciplines within it is shaped by that social reality, and feminist thought in all subjects aims to tackle not only the wider issues of gender equality, but also the ways in which this is built into knowledge and knowledge production. This is why almost every area of academic thought has a feminist strand.

This is another reason why you are being asked this question here. Plenty of things that don't look like feminist issues *are* feminist issues, and it is as worth thinking about when this question is *not* asked as when it is. The same is true of the increasingly common discussions around **decolonising the curriculum**, where many issues that seem to be unrelated to race and colonial history are in fact deeply enmeshed with them.

Decolonising the curriculum is a concept concerned with paying attention to how knowledge is and has been produced, and attempting to approach that knowledge through new perspectives and create new connections to allow different voices and positions to emerge. This is not about deleting existing curricula or histories, but rather opening them up to new ways of knowing and enriching our understanding (see, for example, Arshad, 2021).

What do I already know about feminism and how do I feel about it?

The answer to this question will depend upon a lot of factors, including which country you live in, your social, economic, class and gender background, and perhaps especially your age. Whatever you think about this topic is likely to be different to your grandparents, and perhaps even your parents, even as what they think is likely to be very different from the generations preceding them.

Globally, however, there are certain common features that are likely to be consistent. A 'backlash' against feminism has occurred in various forms around the world over the last 40–50 years, arguing that feminism has 'gone too far', is harmful, or undermines valuable traditional forms of social structure and knowledge. At the same time, events such as the

'Me Too' movement, or the struggle for female education in the developing world (think of the global fame of Malala Yousafzai, for example), consistently occur to demonstrate the continuing need to address gender inequality.

It is likely, therefore, that you will have been exposed to both positive and negative representations of feminism in your everyday life. It is worth noting, however, that the assumption that feminism is widely accepted in a university context is itself questionable. Various pieces of research over the last few decades (see, for example, Houvaros and Scott, 2008, or the popularity of figures such as Jordan Peterson) has shown that students – whether male or female – are much more reluctant than you might expect to identify as feminist, and that they do not always see the label, or the idea, as something positive.

As an example, at the University of Essex in 2017, the (student) Feminist Society held a bake sale to highlight the gender pay gap – i.e. the fact that women in the UK at that point were, on average, paid 18 per cent less than men. As part of this, they sold cupcakes for £1 to male students, and 82p to female and non-binary students, billing this as a way to redress the balance. In reality, it was about raising awareness of the issue in an eye-catching way. Another student reported this as a 'hate crime' and claimed it was discriminatory (Gray, 2017).

Whatever your position on all of this, however, it is worth noting that none of your responses to any of these questions is 'natural'. You think these things for a reason, and you have absorbed lots of arguments about feminism, or at the very least, what is 'true' about male and female roles in society, and the 'nature' of men and women, whether that be in terms of the way they think, the way they behave, the way they experience emotion, the way they conduct relationships, or the way that they have or desire sex. These arguments will have fundamentally shaped your assumptions about how the world works, and will therefore shape your response to any questions about the issue, whether you realise it or not.

This is as true of your response to any question as it is to a question about feminism, and it is important to remember these assumptions in your own thought, as well as looking for them in the thought of others.

For the purposes of this chapter, we are going to assume that the answer is 'yes' – you are a feminist, and you think feminism is necessary and correct. That is the position that we are going to take in response to the questions and texts that we will encounter here. Bear that in mind as we continue, as it will affect the way that we interact with different positions and propositions.

Logical fallacies

Before we look at an example text to further explore this question of feminism, it is first necessary to consider a few of the ways in which we can generate counterarguments.

Firstly, we can think about counterarguments as a way of testing an argument, just in terms of how well it stands up under its own terms. That is, in order to evaluate how strong an argument is, we can ask ourselves – are there any problems with the argument itself and the way that it has been put together?

If all the premises in an argument lead logically to the conclusion, then that argument is **valid**. If the premises of the argument are also true, and the conclusion is therefore also true, then the argument is described as being **sound**. See Chapter 2 for more details.

The easiest way to do this, in the first instance, is to consider whether there are any mistakes or flaws in the argument. We looked in Chapter 2 at how to think about whether an argument is **valid** or **sound** in general terms, but here let us think more specifically about some general types of poor reasoning that can lead to wrong conclusions. Some of these are called *logical fallacies*, and being aware of them can help us to spot a problem with an argument that otherwise seems convincing.

Here are some common examples:

Factual error – This may seem obvious, but it is important to consider. Errors can range from the outright mistake (or falsehood) to the misinterpretation of data or the misapplication of a theory, but it is always worth noting that someone might simply have got something wrong, and spotting that mistake can make you realise that the whole argument is unsound. This is as important to check in your own work as it is in the work of others.

Ad hominem – This is a type of logical fallacy, very common in politics, and literally translates as ‘against the man’. In practice, this means attacking the person making the argument in order to suggest that what they are saying is wrong. ‘Don’t listen to him, he’s an idiot’ is the simplest form of this attack.

Straw man – Constructing an exaggerated and deliberately weak position in order to knock it down and make the opposite seem more convincing. This is named after the straw-filled dummies that were used to practise sword-fighting – in other words, this is something that looks like an enemy but isn’t really at all and ‘beating’ it proves nothing.

Tu quoque – This translates as ‘you too’, and refers to the accusation of hypocrisy, or someone doing the very thing they are criticising in someone else. In other words, it is saying – you do exactly the same thing, or your argument has exactly the same flaw. The problem is, of course, that while the accusation that someone else is just as bad might be true, it doesn’t tell us anything about the quality of the original argument. In fact, it sometimes suggests that the person crying ‘*tu quoque*’ knows they are wrong and is sticking with their argument anyway ...

Begging the question – Tautology and begging the question are two ways of thinking about the same thing – they are both arguments that have conclusions based on their own premises and so are unfalsifiable. Some are very obvious (‘cigarettes are bad for you because smoking kills’), but others are much less so. This is also sometimes referred to as *circular reasoning*, as the premise assumes the conclusion, or *tautology*, where the ‘conclusion’ is just a restatement of the premise(s) in another form.

Equivocation – This fallacy occurs when the same word is used to mean different things, whether accidentally, deliberately, or because of an ambiguity of definition. A famous example of this is the US President George W. Bush’s declaration in 2006 that ‘The US does not torture’. This statement was only true to a given definition of the word ‘torture’ that excluded many acts considered torture under international law, such as waterboarding, which the US *were* doing.

False dichotomy/false dilemma – Suggesting that something is true by creating a false sense that there are only a limited number of options available. Again, this is common in political discourse (‘if Russia does not retreat, then war is inevitable’), but is a common fallacy that can be much more difficult to identify. This can be related to *over-generalisation* – for example, if the outcome of a single experiment is used to argue that a hypothesis is or isn’t proven, or if an individual event is used as a model for all possible situations.

Appeal to ... – There are many outside factors that can be appealed to in order to guarantee or justify an argument but the most common are ignorance and authority: An *appeal to ignorance* is where we assume something is or isn’t true simply because the opposite hasn’t been proven yet, e.g. ‘there can’t be alien life in the universe because otherwise we would have found it if there was’. Of course, just because we haven’t yet proved something to be true does not mean that it is false.

An *appeal to authority* argues that something is true simply because of the source it comes from (e.g. ‘I know that this article is good because my lecturer recommended it’). Note that this is not necessarily a fallacy – authorities are often correct and should be looked to for information on their subjects of expertise. However, being an expert, or other form of ‘authority’ does not mean that someone should automatically be believed, and we should also ensure that people are authorities in the field we are actually considering – a very important reason to be cautious of celebrity endorsements, for example.

Counterarguments

There are lots of other things we can appeal to – *popularity* (10 million listeners can't be wrong!), *tradition* (we've always done it like this!), *nature* (men are naturally more assertive so more likely to succeed in business) and even *sympathy* (the death penalty is justified because victims of horrible crimes deserve justice). Many can be convincing, some can even be correct, but we should still be careful any time that some outside factor is appealed to – this can distract us from the validity of the argument itself.

TASK 5.2

Take a look at the following examples, and see if you can identify the problem in each case:

1. Smith (2018) criticises the study for only using a small number of participants from one social group. However, this is a standard feature of such experiments and so the criticism can be ignored.
2. Life expectancy in Africa has risen astonishingly as that country has entered the global economic system.
3. Jones is a Marxist, and so their reading of Ayn Rand is unlikely to be useful.
4. Free trade will be good for the national economy as unrestricted commercial relations will give all sections of the country the benefits that result when there is an unimpeded flow of goods between states (adapted from Engel, 1994).
5. Those arguing that gender is socially constructed deny that there is any biological basis for sex differences. Such anti-scientific perspectives should not be taken seriously.

ANSWERS

1. This is an example of a *tu quoque* fallacy. The existence of other poorly designed experiments does not justify poor sample selection in this study.
2. This is a *factual error* – Africa is not a country. Boris Johnson said this while Foreign Secretary of the UK in 2016.
3. This is an example of *ad hominem*. Jones being a Marxist may make them likely to disagree with Ayn Rand's position, but that does not mean that their argument will be incorrect or of no use.
4. This is an example of *circular reasoning* – the conclusion is just a restatement of the reason given for it.

5. This is a mixture of a *straw man* argument, an *ad hominem* attack and *equivocation*. Arguing that gender is socially constructed is not related to biological sex distinctions and so is a *straw man* argument; this inaccurate suggestion that gender and sex are synonymous terms is *equivocation*, and suggesting that such viewpoints are 'anti-scientific' is an *ad hominem* attack.

Generating counterarguments

Checking for any mistakes or faulty logic is just one way of testing arguments. There are lots of other things that we can do to generate counterarguments and see what other positions are possible or what improvements can be made to a line of reasoning. These strategies apply just as much when you are considering your own arguments as they do when you are examining the arguments of others.

Here are a few for you to think about.

Think like a believer

The first step is to consider how you, as a reader, are approaching the text. Perhaps counterintuitively, in order to think about challenges and alternative points of view, you first need to try and really understand the argument that someone is making. To do this, you can 'think like a believer' (Ramage et al. 2001, p26), and try what Carl Rogers (2017) called 'listen[ing] with understanding' (see Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion of this). In other words, you try to really inhabit the position being taken, both in terms of its claims and all of the values that underpin it, 'to really achieve ... [their] frame of reference' (Rogers, 2017). This will allow you both to properly evaluate the argument and to really understand how it has been put together.

There are various ways you can help yourself think or read like a believer, and one of the key ways of doing this is to attempt Rogers' thought experiment (see pp29–30) – namely to summarise the point of view so well that the person arguing it would be satisfied with your version. Doing this will force you to properly and fully understand what you are dealing with and enable you to consider it critically.

Think like a doubter

The flipside to thinking like a believer is, of course, thinking like a doubter and coming up with questions, challenges and reasons to be sceptical.

There are a number of questions you can ask yourself here, including the following.

What paths were not taken?

Answering any question and building any argument involves taking a certain approach. How the question is framed, why the question is being asked, what evidence is used, any hypothesis that will be tested – deciding all of these requires not only choosing a particular path, but also means that other paths cannot be taken. In economics, there is the idea of **opportunity cost**, or the benefits that you would have gained from the option that you didn't take, and a similar effect is relevant here. Considering what other paths could have been taken in an argument is one key way that you can generate counterarguments, whether to challenge a given position or strengthen and complexify it.

Opportunity cost – The benefits that you would have gained from the option or options that you didn't take and that have therefore been lost.

What evidence is being used here and why?

All arguments are backed up by some form of evidence, whether that be experimental data, historical fact or secondary quotation. When considering this evidence, as well as checking for any errors or logical missteps, it is also important to consider why *that* evidence is being used and not something else. In any given situation, the person making the argument will have to have made decisions about the evidence they are going to use to back up their position, and those decisions are not neutral. Thinking about the evidence used will help you to understand those decisions, and what has shaped the approach taken, even if that is not explicit.

What's missing?

Any choice of what evidence to include necessarily also involves a choice of what to exclude. Sometimes this is conscious, but either way, it is interesting to consider what *isn't* being said in any given argument and why. Considering both what has and hasn't been included allows you to think about the impact of alternative points and whether any important omissions have been made.

What method has been used and why?

Often, the evidence used or omitted will have been determined by the method used. In the sciences and social sciences, this will often be very explicitly discussed, and critiquing the methodology used in any piece of research (and the arguments resulting from it) is a standard part of academic practice, and will be explicitly taught in both undergraduate and postgraduate study. However, in any discipline, a ‘method’ of sorts has been chosen and applied, even if that decision is more implicit. For example, when examining a novel, a literary scholar could use a biographical, new historicist or post-structuralist approach (among others), while a historian could, for example, approach any given event from a socio-cultural, economic or ethnohistoriographic perspective. Each will have an effect on the outcome, and considering the results that alternative approaches might have produced will help you to consider possible counterarguments or ways of thinking.

How would thinking about this from another perspective change things?

Underpinning all choices about evidence and method are theoretical frameworks and approaches that decide how questions can meaningfully be answered. Some of these are disciplinary – think, for example, of the differences between how a biological scientist, a philosopher and an architect might approach the question of what constitutes beauty – while others are ideological, or simply more pragmatic. Choosing one or the other is not a value judgement – psychology is not ‘better’ than sociology, and new historicism is not ‘better’ than deconstruction. Different forms of knowledge, different forms of ‘fact’ or ‘data’, are the base units from which we construct arguments, and we create these different forms by choosing these different approaches.

As we explored at the beginning of this chapter, in order to answer a big question we often focus down onto smaller, more manageable questions and explore those, and there is often some distance between the evidence used or facts deduced and the argument made based on those facts. Thinking about how the counterarguments that different approaches might suggest, and moving between the different levels of abstraction (i.e. between a detailed consideration of individual pieces of evidence and a broader interrogation of context and approach) are both vital parts of testing any argument and improving it.

Here, it is also necessary to think about the purpose of an argument or the underlying assumptions. Does it relate to an existing debate or way of thinking and is it trying to achieve a particular goal?

The further you go through your studies, the more you will be aware of different approaches within your own discipline and how they help determine arguments. But it is also worth being open to ideas and concepts from other disciplines and forms of study as these can help to inspire different ways of thinking and stop you from seeing the processes and frameworks of your area as being the only way of doing things.

Can you counter the counter?

Having thought of possible objections, questions and alternative ways of approaching things, you can now ask yourself – how would you respond to these counterarguments? This may require further research or thought, but considering counterarguments can be a productive way to both improve your own understanding of, and engagement with, another’s argument, or to more fully understand your own. See the example at the start of this chapter (pp87–88) for an illustration of this.

TASK 5.3

Take a look at the following examples and see what counterarguments you can come up with. They are all quite brief so it may not be possible to do all of the steps above, but try and come up with as many challenges, problems and potential questions as you can.

1. People who live in Mediterranean countries have fewer heart attacks than those who live in Northern Europe. The diet in those countries includes a lot of olive oil – therefore, eating olive oil makes you less likely to have a heart attack.
2. During the Brexit campaign in 2016, when people in the UK were asked to vote on whether or not they wanted to remain part of the European Union (EU), the following claim was made by the Vote Leave campaign: ‘Turkey (population 76 million) is joining the EU’. Suggestions were made that between 5 and 15 million Turks would come to the UK as a result in the first five years. What do you think of the claim that millions of migrants would be headed to the UK if Britain stayed in the EU?
3. Paying unemployment benefit makes being out of work attractive. Therefore, lowering the level of benefit – i.e. the amount of money people receive from the state when they don’t have a job – will incentivise them to find work and lower the unemployment rate.

ANSWERS

1. This sort of claim about diet and nutrition is very common and is frequently reported in both advertising campaigns and the media. It is an example of *correlation not equalling causation* (see Chapter 2), and more broadly we can see that it relies on taking two separate facts – incidence of heart attacks and presence of olive oil in the diet – and not considering any other factors that might be relevant. Also missing here is a consideration of anything that might be *causing* heart disease in Northern Europe or any other contextual detail.
2. A quick check tells us that currently, in 2022, Turkey has still not joined the EU. Even ignoring this fundamental problem with the argument presented by Vote Leave, we can see that the number of suggested migrants as a proportion of the population of Turkey is very high and thus unlikely to be realistic. A consideration of why this argument was made is also important here. The idea was to promote fear of large numbers of immigrants, and the fact that it was possible to suggest this simply by stating the population of the suggested country shows how prevalent anti-immigration sentiment was at the time.
3. There are a number of things to think about here. Firstly, the claim that lowering unemployment benefits leads to lower unemployment figures is one that could be checked against available data. The claim that receiving unemployment benefit makes being out of work attractive is also questionable and evidence for this would need to be examined. The rest of the argument fundamentally rests on this claim, and if it were found not to be true, then the rest would also not be true. Other potential challenges include the fact that if there are not enough jobs for people then any incentive to work will have no effect, and the impact that lower benefits might have on the ability of individuals to find a job (e.g. being able to travel to interview, having the necessary clothing and equipment). This argument is common, and rests on a particular theoretical framework – that is, a conception of poverty and worklessness as the responsibility of the individual. Starting instead from a point of view that saw employment and welfare benefits as the responsibility of the collective (i.e. society or the state) would be likely to lead to a very different position.

Putting it into practice

Having thought about all of the possible strategies for generating counterarguments, let's put this all into practice by returning to our topic – feminism – and in particular, analysing a short extract from a text that represents a challenge to the pro-feminist position that we have decided to take in this chapter.

Counterarguments

The short text that we are about to look at is taken from the Prologue to Neil Lyndon's 1992 book *No More Sex War: the Failures of Feminism*. Lyndon is a journalist rather than an academic, and while in many ways the book is obviously outdated, it remains representative of certain key arguments from the backlash against feminism, and the fact that Lyndon republished it in 2014 suggests that he considered its arguments to remain relevant.

You do not need to know anything about feminism, in the UK or elsewhere, beyond what has already been discussed here to critically approach this extract. If you would like to, please revisit *the trigger questions from Chapter 4* before reading.

In the prologue to his book, Lyndon (1992) argues feminism is a failure that is based on fundamentally wrong ideas and has had an actively negative effect on society. He says that feminism has 'declared a war of eternal opposition between men and women' (p2), and attributes the 'conspicuous failure' of his generation (i.e. Baby Boomers, those born in the decades after the Second World War) to deliver 'radical change in the institutions of state, in the rights and freedoms of individuals', to 'the influence of feminism and to the perverted account of personal relations and of social composition which feminism has fostered' (p2).

To support these claims, he gives the following 'short list of facts'. While reading these, use the approaches above to see what you think of Lyndon's (1992) argument and see what objections you can come up with.

Think:

- What evidence is being used? What is missing?
- Does the evidence support the conclusions drawn? Are alternative conclusions possible?
- Can you spot any logical fallacies, errors or examples of faulty reasoning? For the purposes of this exercise, you can consider all factual assertions here to be correct.

Here is Lyndon's (1992) list. I have numbered the points to make things easier:

1. Until the autumn of 1991, when the Children Act became law, the fathers of at least one in every four children born in Great Britain had no rights with regard to those children.

Approximately 175,000 children are born every year to unmarried women. Those women have had all the rights of parenthood for those children. The men have had no legal rights of paternity ...

The Children Act is intended to afford to unmarried fathers the right to acquire parental responsibility on the same terms as married fathers; but we cannot, at present, guess how its vaguely expressed terms will work in practice

2. A man who makes an application to the divorce court for joint custody of the children of a broken marriage has a one-in-five chance of success. A man who makes an application for sole custody of his children has a one-in-ten chance of success.

About 175,000 divorces are granted in Great Britain every year. In more than 100,000 of those divorces, the couples have children under the age of 16. The routine practice of the divorce courts of Great Britain is to strip men of their property and income and, simultaneously, deny them equal rights of access to and care for their children.

3. About 200,000 abortions are legally effected in Great Britain every year. We do not know how many of the fathers of these fetuses might have wished to see their children born: nobody has ever tried to count them. They are not accorded a glimmer of public attention nor an atom of legal rights. Subject only to the consent of doctors, the pregnant woman is given the absolute right to choose to abort the foetus, regardless of the father's wishes or the state of their relationship when she conceived. The inseminating man has no right, in law or convention, to express or to record an opinion on the abortion, even if the woman has previously openly and unambiguously expressed their desire to bear their child.

4. About 700,000 babies are born in the UK every year. The 700,000 men who are their fathers have no right in law to time off work when those babies are born.

5. A man may not be classed as a dependant for social security benefits in Great Britain.

6. Widowers who are left with the care of children are not entitled to the state benefits which a widow would receive.

7. Though it will soon be changed, the law in Great Britain still allows women to retire and receive a state pension at the age of sixty while requiring men to work until they are sixty-five. The coming change in the law has been imposed upon Britain to bring the country into line with its European partners. The protests of men on this incontestable point of inequality have been ignored in Britain for twenty-five years. (pp3–5)

Lyndon (1992) says that, 'two connected consequences flow from this list. First, it gives an unusual perspective on our times and the societies

in which we live ... Second ... it must mean, in each of its particular parts and in sum that the cardinal tenets of feminism add up to a totem of bunkum' (pp5–6).

For him, the chief of these tenets, 'the corner-piece of that mosaic of belief, assertion and argument [i.e. feminism] has been the claim that all post-nomadic societies have been patriarchal ... that those societies have been organised by men for the benefit of men and to the disadvantage of women' (p7). He argues that, 'If any disadvantages apply to all men, if any individual man is denied a right by reason of his gender which is afforded to every single woman, then it must follow that ours is not a society which is exclusively devised to advance and protect advantages for men over women. It is not a patriarchy' (p9), and claims that the above list of facts therefore provides proof of the fact that UK society is not a patriarchy. Feminism is therefore wrong, and is attempting to address a problem that does not exist.

Before we try and see what counterarguments there are to Lyndon's position, let us first try to *think like a believer*.

TASK 5.4

Write a short summary (i.e. less than 100 words) of Lyndon's position that you think he would be satisfied with.

Having done this, let's return to the question I asked you at the very beginning of this chapter. Are you a feminist? Has reading Lyndon's (1992) argument changed your mind?

QUESTION: Are you a feminist? Yes or no? Why/why not?

Now, having tried to fully inhabit Lyndon's position, let's *think like a doubter* and see what possible counterarguments there are to his arguments.

We have a list of seven 'facts' to consider, which are used as evidence to support an overall argument that feminism is wrong because it is based on the erroneous assumption that society is patriarchal.

Before we interrogate the overall claim, let us take each of the 'facts' in turn and as an overall list. What problems and challenges can you come up with in each case? Can you spot any flaws? Why has this evidence been chosen and what is missing?

TASK 5.5

Look back at Lyndon's list of 'facts' and take notes on the above questions.

Before considering the overall list, let's look at each point in turn:

Point 1 – This is clearly unfair. However, this is a recognised injustice that has already been addressed (through the Children Act), as Lyndon himself recognises.

What is missing here is a sense of how many of these unmarried fathers are being denied any rights – that is, how many of the 175,000 children have fathers that are not being allowed to do something they want to – and a consideration of historical context. Children being born outside of marriage was only normalised from the 1960s onwards in the UK, and men not having 'rights' to such children could arguably have been seen as a benefit, in that they were not required to take responsibility for something unwanted, rather than that they were being denied access to something desired. Existing legislation and parental rights were therefore reflecting this norm, rather than designed to disadvantage men. Laws are made to address specific issues and behaviours and are born out of specific social contexts – they are not necessarily expressions of moral positions.

The flipside not mentioned by Lyndon (1992) here, related to this, is the fact that as these fathers were not recognised by law, the mothers also had no ability to impel the fathers to assist in raising their children. In this sense, their legal 'right' to the child is also a legal *obligation* to care and raise that child, which was not incumbent upon men.

Point 2 – At first glance, this also seems like an injustice, and anyone being unfairly denied access to their children is wrong. However, there are several issues here. Firstly, note the emotive language ('strip men of their property ... deny them equal rights'), which seems designed to provoke an emotional response rather than present an objective account. Secondly, we don't know enough about any of these claims to say that this is 'routine practice' and not a justified response based on the cases at hand; thirdly, joint or sole custody are not the same as 'equal rights of access and care' and there are many forms of arrangement that would constitute equal access but not joint custody. To an extent, Lyndon (1992) is guilty of creating a *false dichotomy* here.

Lastly, the property of a marriage and the income of those within it are seen in law as shared, not the sole property of the man. The routine

practice that Lyndon describes here is to split that property and income between the parties, so men are not being ‘stripped’ of their assets or income, but rather being made to divide them fairly. Lyndon is unintentionally showing the patriarchal basis of his thinking here, both in assuming that it will be the men that have the income and property, and that taking any of it away constitutes some sort of theft.

Also missing is a sense of what proportion of men apply for joint or sole custody, and the proportion of men who do not want custody or do not fulfil their legal obligations (e.g. paying child support) following separation. Without this, we can’t contextualise the figures or truly draw a conclusion as to what they mean.

Point 3 – As with point 2, Lyndon (1992) uses very emotive language here, which is problematic given the fact that abortion is a hard and recently won right and a very emotionally freighted topic. Women being denied the right to control their own bodies or reproductive capabilities is a major aspect of most of human history and continues to be a very contested battleground. That context is ignored here. Women being abandoned by men to raise unwanted babies is also a very real problem – as is women being forced to have abortions, legal or otherwise. The legalisation of abortion in the UK in 1968 is widely regarded as one of the ‘radical change[s] in the ... rights and freedoms of individuals’ that Lyndon (1992) wants his generation to have made, so it is important that he does not mention any of this context.

Last but not least, and as with point 2, a fundamental question not answered here is – how much of a problem is this? If there were large numbers of men feeling that their unborn children were being stolen from them, it is hard to believe this would not have been considered, especially when anti-abortion stances are so politically popular. Lyndon (1992) himself says that no one has tried to count this, and implies that it’s because no one cares for these men. It could equally be because there is nothing, or very little, to count.

Point 4 – Lyndon is correct – this is/was a scandal. Missing, as with the previous two points, is a sense of how many men actually *want* such time off, but overall he is right to highlight this issue.

But can we counter this counter? Yes. Men being denied the right to time off after their children are born means that the burden of child-care falls almost completely on women and that they have no choice in the matter. Something being bad for men doesn’t always automatically make it good for women, or vice versa – a point that Lyndon recognises but does not always seem to follow to its logical conclusion. In this case, both men and women are disadvantaged by the law rather than

a disadvantage for men being an advantage for women. The perceived 'battle' between men and women that Lyndon (1992) deplores seems to have infected his own thinking, and what he sees as an example of men being disadvantaged is in fact a feminist issue that affects both sexes.

Point 5 – again, this is wrong. But it is also a legacy of patriarchal society – this is because men were (and still are in many cases) presumed to be the 'breadwinner' (that is, the one responsible for 'providing for' the family) and always in charge of money. Women in the UK were traditionally denied access to money and *forced* to be dependent, whether they want to be or not. Thus the law reflects historical and still existent social norms, where men cannot be considered dependents because it is assumed that there is no way that they *could* be dependent on a woman.

Patriarchy is not always good for all men or what all men want. Something that disadvantages some men can be a result of something that also disadvantages women. Again, the system here disadvantages both men and women, and so this is also a feminist issue rather than an illustration of a failure of feminism.

Point 6 – Again, this is a legacy of the patriarchal assumption that a widower will be the breadwinner and so will have an income after their partner's death. Widows received benefits as it is assumed that they would not have such an income and would therefore otherwise be left with no money. There are also assumptions about childcare and who carries it out here.

Missing again, therefore, is a consideration of the wider context of financial and economic rights and benefit allowances. We cannot conclude whether the system as a whole advantages women over men, or vice versa, based solely on this point.

Point 7 – This is a valid point. However, it is also 'soon [to] be changed', so, as with point 1, it is a recognised injustice. It is therefore arguable whether the 'protests of men on this incontestable point of inequality have been ignored in Britain for twenty-five years', or whether the protests have in fact been listened to and led to a change in the law.

The whole list

Having considered the points individually, let us now look at the list as a whole. The evidence used has clearly been chosen in an attempt to show that there are a number of ways in which men are disadvantaged compared to women. Some of them are valid and do suggest that men are disadvantaged in particular ways.

However, there is too much missing here to draw strong conclusions. We do not have a comparable list of inequalities or injustices affecting women, and in most of the points Lyndon (1992) lists we are also missing key contextual details that make it difficult to judge whether his interpretation is correct.

Also missing is a sense of *why* any of the laws or situations quoted are the way they are, or the motivations behind them. Lyndon (1992) frames this list as if the points included are indicative of conscious attempts to disadvantage men, yet does so without any of the necessary historical context.

Let us consider the claims that Lyndon (1992) makes based on this list – that society is not patriarchal and that feminism is thus rendered null and void.

Firstly, is it true that, ‘if any disadvantages apply to all men, if any individual man is denied a right by reason of his gender which is afforded to every single woman, then it must follow that ours is not a society which is exclusively devised to advance and protect advantages for men over women. It is not a patriarchy’ (p9)? No, it is not. This is another example of a *false dichotomy*, and to a certain extent of *equivocation* or even of a *straw man* argument.

A very basic definition of patriarchy, taken again from simply searching on Google, is that it is, ‘a system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it’. The word ‘largely’ is key here – and note how this contrasts with the ‘exclusively’ used in Lyndon’s (1992) definition. Lyndon’s points, at best, show that there are some examples in which women are treated better than men by society, but this is not enough to discount all of the other ways in which society does the opposite.

Lyndon’s (1992) overstatement of what patriarchy means is *equivocation* and he uses that equivocation to set up a *straw man* argument. If feminism did really argue that patriarchy was about a society that *exclusively* gave power to men, then it becomes a very easy argument to knock over, as all one needs to do is find one example of where women seem to hold the advantage – the one black swan. Feminism does not argue this, and so the whole premise of the prologue is a *false dichotomy*.

To return to the very beginning, we also need to consider Lyndon’s (1992) overall definition of feminism as has having ‘declared a war of eternal opposition between men and women’, and being responsible for a ‘perverted account of personal relations and of social composition’. This underpins his argument and allows him to cast feminism as *against*

men – which from our overall definition of feminism as seeking *equality* is again erroneous. It is in fact interesting to consider that Lyndon sees the attempt to achieve equal treatment as a declaration of ‘war’. The idea that those who are used to privilege experience equality as oppression is perhaps useful here.

Lyndon’s (1992) initial definition of feminism can therefore be seen as a caricature, which deliberately exaggerates in order to create the straw men and false dichotomies to follow. He also seems to fundamentally misunderstand the call for equality, as to seek an equal balance is the very opposite of seeking to overturn patriarchy and replace it with matriarchy, which is what Lyndon seems to have in mind. At the end of the prologue Lyndon says that to be anti-feminist is not to be anti-woman (p10) – but he doesn’t seem to acknowledge that to be anti-patriarchal is not to be anti-man.

Having looked at all of this, see if you can write a short summary of the doubter’s response.

TASK 5.6

Write a short paragraph (100–150 words) summarising the counterarguments to Lyndon’s (1992) position.

Example: It is doubtful, overall, whether any of Lyndon’s (1992) ‘little list’ of facts does indeed suggest that women are advantaged over men, and that society is therefore not patriarchal. While his list includes some important points regarding ways in which men seem to be treated poorly, he does not demonstrate that these add up to a meaningful advantaging of women. No definition of patriarchy suggests that it can be seen as beneficial to all men in all situations, and Lyndon’s argument is based on this misconception, along with the idea that feminism seeks an opposition between the sexes rather than equality, which in fact entails seeing both sexes treated equally well. Recognising these flaws in his reasoning allows the points he makes to in fact be seen as feminist issues in themselves, as any attempt to achieve gender equality would also need to address these problems.

Having gone through the counterarguments and the counters to the counters, let us consider then how reading Lyndon’s (1992) text has affected your own position on feminism.

Again, answer the question, are you a feminist? Why or why not? Has reading Lyndon (1992), and our response to it, changed or strengthened your position?

Before we leave Lyndon (1992), it is perhaps worth noting that my choice of this text could itself be seen as a straw man. Lyndon is a journalist, not an academic, and his argument is deliberately exaggerated in some ways for effect. If you wanted to counter my counter to Lyndon, one way you could do that would be to point this out and to argue that I have selectively taken one small section of his book in order to caricature his argument.

I would argue that this is not true, and that the treatment of his work here is fair. But then again, I would say that. I will leave you to use the strategies discussed here to decide on your own answer.

It is also worth noting that at the beginning of this chapter we said that counterarguments are not always adversarial. The deliberate choice of a text that was directly opposed to a chosen position, however, inevitably meant that the response constructed here was one of outright disagreement. In order to look at how we synthesise arguments and counterarguments to produce stronger overall positions, we need to think in more detail about how to structure arguments and incorporate different perspectives and positions, which brings us on to our next chapter.

Summary

- Counterarguments are a vital part of the academic process, whether to test existing positions, generate responses to them or explore and develop our own arguments.
- Looking for factual errors, logical fallacies or examples of faulty reasoning is an important first step in considering counterarguments.
- When considering an argument, it is important to think about it on all levels of abstraction – in other words, from the detailed level of individual pieces of evidence or facts, to the broader, more zoomed out perspective of approach and overarching question.
- All arguments are based on a particular selection of evidence, and thinking about what was deliberately *not* included is as important as thinking about what *was*.
- Think about how you are approaching the text as a reader. Try and *think like a believer* and *think like a doubter* and see how that affects your view on the argument.

- Consider possible alternative approaches, methods or interpretations. Looking at the paths not taken will help you to evaluate the path that was.
- Think about the purpose of any argument and the assumptions underlying it to see if this suggests any counterarguments. All arguments exist within particular contexts, and considering these contexts will help you to explore different approaches.
- Everything discussed here applies equally to your own arguments as it does to the arguments of others. It is as important to be critical and open to challenge when producing your own work as it is when approaching the work of others.

FURTHER READING

Chapter 4: How to criticise arguments from Bonnett, Alistair, *How to Argue*, 2nd edn (Pearson, Harlow, 2008).

Metcalfe, Mike, *Reading Critically at University* (Sage, London, 2008).

NOTE

1. For a more detailed exploration of this example, see Rush (2020).