

Mill argues that presenting the opposing viewpoint is necessary to establish truth. He claims that if an opposing view does not exist, it must be created. This is called playing the devil's advocate: To understand the doctrine which you profess, you must throw yourself into the mental position of those who think differently from you and considered what such persons might have to say. As Mill writes: "So essential is this discipline to a real understanding of moral and human subjects, that if opponents of all important truths do not exist, it is indispensable to imagine them, and supply them with the strongest arguments which the most skillful devil's advocate can conjure up."

How to Implement the Activity

List popular opinions, then write/type them for all students to see. Choose opinions of which your students have some knowledge. You can have the students supply you with the opinions they either hold or are aware of, then, if you so choose, add any popular opinions you are aware of that have gone unidentified. Here are some examples:

- The requirement to wear face masks due to COVID-19 unjustly hinders individual liberty.
- The federal government should pass a law banning hate speech.
- The hanging or flying of the Confederate flag by private businesses should be illegal.
- A civics test, like what is required for foreign-born citizens, should be required to vote in all elections.
- College should be free for all who are accepted to a 2- or 4-year degree program.

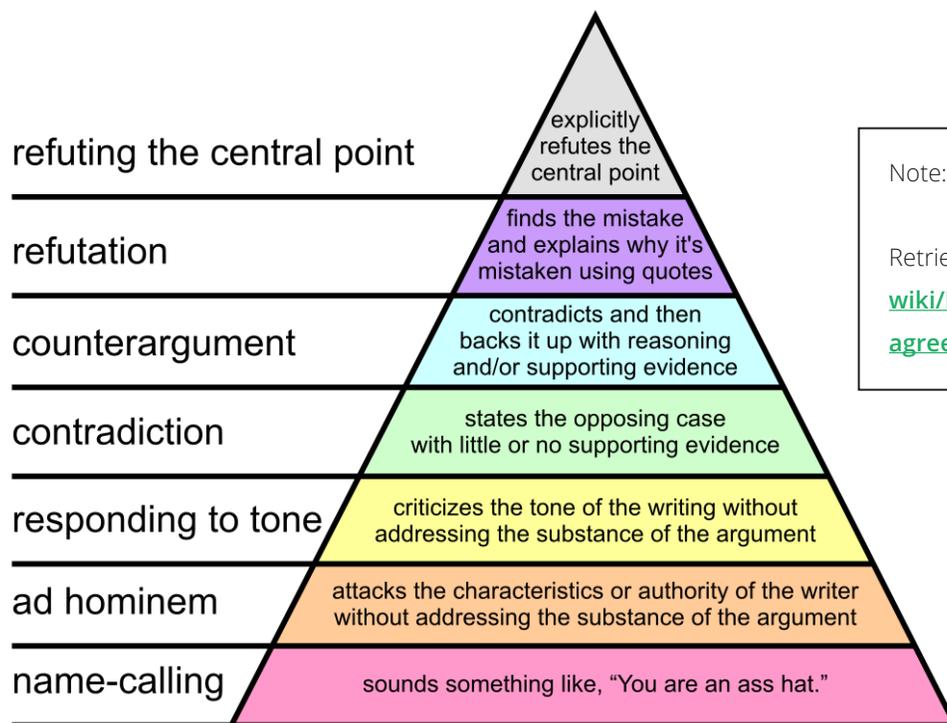
Activity instructions:

- 1. Show and describe the pyramid below** to teach students the different layers of argumentation, with name-calling being the weakest form of argument. (The pyramid is for writing but can be easily applied to dialogue.)
- 2. Tell your students they must take a stand on each issue**—either agree or disagree—but they are welcome to switch sides at any time, given new evidence.
- 3. Have students show their agreement/disagreement** by walking to a designated spot in the classroom, or with an online course, by holding up a sign indicating their agreement/disagreement. If students object to taking a stand on every issue through the binary choices of agree or disagree, remind them that the activity is practice for how best to develop strong positions to support their own opinions and seek truth.
- 4. Once the students have taken a position, ask them to articulate the opposing view** (or the heretical opinion) to where their classmates who support the view can say, "You have it correct." Instruct them to do this by presenting a "steel man" argument of the opposing view: the calmness to see and honestly state the opposing position in a manner with which you would agree. In other words, be [intellectually charitable](#). Students can either do this as a group or individually, depending on the size and structure, such as online versus in-person, of your class.

What it means to be intellectually charitable:

- Tell students to engage with the strongest form of a position with which they disagree: Try to acknowledge, when possible, how the opinion you disagree with may be right—in part or in full.
- Tell them to look for reasons the opinion may be compelling, under the assumption that others are roughly as reasonable, informed, and intelligent as you.

Spend time modeling the strongest form of argumentation before the activity, such as modeling ideal word choice and civil dialogue, and during the activity, if students resort to lower forms of argumentation. During the activity, act as the facilitator by helping students locate any blind spots—do this by playing the devil's advocate yourself—and ensuring the dialogue is good-natured.



Note: **Graham's Hierarchy of Disagreement**
 Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Graham%27s_Hierarchy_of_Disagreement.svg

Activity Extension

Have students practice taking the opposing view by completing the following assignment. This assignment may be completed in class or for homework.

Assignment directions:

1. Regarding your own social or political views, what is one belief **you** have that you think is misunderstood by many others today? Write this view in one to two paragraphs.
2. Next, steel man the opposing view. In other words, articulate what the **other side** sincerely means (from their viewpoint) when they disagree with you. Try to describe their side **more** clearly than they can.