

# Undermining Your Opponent & How To Defend Yourself

## Description

This article discusses practical tactics that can be used to undermine your opponent's credibility. It also discusses how you can fight back if someone is undermining your credibility. Fundamentally, undermining an argument or an individual means you point out ways they could be inadequate, wrong, or misinformed. Undermining can be a form of [character assassination](#).

## The Strategy

A person or institution's credibility rests on two things, competence and social perception. This means a person could be very good at their job but still have little credibility if they have a poor social perception. The reverse is also true. Credibility attacks are very similar to character attacks.

We are going to use some trial attorney techniques since they are the only profession that consistently requires undermining people with opposing opinions. If you are interested in learning more, check out this [deposition book](#) we used as a reference.

## Tactics For Undermining

Undermining the person can appear to be an ad homonym fallacy. However, it is only a fallacy if the attack is irrelevant to the argument. Sometimes the person's character or qualifications effect how much weight we should place on what they say. Thus the best tactics for undermining the person focus on pointing out the ways they could possibly be wrong.

Remember to focus on the values of the social group. If you show that a person is lazy, but the social group doesn't care, your attack will have been in vain. Only attack characteristics that give a person [social power](#). See also [minimizing](#).

Undermining the argument can either take the form of undermining the evidence or the way the premises support the conclusion. If you undermine the premise, you are showing how that statement is less likely to be true. If you undermine the way the premises support the conclusion, you are showing that different conclusions could be drawn from those premises.

The most important thing you can do when you are trying to undermine a person or argument is to have a narrative plan. The narrative plan is the story you will be trying to tell with your questions and comments. Lawyers use a [version](#) of this when they prepare to go into a deposition. First they research the evidence related to the case and decide the story they want to tell that is most advantageous to their position. When depositions are performed, the lawyers ask questions to get answers the support their planned narrative. Ultimately this could result in the lawyer asking the witness these questions on the stand in order to tell a persuasive story to the jury. You want to do the same thing when you seek to undermine someone. Think of their weaknesses. Then ask questions to demonstrate those

weaknesses. Remember your job is to use questions and comments to tell a persuasive story so [powerful that everyone starts seeing that person](#) through your narrative.

Here are some general tactics that undermine the person or argument.

1. **Show or imply bias.** One way to [discredit or undermine what someone](#) is saying is to imply that they are biased. Do they have a family reason for thinking something? Does their income depend on people thinking or acting a certain way? Do they have a past history of supporting a cause in exchange for financial returns via connections, referrals, or money? Have they put in time and effort to prove something is true? For example, who is more likely to easily change their mind about the results of a study? A random person on the street or the scientist who sunk years of their life into the research? Are they the mother of the accused?
2. **Point out incoherence.** Maybe the person remembers how hot it was outside after the crash but they don't remember what country or state they were driving in. Are there facts that their plan or argument doesn't explain? How can you make those facts seem more important and threatening? Other people's opinions can undermine a person's argument. What have other people said about the person or argument that can be used to break down their perception of support? Another strategy you can use to point out incoherence is to create your own contradiction. Simply ask them a leading question that contradicts what they have said earlier. Say your friend says they saw you at the mall late Tuesday afternoon, but the mall is five hours away. You could ask, "so you were at home making dinner early Tuesday night, right?" Then point out the incoherence. You can also use analogies to draw contradictions. "It is safer to shoot a gun with two hands right?" "Yes." "Wouldn't it have been safer to drive the car with two hands?"
3. **Circumstances.** Emotions can [severely distort memories](#). Ask the person if they were feeling any strong emotions during the event. Do they have any emotional attachment to the topic? Similarly if someone is in a hurry, drunk, stressed, or preoccupied, they are less likely to remember details. Ask questions about the circumstances and procedures that were happening at the time. For example, ask what the person was intending to do in that circumstance. Would you believe someone remembered the color on the robber's watch if they were rushing their child to the hospital? You can also attack circumstances that happened long ago. How would someone remember specific things about an even that happened so long ago? Did they write it down? Did they talk about it? How could they remember such a routine event? What made it stick out?
4. **Attack character directly.** Do they have a past of lying, cheating, lazy research, or dogmatism? Any of these things make it harder to believe someone is telling the truth about something. Do they regularly change their opinions? How do you know they won't change their opinion this time? Do they never change their opinions? If so, is it more likely that they are never wrong or just too stubborn to admit it when they are? Try asking the person what is the last time they changed their opinion. Regardless of their answer you win. Additionally you can point out that the person doesn't have any qualifications. Does the person have a degree? Have they ever been paid to know what they are talking about in that field? "So your degree and job is in computer science, but you are commenting on astronomy. How can we know what you are saying is even correct? Is it possible you could be wrong?"
5. **They didn't do their research.** One technique that is very useful in daily conversations is to ask the person if they are familiar with what the other side would say about their argument. Either they give good arguments against their original argument or they don't know what the other side would say in any sort of detail. Why would you believe someone who hasn't spent much time studying both ways of looking at a problem? Similarly you can ask about the risks or downfalls of

the plan. They will either list the risks or they will say there aren't any. What is the last time you ever participated in a project that didn't have any down sides or risks?

6. Get them **explaining**. Whoever is explaining is giving the other person opportunities to poke holes in their argument. Since people rarely strategize out what they will say before hand, you probably won't have to wait long for them to make a misstep. Try asking "What led you to think X?" Then keep asking that over and over until you spot a problem.
7. Occasionally **pointing out logical fallacies** can cause people to take someone's argument less seriously. Typically this only persuades people with backgrounds in science or logic. Did they straw man the argument? Did they appeal to an inappropriate authority? Did they review the statistics of the study that they are citing? Do they know the "P" value? Check out [how to lie with statistics](#) for more information on the questions you should ask. View this [article](#) about how flexibility in data collection and analysis allow you to basically make up your own conclusions.
8. You can use an **X Y reframe** here as well. Instead of directly undermining the person, show that their argument actually supports something else they don't like. Show their argument actually means something they didn't expect.
9. The **over complicate strategy**. Sometimes your opponent's argument is correct but [too complicated](#) for a lay audience. Undermine their presentation by asking questions to make it seem way more complicated than it really is. Remember that the [brain has a limited amount of working memory](#) so just fill it up with irrelevant details.
10. You can undermine an argument simply by **delaying its application**. Instead of saying why the argument is wrong, simply say there are more important things to decide right now.
11. Finally you can **increase the burden of proof**. Simply say that they haven't presented enough evidence to convince you of their argument's accuracy.
12. Attack the **sources** they use. Are the sources easily editable like Wikipedia? Are the opinions from non peer reviewed documents? Are the transcripts open for multiple people to edit?
13. Attack the way **results of tests or procedures** were obtained. Were the procedures irregular, what was the sample error, is the methodology unbiased, reliable, and repeatable? Who else has echoed the same sentiment? What are the inherent uncertainties in statistical assertions? Was the investigation untimely, incomplete, or not finished by the same person?
14. Directly attack **specialized knowledge**. Sometimes you are talking to someone who is skilled in the area. They use this experience to convince people they are right. Attack the experience they project by pointing out inadequate elements in their training, experience, education, missing industry stamps, or overly academic background. Find conflicting authorities to undermine their opinion. Ask if they are aware of other opinions that disagree. Does the industry use their information as a standard to teach from?
15. Focus on **exceptions** or qualifications to their argument. Most statements have situations where they don't apply. Focus the audience on these things by asking questions that point out limitations on what they have said. Challenge words like generally, usually, most, and some.
16. Introduce an **alternative narrative**. How do we know which narrative is more credible or plausible? For example scriptures argue that morality comes from god. Nietzsche argued that it came from man. How do we know which is more plausible? See our article on [frames](#) for how to craft a good alternative narrative.
17. Leverage people's desire to **focus on the negative**. Say "I wouldn't want to imagine what that does to x." This gets people focusing on the negative and allows you to avoid making an argument in support of something.

When you are attacking a person's character, recollections, or argument, think about targeting the

following things: knowledge (expert or not), state of mind (were they emotional, scared, tired), perceptions (do they have good vision), recollections (were they distracted), actions, opinions, environment (was it rainy), motive (mother of the person who died), history (are they a liar, do they jump to conclusions, were they a poor student), and corroboration (no one else agrees with you).

If the person realizes what you are doing and starts evading your questions, simply say “What could you possibly be hiding by not answering the question?”

## How To Stop Undermining

If someone is undermining you, especially at work, you need to fight back. If you don't your reputation will get destroyed. There are two primary strategies. First you can ignore and filibuster. Second you can draw out their argument and attack it.

Additionally the best way to stop it is to catch it before it ever begins. Learn to spot bitterness and undermining. Look for excessive praise or irritation when you succeed.

### The Deny Strategy

You can use the deny and filibuster strategy first. When someone asks an undermining question or makes an undermining statement, you can simply disagree with what they said and then start talking. If you speak long enough, people will only remember that you disagree with the individual. Since the brain has a [limited portion of working memory](#), they might not remember what was being disagreed with in the first place. This strategy's weakness is that some people may remember and think you weren't listening to what the person said. Second it could bore people.

### The Draw Them Out Strategy

A better strategy is to swap places with the other person. Instead of them attacking your argument, attack theirs. Get them explaining. You do this by [drawing out their argument](#) (Sun Tzu 4.1-4.2). Ask what they think is a better decision. Ask them why. as they explain each facet, keep asking them to explain different portions of their argument. For example you might say “why do you think the car will break down?” They would say because it makes funny noises. You'd respond “do you think that all cars that make funny noises break down? Keep drilling down into their argument until you find an assumption or a point of incoherence. This strategy can backfire if it turns out that the person has good reasons for their belief.

The next strategy works well when used in conjunction with the last. Simply get them explaining and then say their argument isn't strong enough to convince you. Since you are the one in control of what level of evidence you require to change your mind, you can always lower or increase that bar. “I hear what you are saying but I'm not convinced yet. I need more evidence.” This can backfire if they have a well thought out argument since you can look unnecessarily stubborn.

The best way to stop undermining is to simply show them where they went wrong. Demonstrate their mistake in reasoning and no one can undermine you. If done correctly, this makes you look more competent.

Finally you can attack the costs or implications of their version of events. If you accept their plan, what are the associated costs? What other effects have they not foreseen?

**Category**

1. Manipulation

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