

Seven Weaken Patterns You Should Recognize

Start with the gap between the evidence and the conclusion. A weakener supplies information that makes that gap more damaging.

PATTERN	THE AUTHOR'S MOVE	THE GAP	EVALUATE QUESTION	WHAT THE WEAKENER DOES
1 A Competing Explanation	Credits one cause for something observed, such as a difference between groups or a change over time.	The same result could have another cause, and the evidence does not rule that cause out.	Could something other than the author's cause have produced this result?	Shows that another plausible cause was present in this particular situation.
2 Results from Different Situations	Uses a difference in results to conclude that one person, product, or method is worse.	The results came from different circumstances, so they may not support a fair comparison.	Did both sides produce their results under comparable circumstances?	Shows a relevant difference in circumstances that could explain the difference in results.
3 A Broad Claim from a Narrow Indicator	Judges a quality that cannot be measured directly, such as commitment, by a stand-in, such as attendance.	The stand-in may capture only part of what the author wants to judge.	Does the stand-in leave out something relevant to what the author wants to judge?	Shows that the stand-in differs from the quality it is supposed to measure, so it is less trustworthy.
4 Disanalogous Populations Being Compared	Takes a result found in one group and applies it to a different group.	The author has not shown that the two groups are alike in the ways that matter for the result.	Is there a difference between the groups that could change the result?	Shows a relevant difference between the groups, so the original result says little about the new group.
5 An Overlooked Tradeoff	Recommends an option because it provides a particular benefit.	The author weighs the benefit but not what the option costs or requires giving up.	Would the costs or losses of this option outweigh its benefit?	Shows a cost, a loss, or a better alternative that choosing this option would give up.
6 A Broken Link in the Chain	Predicts a result from a sequence in which one event leads to another.	The prediction requires every step to occur, and the author has not shown that each one will.	Will each step actually lead to the next one?	Shows that one step may not lead to the next, so the sequence may never reach the result.
7 An Unsettled Prerequisite	Proposes a method for resolving a question.	The method works only if another issue is already settled, and the author treats it as settled.	Can the judgment the method depends on actually be made reliably?	Shows that the required judgment is disputed or difficult to make, so the method cannot resolve the question.