

CERCA Writing Strategy

Claim · Evidence · Reasoning · Counterargument · Audience

Student example — completed as if by a college freshman or sophomore. Written with genuine effort but not perfect in every detail.

NAME	PROMPT / POLITICAL QUESTION	DATE
Jordan T.	Should the United States adopt ranked-choice voting for federal elections?	April 22, 2025

C

C — Claim

State your position clearly and completely in one to two sentences. An arguable assertion, not a fact or a question.

The United States should adopt ranked-choice voting for all federal elections because it produces winners with broader public support, reduces the polarizing effect of negative campaigning, and eliminates the “spoiler effect” that discourages voters from supporting candidates outside the two major parties.

I had to rewrite this twice. My first version was “Ranked-choice voting is a better system” which is too vague. I think this version is clearer, but I’m not totally sure whether putting three reasons in the claim makes it too long.

E

E — Evidence

Provide specific facts, data, examples, or quotes. Evidence must be credible and relevant — not just opinion.

Evidence 1:

Maine became the first U.S. state to use ranked-choice voting in federal elections in 2018, and Alaska adopted it in 2020. Post-election surveys in both states consistently showed high voter satisfaction, with majorities reporting that the ballot was easy to understand.

Evidence 2:

In a standard plurality election, a candidate can win with well under 50% of the vote when three or more candidates split the electorate. In the 1992 presidential election, Bill Clinton won with only 43% of the popular vote because third-party candidate Ross Perot drew 19% away from the field. RCV prevents this by requiring the eventual winner to build majority support through successive rounds of counting.

Evidence 3:

A 2020 study by researchers at Ithaca College found that candidates in RCV elections ran significantly fewer negative advertisements than candidates in plurality elections, because attacking an opponent risks alienating the voters whose second-choice support you need to win.

I found the Ithaca College study through a news article — I should track down the original before using this in a formal paper. The Maine and Alaska data I'm more confident about.

R — Reasoning

R

Explain the logical connection between your evidence and your claim. This is where your analysis lives — do not just restate the evidence.

How Evidence 1 supports the claim:

The successful use of RCV in Maine and Alaska demonstrates that this is not a theoretical improvement — it is a proven, workable system that American voters can learn and use. The high satisfaction rates directly challenge the argument that RCV is too complicated. If voters in two states with very different demographics found the system accessible, there is no principled reason it could not function nationally.

How Evidence 2 supports the claim:

The 1992 election illustrates exactly the problem RCV solves. When voters fear that supporting their preferred candidate will split the vote and hand victory to their least-preferred candidate, they vote strategically rather than honestly — what political scientists call “voting against” rather than “voting for.” RCV eliminates this dilemma by allowing voters to rank their true first choice without worrying that doing so wastes their vote. Election outcomes would more accurately reflect what voters actually want.

How Evidence 3 supports the claim:

The reduction in negative advertising under RCV suggests the system changes not just how votes are counted but how campaigns are conducted. A system that structurally incentivizes candidates to appeal broadly rather than mobilize a narrow base through attack politics would likely reduce the kind of polarization that many Americans identify as the most serious problem in U.S. politics today.

C — Counterargument

C

Acknowledge the strongest objection to your claim. Then respond to it directly. Engaging opposing views strengthens your argument.

The opposing argument:

Critics of ranked-choice voting argue that it is unnecessarily complicated, and that voters — particularly older voters and those with lower levels of formal education — may find ranking multiple candidates confusing, increasing ballot errors and effectively disenfranchising the people the system claims to help. Opponents also cite the 2022 New York City mayoral primary, in which RCV led to significant delays in announcing results, as evidence that the system undermines public confidence in elections.

My response to the counterargument:

These concerns deserve serious engagement. The evidence from Maine and Alaska shows that voter confusion is manageable with proper public education, and ballot error rates in those states were not significantly higher than in traditional elections. The New York City delay resulted largely from inadequate preparation and outdated voting infrastructure, not a flaw in RCV itself. A federal rollout would require investment in voter education and updated systems — but those are implementation challenges, not arguments against the principle of more representative elections.

I think I handled the complexity argument okay but I glossed over the equity concern about lower-education communities. That's a real argument and I should engage it more directly rather than just saying voter education can fix it.

A

A — Audience

Identify who you are writing for. Explain how your audience's values, concerns, and likely objections shape your argument.

Who is my audience?

Members of Congress — specifically the House Committee on House Administration, which oversees federal election law. This audience includes supporters and skeptics of electoral reform alike, and many have a direct political interest in preserving the current system because they won their seats under it.

How does my audience shape my argument?

Because my audience includes politicians who may benefit from the current plurality system, I frame RCV as an improvement to democratic legitimacy rather than a partisan advantage. I emphasize bipartisan examples (Maine is a divided state; Alaska leans Republican) and focus on reducing negative campaigning, which members of both parties publicly oppose. I avoid framing this as a “Democrat vs. Republican” issue because that framing would immediately lose half the room.

Language and tone choices:

Formal but accessible. I avoid academic jargon and acknowledge implementation concerns, because this audience will not be persuaded by an argument that dismisses practical objections. I lead with democratic principles rather than partisan data.

This section was the hardest. I kept wanting to write “my audience is my professor” but the point is to imagine a real-world audience and think about what would actually persuade them. That’s a different kind of thinking.

D

Full Draft

Written from the CERCA organizer above. Each paragraph maps to one component.

The United States should adopt ranked-choice voting for all federal elections because it produces winners with broader public support, reduces the polarizing effect of negative campaigning, and eliminates the “spoiler effect” that discourages voters from supporting candidates outside the two major parties.

The evidence that RCV works in practice already exists within the United States. Maine adopted ranked-choice voting for federal elections in 2018, followed by Alaska in 2020. Post-election surveys in both states found high voter satisfaction and broad agreement that the ballot was manageable. A 2020 Ithaca College study found that candidates in RCV races ran substantially fewer negative ads than candidates in plurality races — a direct consequence of needing second-choice votes. History also illustrates what is lost without RCV: in 1992, Bill Clinton won the presidency with just 43 percent of the popular vote because Ross Perot split the electorate, leaving a majority of voters represented by someone they ranked below their first choice.

This evidence matters because it demonstrates that the problems RCV addresses are not hypothetical. A system that allows a candidate to win with a plurality rather than a majority structurally disadvantages voters whose preferred candidate draws support from a similar alternative. RCV corrects this by letting voters express their true preferences without fear of wasting their vote. The reduction in negative campaigning is equally significant: if the design of a voting system can structurally incentivize broad appeals rather than narrow attacks, it is a reform worth serious consideration by anyone who believes polarization is a problem in American democracy.

Critics raise legitimate concerns about complexity. The 2022 New York City mayoral primary, which used RCV for the first time, was followed by delays and public confusion. Some argue the ballot format creates an unequal burden on older voters and communities with less access to civic education. These objections deserve a serious response. The New York City delays resulted primarily from inadequate preparation and aging infrastructure — not a flaw in RCV. Maine and Alaska conducted RCV elections without comparable disruption, and ballot error rates remained within normal ranges. A federal adoption would require investment in voter education and updated systems — manageable implementation challenges, not principled objections to more representative elections.

This argument is addressed to members of Congress responsible for federal election law — an audience with varied and sometimes conflicting interests in electoral reform. The case for RCV is therefore framed around democratic legitimacy rather than partisan advantage. The examples drawn from Maine and Alaska are intentional: both states have cross-partisan political cultures, demonstrating this is not a reform that serves one party at another's expense. A federal election system that produces majority winners, reduces incentives for negative campaigning, and allows voters to express genuine preferences without strategic calculation would strengthen the legitimacy of American democracy at a moment when that legitimacy faces serious strain.

Overall this draft is solid but the counterargument paragraph still feels rushed compared to the others. I want to add a specific statistic on ballot error rates in Maine before turning in a final version.



Self-Check Before Submitting

Review every item. If you cannot check it, revise before you submit.

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|---|---|
| ✓ My claim is specific and arguable — not a fact or a question | ✓ I included at least two pieces of credible, specific evidence |
| ✓ I explained how each piece of evidence connects to my claim | ✓ I identified and fairly stated the strongest counterargument |
| ✓ I responded to the counterargument without dismissing it | ✓ I identified a specific audience beyond “my teacher” |
| ✓ I explained how my audience shaped my language and framing | ■ My reasoning analyzes the evidence — not just restates it |
| ■ I revised at least one section after completing the organizer | ✓ Each paragraph in my draft maps to a CERCA component |



Reflection

What did you do well? What would you improve with more time?

I did well at:

The reasoning section — I actually explained the spoiler effect and why it matters instead of just restating the evidence. The audience section also pushed me to think about framing in a way I don't usually do. Choosing Congress as my audience made me realize I needed to keep the argument bipartisan, which changed how I wrote almost every paragraph.

I would improve:

My counterargument response. I addressed the NYC primary delay okay but I glossed over the equity concern about lower-education communities. That's a serious argument and I should have engaged it more directly. Next time I want to spend more time on the counterargument than on any other section.