The “Gray” Exercise:  
Reconsidering a Position/the Opposition

In my courses, when students write argumentative research papers they spend a good deal of time in the inquiry process before they settle on a working position/thesis on which to center the paper; they also know (or, at least, I remind them) that this thesis is/should be fluid and subject to change. As a way both of getting them to test their certainty in their tentative thesis/position and of getting them to consider differing viewpoints, I do the following exercise in class. (Words in quotation marks are roughly the directions I give aloud.)

“Write/type your working thesis at the top of the page. Then, assume the voice of someone who does not agree with your thesis. Write, in that voice, several paragraphs outlining the reasons for this disagreement.” [Allow approximately 10 to 12 minutes]

“Now, on a separate sheet of paper/on a new document, write down/type the three most effective/persuasive arguments this ‘voice’ had against your position.” [3 minutes]

[Pair students up; then:] “Give your partner the list of opposing viewpoints to your thesis [or, in a computer lab, switch seats]. Decide who will be Person A and Person B.” [Shuffling of papers and mumbling of, “Do you want to go first?” here.]

“Person A has Person B’s opposition points in hand. Person A will read these points to Person B one at a time. After each point is read, Person B will respond in the following manner [gesture to sentences written on the board]:

That is a good point because ________________________.
However, ________________________.
What do you think about that point?

In the first blank, Person B will offer a genuine concession or understanding of the opposing view; state why this may be a valid claim, how it does call your own claims into question, etc. In the second blank, Person B will offer some sort of defense back against this “good point.” You may discover that the good point is so good that you can’t or don’t want to rebut it completely. Finally, Person B will ask, “What do you think about that point?” to get any additional feedback from Person A. Throughout this process, Person B should be taking notes of what both people say.

Repeat this process for each of Person B’s remaining opposing points, then switch—Person B reads Person A’s opposition points while Person A responds in the “That’s a good point because….However…” format.”