

# Yale Department of English

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English 114 Guide  
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# Writing Academic Argument

## What is Academic Writing? <sup>1</sup>

Writing is a social practice. Though you might think of each essay written in English 114 as a solo performance, you are in fact joining a conversation with other writers and thinkers who share your interests. Additionally, the feedback you receive from your classmates, writings tutors, and your instructor contribute to the dynamism of this social activity. You will notice, too, that whether the works you study in Writing Seminars, represent ideas textually, visually, or through some other mode, they also participate in exchanges with others. Any text then, can be viewed as a response to something that precedes it, and that response might involve supporting, challenging, and/or extending what has already been said.

*This guide defines academic writing and identifies some key moves to help you join the conversation.*

# The First Move:

## *Giving Each Text Its Due*

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We incorporate external sources into our argument for different reasons. Some texts might provide important evidence, offer a model for the structure or the method of the argument, or help us define a key concept. Others might serve more directly as conversation partners. As a writer, you have a responsibility to represent the ideas of others fairly and accurately, to acknowledge how others' thinking or methods might have influenced your own—to “give each text its due.”<sup>2</sup> This means that you will need to **credit your sources**. You can consult the section “Using Sources” on the Poorvu CTL website for guidance on how to do this: <https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/using-sources>.

Giving the texts their due also involves understanding the relationships between different interlocutors or speakers in a conversation. You will need to determine if there is a general consensus among the speakers and *how* opinions might be divided. Pay attention both to links and resemblances between different speakers' ideas and approaches to their argument as well as what differentiates one writer's idea from another.

Assignments such as the “**Controlled-Research Argument Essay**” and the “**Annotated Bibliography**” are crafted to help you map out the relations among different speakers in an ongoing academic conversation. You might think of these assignments as scaffolds, important steps that help you progress towards the larger goal of intervening in the discussions that are meaningful to you.

As you analyze texts that you might have gathered for your research, you might notice that even writers who belong on the same side of a debate will still have significant differences among them. This means that when you define the relationship between texts that share a similar perspective, you want to do more than highlight their similarities. You should be able to articulate the importance of the connections you have identified. It is also important that you remain attuned to the possibility of difference even among writers who agree. They may differ in their approaches, the questions they ask, the rhetorical context or situation to which their arguments respond, the principles of reasoning that support their argument, and the methods and pre-existing knowledge that guide their research.

With a good understanding of the existing conversation, its participants, and the various relations between their ideas, you will be better able to evaluate the limits of others' arguments and create a path to enter the conversation yourself.

# The Second Move: *Advancing the Conversation*

An essay that is only about the gaps or limits of another person's argument does not move the conversation along. That is not to say that you cannot take a firm position on a subject, but we engage with the ideas of others to enhance and complicate our own thinking, to open new lines of inquiry, and to arrive at new conclusions. This also means that when you while you interact with others' ideas, you want to emphasize your own voice and insights. Academic argumentation requires that you take what has been done before in a *new direction* or give it a *new spin*—your own.



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You will notice that the texts you examine address subjects that have long been in circulation. When you take up the same subjects and **raise new questions** about them, you are revising these conversations. The following section offers three possibilities for responding to an argument. Although Graff, Birkenstein, and Durst describe these responses as agreement, disagreement, and a combination of both, this guide defines the moves as **supporting, challenging, and extending** to emphasize the student's role in **transforming the conversation**.<sup>3</sup>

# Three Responses to An Argument

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**Support:** You can respond to another writer's argument by taking a *similar stance* on a question or issue raised by their writing. Though you might share a similar perspective or align your own motives with the writer's, you can still *add something different* to the discussion. For example, you might be aware of neglected reasons and evidence that ultimately support the argument but create *new insights* on the topic. It is also possible to agree with a writer's position and realize that the implications of their argument need to be more fully considered. In effect, you can agree and still explore a point of difference.

**Challenge:** You might intervene in an academic conversation by challenging a writer's assertions. This involves more than offering the opposite view or playing devil's advocate. A claim that challenges another writer's ideas must *be grounded on good reasons and evidence*, and you must be able to *explain the significance* of the different opinions that you offer. It is also possible that you might agree with one or more aspects of the writer's argument and disagree fundamentally with others. You should be clear to your readers about how your own complex take on the issue *advances* the conversation.

**Extend:** You further an argument by addressing a gap or tension that the writer overlooks or by updating old ideas and methods based on new research. Or, you might analyze the ideas within new context(s), or *redefine or broaden the meaning of a key concept*. With this move, the gap or limit of the writer's ideas becomes a *springboard* for your own. If you choose to analyze a text within a new theoretical context, for example, you need to be able to identify what *changes* because of this *new focus*.

While supporting, challenging, and extending an argument offer three distinct ways for you to respond to others' ideas, a single essay can combine different moves based on the scope of the argument, the complexity of the questions and tensions the essay engages, and the solutions or answers those problems require.<sup>4</sup>



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### *Try it out*

Find a journal article either on your own or one that was assigned for your class. Try to identify the writer's conversation partners. *How* does the writer position their argument in relation to what comes before? Can you *identify the different rhetorical moves* they make in their argument, whether they are supporting, challenging, or extending the ideas of others? *How* do they make the moves you have identified?

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# Notes

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1. This guide was adapted from Joseph Harris, *Rewriting: How to Do things with Texts*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2017) and informed by readings in theories of genre including, M.M Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Trans. Vern McGee. Ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1986) and Charles Bazerman, and Paul Prior, editors, "Speech Acts. Genres, and Activity Systems: How Texts Organize Activity and People," *What Writing Does and How it Does it: An Introduction to Analyzing Texts and Textual Practices* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Erlbaum, 2004) 309-39.
2. Harris also calls this move "coming to terms" with another person's work. He sees this move as a negotiation between the reader and writer. You are not only representing the other person's ideas by quoting, paraphrasing, or summarizing what they have said, but you are also signaling how you will use their work in your own project. What you chose to focus on in another text will be informed by the direction your own project will take. See Harris, *Rewriting*, 16.
3. See Gerald Graff, Cathy Birkenstein, and Russel Durst, *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012).
4. See Mary Soliday, *Writing Assignments Across the Disciplines* (Southern Illinois UP, 2011) and Mariolina Salvatori, "Conversations with Texts: Reading in the Teaching of Composition." *College English*, vol. 58. 4 (1996): 440-54.

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