Forwarding, Countering, and Taking an Approach
Three Ways to Enter and Extend a Scholarly Conversation
UVM Graduate Writing Center

Coming to terms with prior research in order to advance your own work is one of the most important and frequent writing tasks graduate students face — a common example is the literature review. No matter your discipline, you will often find yourself facing the task of bringing together the research you’ve done and introducing your own voice into the mix. Here are some general strategies to help you think about how to synthesize research into your writing without losing your own voice!

Forwarding
This comes from the understanding that academic writing is like entering a conversation that began before you arrived. You can’t have the first word, and you have to figure out where the conversation currently is in order to enter it.

Forwarding is a writing “move” in which you take an idea, concept or finding that someone else has expressed and use it to introduce your own new or different idea. Much like an actual conversation, it is smoother to borrow a phrase that someone just said to introduce your own idea, rather than introducing it as a non-sequitur. “Speaking of X, I’ve been thinking about XY…” The goal is to pull the most useful ideas from your research into your own paper, letting them serve as the foundation upon which your build/develop your own ideas. Again, like an actual conversation, the tone here is agreement; you are pulling your audience along with you towards your idea because you’re all on the same side: “Yes, X, mhm… and XY too!”

Countering
When it comes to working in your own voice, Countering — pointing out how someone else’s work is “wrong” or how your work contradicts it — would seem to be the most obvious way to do it. A question to keep in the foreground, however, is: does it actually help advance your work? The key is to Counter carefully (and respectfully), and not let it distract you from your main focus: getting your own point across. Successful Countering is often focused on details, and there are three main ways to go about it:

1) Arguing the other side. If someone said “X is wrong,” you can argue that “perhaps we need to reconsider whether X might be, in some ways, right.” And vice versa.
2) Uncovering values. “This person said ‘X is wrong,’ but I think they’re talking about ‘X’ in this particular way / they didn’t explore this aspect of ‘X’, and there are other ways of understanding ‘X’ that might show it to be right.”
3) Dissenting. This is where you take issue with an accepted premise that leads to an argument or idea you are countering. “Many scholars seem to agree that ‘X’ is wrong, largely because they accept that ‘Y’ is right. However, what if ‘Y’ isn’t totally correct? Then we would need to take a fresh look at ‘X.’
Taking an Approach

When you’re working to find your own voice amidst the research, there are three main ways to carve yourself out some space.

1) Acknowledging influences. To avoid drowning in other authors’ or researchers’ work, you can make clear at the outset of your writing how their work has influenced your own. This can help to invoke their ideas/reputation while allowing you more space to move on and write in your own voice, without feeling the need to constantly quote theirs.

2) Turning an approach in on itself. If you’re dealing with some very strong voices in your writing, you can assert your voice by turning that author’s questions/strategies back on themselves. If person 1 is asking “Why is everyone doing ‘x’?” You can say, “Good point. Let’s consider how person 1 does ‘x’ as well.”

3) Reflexivity. You can also do this to yourself! Noting and reflecting upon what you’re writing about and how you’re writing about it can strengthen your presence in the text. Consider your method, what values/assumptions you might be bringing to the table, and how you made choices about the language you’re using. Explain why you’re doing what you’re doing. Who could do it better than you?

As you consider your place in the conversation of research, don’t forget that you’re a key player in that conversation!
You may not get the first word, but it’s your turn to speak!

These tips are derived from (and we strongly recommend for further reading):