



University of Vermont Graduate Writing Center

Forwarding, Illustrating, Countering, & Taking an Approach

Coming to terms with prior research or scholarship in order to advance your own work—that is, entering and contributing to a scholarly discussion—is one of the most important and frequent writing tasks graduate students face. 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 that arise 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 and make your contribution.

Forwarding

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 you 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, ... and XY too!”

Illustrating

Any time you write or imply “For example” or “For instance,” you are orchestrating a conversation through illustration. You might (to give one example) write that there is wide agreement among researchers that X is a problem or Y is beneficial and then cite and describe specific examples from the literature. You might also draw on examples not just from the existing literature but from your own research, observations, and experience. Here too, the tone is generally *agreement* as you teach your audience about a concept, idea, or problem through example and illustration.

Countering

Countering—pointing out how someone else’s work is “wrong” or how your work contradicts it—would seem the most obvious way to enter a conversation. But the key is to counter carefully and respectfully. Successful countering can involve:

- *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.
- *Uncovering values or assumptions.* “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.”
- *Dissenting.* Here 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

You can also create a space for your voice and project amidst powerful influences by

- *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.
- *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 falls prey to doing X as well."
- *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, especially in humanities and social science fields where feminist and other standpoints, research ethics, subjective responses, or collaborative/participatory research approaches are valued or are a topic of concern. Reflect on your method, on your socio-cultural standpoint, on the values/assumptions you might be bringing to the table, and on your language choices.

Use Color-Coding to Track Your Voice

Don't forget that you're a key player in that conversation! You will want and need to acknowledge the discussion so far and important influences, but it's also your turn to speak! Color-coding can help you see when, where, and how much you are drawing on others' work and when, where, and how much you are joining and advancing the conversation.

- **Take a highlighter** and read through your draft, highlighting all the places where you refer to, quote from, or write from the influence and contribution of someone else's work. Reflect too on how you're showing or not showing that you're working with another's text/influence.
 - *If you realize you haven't acknowledged the other voices and texts that have informed these moments in your project, here's an area to tackle next.*
- Read the draft again and **with a different highlight color** mark those places where you're drawing on your own resources—experiments, primary sources, first-hand experience, observation, expertise—or where you are advancing your own interpretation or perspective.
 - *If you realize you haven't made the most of pertinent experience or expertise you have or that you could do more to highlight your perspective and what's shaped your standpoint, focus your work here.*
 - *Or if you realize that your specific and unique contributions are submerged—in the middle of or ends of paragraphs, sandwiched between or tacked onto the end of other sources, only appearing at the draft's end without much prior signaling that you're making a contribution too—a next step to take is rewriting to see if you can lead more with your ideas, your voice!*

For more on joining a scholarly conversation and for other revision activities like color-coding, see Harris, Joseph. *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts*. Utah State University Press, 2006.