

Research as Conversation

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Entering the Conversation

You may have heard your writing instructor refer to writing as a conversation, and your instructor may have even asked you to read the following passage by Kenneth Burke.

In his book, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Burke writes:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending on the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, and you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (110-111)

But what did your instructor mean? Why did he / she ask you to read this passage? Let's try a different example.

Imagine you were invited to a friend's party. You decide to go, but you arrive late. Instead of a parlor, you enter your friend's dimly-lit basement. At this party, you see some friends standing in a corner next to a foosball table, arguing over which players your school's football coaches should recruit next year. As a devout fan, you have an opinion on the topic, but you quickly decide it would be rude to interrupt the conversation that has been going on for quite some time before you arrived. If you interrupt, you know it is highly unlikely you will be successful at making your point. You don't want the group to think you are a poor listener or rude. You want the group to agree with you, so you figure it is better to frame your opinion after you get a better understanding of the group and their opinions on the topic. Before jumping into the conversation, you seek answers to the following questions:

- What are other people saying? What reasons do they give to support their opinions?
- Do they feel strongly, or do they not care?
- What are the latest developments?

After you obtain answers to your questions, or at least most of them, you offer your thoughts. How can the coaches not at least try and recruit the phenom from West Monroe, LA?

When you write a research paper, you are entering a conversation too, just like you did at the party. For example, if you decide to write your final paper on why the federal minimum wage should be raised, it is important to realize other people have written papers on this topic too and that it would be difficult to successfully convince your reader to agree with you if you completely ignore what is currently being discussed by others. Just like the conversation at the party, you need to understand the greater context of your argument.

When you go to do research to find out what others have said about raising the federal minimum wage, you will notice there are other authors who have closely studied and carefully researched your topic. They may even be experts from universities across the country or, in the case of minimum wage, work in the economics and banking industries. It is important that you draw on their work. You may also find people who have expressed their opinion on the topic, but are not experts in the field, but their ideas can be important too.

It is important to remember that you do not have to agree with everything others wrote, but in order to develop an informed opinion, and persuade your reader, you will need to acknowledge what others are saying. According to the authors of *They Say, I Say*, Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, “Academic writing in particular calls upon writers not simply to express their own ideas, but to do so as a response to what others have said” (IX). In other words, you should explain how your ideas align or do not align with the ideas of others. Not only will researching help you develop an informed option, citing professionals who you agree with you can help make your argument stronger. Citing professionals who you disagree with you can be important as well. It gives you a chance to explain why you think your argument is stronger, and it gives you a chance to explain to your reader what you see flawed in the opposition’s argument. In addition, it also shows that you acknowledge there are other ideas out there. It makes you sound knowledgeable and reasonable.

In summary, it is important to remember that writing is a conversation, but it is not a one-sided conversation. The product of your research should not simply be a summary of sources, nor should it consist of your ideas alone. If you have ever been in a one-sided conversation, where the other person does all the talking and fails to listen to anything you have to say, you know how annoying—and unproductive—the situation feels. Each party needs to listen, and each party needs to contribute. When writing, you should be creating a dialogue among perspectives: they say, I say. In addition, it is also important to remember that the discussion continues even after you turn your paper in.

Successful writers do not write in a vacuum; successful writers engage the voices of others and let other writers engage them. Your writing instructor will expect you to position your argument in relation to what others have said in the field. Even the actual act of writing is a social act, just as social as the conversation you had at the party. Even though it may not seem like it when you are alone in the library late at night researching for your paper or in your dorm room writing your first draft, writing, and the concurrent act of researching, is a very much a collaborative effort.

Research: A Collaborative Effort

In a similar argument, Karen Burke LeFevre views invention, the process of developing and refining an argument, as a social act that is initiated by writers and concluded by readers. It is important to recognize the role invention plays in the writing process; it is also important to study how the individual inventor (or author) and readers are interconnected in the process. Some call this interconnected process collaboration.

Collaboration can come in many different forms. Some papers are written by more than one author, a more formal collaborative effort, while some texts are written by one author drawing on a variety of outside sources such as a colleague, partner, or even a database. Many people call the latter collaboration as well. While many view collaboration as the act of writing together and only writing together, there are other ways to collaborate with, or seek the assistance of, other people when writing your paper.

Rebecca Moore Howard asserts that all writing is the result of a collaborative effort. Howard believes

there are three types of collaboration used specifically in writing classrooms, like the one you are in now: collaborative contributions to solo-authored texts, writer-text collaboration, and collaborative writing (*Collaborative Pedagogy* 59-67). Below is an explanation of each.

- **Collaborative Contributions to Solo-Authored Texts:** Collaborative contributions to solo-authored texts are “most often used in writing classes for collaborative responses to individually drafted texts” (59-60). An example of collaborative contributions to solo-authored texts would be peer review. In this case, one person writes the text, but one or more persons give feedback on the draft.

- **Writer-text Collaboration:** Writer-text collaboration is when a writer draws on another text. While this is most commonly referred to as citation or research, Howard argues that this too is an example of collaboration because it is a dialogue between the author and text. It is a conversation. Traditionally, writer-text collaboration has been viewed mostly as “quotation, paraphrase, summary, synthesis, research—or plagiarism” (66). Howard argues that this is the least acknowledged type of collaboration.

- **Collaborative Writing:** If more than one person, however, writes a text, this would be an example of Howard’s collaborative writing (*Collaborative Pedagogy* 62).

In your English course, you will be asked to do research for many of your assignments; in other words, you will be expected to participate in writer-text collaboration. In order to do so, you must first determine how to enter the conversation on your chosen topic, how to enter the parlor. By creating a dialogue between your work and the work of other authors, you are doing much more than simply entering a conversation; you are also extending a conversation as well.

Works Cited

Burke, Kenneth. *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*. 3rd ed. Berkeley and Los Angeles: UC Press, 1973.

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Graff, Gerald, and Cathy Birkenstein. *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*. New York: W. & W. Norton & Co., 2007.