Workshop: Creating a Conversation and Using Evidence Effectively

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A Conversation Essay is an essay that:

- uses* an “Exhibit” (i.e., an object, current event, place, idea, or another text) of the writer’s own choosing
- to develop a claim, argument, or hypothesis (or complex series of claims, arguments, or hypotheses)
- by engaging the ideas of at least two texts that are provided by your instructor and which relate to an existing and “exigent” academic conversation about the issues or problems presented by the Exhibit

In other words, by applying key concepts or theories of the existing conversation (between the two authors) to your Exhibit, you will develop new ideas, arguments, or insights that contribute to the ongoing academic conversation.

*Note: not all professors require an Exhibit—so check your prompt....
Two Helpful Analogies

The Dinner Party

The Multi-Lens Microscope

ORIENT YOURSELF IN THE ONGOING DEBATE!

In scholarly essays, the goal is NOT to cite evidence simply to “support” or “prove” an argument, but rather, to respond to a larger scholarly conversation about the issue. In other words, the goal is to:

“Situate Your Project in an Ongoing Academic Conversation”
Two Major Types of Conversation Essays

A. Question and Answer. Here, you use an Exhibit to raise issue(s) or question(s) and then use the ideas and theories drawn from the readings to address those issues. Your nuanced position emerges in the way that you put the readings into conversation with one another to address the issue or answer the question.

B. Daisy Chain. Here, instead of discussing the readings together, you move from one to the next in a way that allows you to develop an interesting argument of your own. Your analyses of the readings build on one another and eventually reach a conclusion that you wouldn’t have been able to reach without having to read all of them.
The writer engages the reader by briefly introducing an exigent Exhibit.

The writer describes the [first] problem/issue/question that the Exhibit prompts.

The writer introduces AUTHOR A and briefly summarizes AUTHOR A’s project and ideas (Note: this must be done in a “fair” manner and sufficient for a “reader unfamiliar with the text”).

The writer uses/applies AUTHOR A’s theory/idea to explain/address the [first] problem presented by the Exhibit (this is sometimes called “linking back”).

The writer briefly summarizes AUTHOR B’s project and ideas and then uses/applies AUTHOR B’s theory/idea to explain/address the problem/issue/question presented by the Exhibit.

Note: the introduction of the second author can be done separately or you can jump right in and introduce the second author as part of a “conversation” (e.g., “While AUTHOR A believes that XX is the answer, AUTHOR B believes that XX is the real culprit (CITE)”. As AUTHOR B explains in his essay “___________, “___________” (CITE). **

The writer “complexifies” the essay (e.g., by examining another facet of the Exhibit, by asking the next logical question, by second guessing the answer you reached, etc.).

The writer concludes the essay in a way that is “surprising but inevitable.”

**REQUIRES EVIDENCE—EITHER IN THE FORM OF A PARAPHRASE OR A QUOTATION—AND CITATION.
There exists a common misconception that the terms “World War II” and “The Holocaust” refer to the same period in history. Though historical analysis might reveal that the Second World War had its roots in what were the early stages of the Holocaust, that which made the war worthy of its worldly status did not truly begin until a number of years later. By the time the United States and its allies finally launched a full scale attack against the Fascist powers in 1944, most of the genocide that the Nazis ultimately committed had already taken place, and many of the death camps had long since closed down because there was simply no more killing to be done. What exactly was it, then, that took the world so long to respond? And if the international community was truly unaware of what was taking place (a theory which has long since been abandoned), why did the Europeans who were aware of but not subject to Nazi persecution sit back and watch?

In his speech “The Perils of Indifference,” Elie Wiesel addresses the question that underlies any discussion of the world’s response to the atrocities of the Holocaust: “What is indifference?” (2). Essentially, his question raises two separate but equally important issues: What motivates indifference, and what are its consequences? Martha C. Nussbaum and Bruce Robbins, in their respective essays “Compassion and Terror” and “The Sweatshop Sublime,” present the typical contemporary answers to these questions. It seems worthwhile, however, to take heed of the words of wisdom that Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor, might have to offer given his experience. Analyzing the prevailing approaches to these questions, from the perspective of two significantly different generations, ought to give deeper insight into the concept of indifference, how it might explain the global response to the Holocaust, and, perhaps more importantly, how it relates to the world today...
What is Evidence? Evidence is the term we use to describe the words or ideas of others that a writer uses. Evidence can take TWO forms:
   1. Evidence can consist of a quotation of someone else’s exact words; or
   2. Evidence can consist of a paraphrase of someone else’s words or ideas.

How is Evidence Used? In academic writing, writers often use evidence to document the existence of an Exhibit, to provide background information, to explain or understand a problem or answer a question, and/or to provide support or contradict the new writer’s argument.

Are There Academic Rules About Using Evidence?
Yes, there are FIVE rules. When using Evidence, you MUST:

1. Give credit to the original author—even if it is only a paraphrase;
2. Distinguish between your own words and ideas and the words and ideas of others; NOTE: if the reader cannot tell “who is speaking,” then you are guilty of “conflation” and may be guilty of “plagiarism”; NOTE: “plagiarism” is often defined as “the use of someone else’s words or ideas without proper attribution”—so you can be guilty of plagiarism even if the error was unintentional;
Are There Academic Rules About Using Evidence? (continued)

3. Be “Fair”; in practical terms, this means that a writer:
   (a) MUST provide a “fair summary” of another author’s work or idea; and
   (b) MUST NOT pluck a quotation or idea “out of context”

   NOTE: one way to test whether what you wrote is “fair”: Would a “reader unfamiliar with the other text” understand what the original author was trying to say?

4. Use the proper “Signal Phrase”; signal phrases are the verbs used to introduce another writer’s words or ideas; for example, did the other author “claim” something—OR did the author “question” something?; NOTE: the wrong signal phrase can mislead the reader;

5. Provide Proper “Citation”; in practical terms, this means that you must include BOTH an “in-text citation” and a list of works consulted (e.g., a “Works Cited” page); a failure to properly cite a source can result in an honor code violation and/or a claim of “plagiarism”; For more information on citation form (e.g., MLA, APA, or Chicago), see: https://owl.purdue.edu
1. **Save your quotations for the “top hits”**—the things that you would have trouble paraphrasing. Generally, you should ONLY quote: when you need to include “primary” data (i.e., something you will analyze); when you want to discuss “key terms” coined by that author; when the specific words matter to you (or to others); when the author’s words are so distinctive or compelling that paraphrasing them would be difficult or a disservice to the reader. Otherwise: PARAPHRASE!

2. **Avoid “Block Quotations.”** They are sometimes considered the sign of a lazy or inexperienced writer, a person who doesn’t have the energy or confidence to decide what the reader really needs to see. NOTE: since MLA rules require that *more than* four typed lines of quoted prose be indented from the left margin, any quote longer than four lines must be presented as a blocked quotation.

3. **Do not “Drop and Run.”** If you quote or paraphrase, in addition to providing attribution, be sure to explain the significance or purpose of the quote for the reader. (i.e., use “I.C.E.”). A writer who simply drops the quote into their essay—without any explanation and who expects the reader to intuitively understand the significance of the quotation is guilty of “dropping and running.”

4. **Do not change another author’s words or punctuation without signaling the change** to the reader (i.e., by using brackets and/or ellipses). For more information on this, see: https://owl.purdue.edu

5. **Avoid quotations that require a lot of work to make them “fit.”** In other words, if you must use brackets or an ellipses, reconsider whether the sentence or phrase is worth quoting—or whether paraphrasing (or using a shorter version of the quotation) would work just as well.

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**A Few Tips Related to Quotations**
Focused Freewrite:
(for incorporating Evidence)

● Write a one- or two-sentence summary of one text or source that you plan to use as Evidence. Be sure that it is a “fair” summary and that you include the author’s name* and the title of the work.

NOTE: in MLA, the names of articles are enclosed in quotation marks, whereas the names of books are italicized.

● Once you have done that, add another sentence that contains a paraphrase or quotation that helps the reader further understand the other author’s text or project. Be sure to use quotation marks (if necessary) and an in-text citation.

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*NOTE: the first time you mention an author, it is customary to give the author’s full name.
How does a writer develop a Conversation Essay?

First, the writer needs to perform a “close reading” of the two texts, looking for potential “points of intersection.”

These points of intersection can be places of agreement, tension, or gaps (what academics like to call “lacuna”).

Note: you will need to have a solid grasp on this material, so it is important to read each piece carefully (two or three times, if necessary), using an “active reading” method, where you mark and annotate as you read. As you read, also be on the lookout for things that you might want to quote or paraphrase (i.e., use as “evidence”).

NOTE: The strength of a Conversation Essay often depends on how well suited your Exhibit is to your two texts. Thus, as you read, also try to think of potential Exhibits that might make good subjects for analysis (e.g., do the texts make you think about a current/exigent controversy that’s been in the news?)

Step 1: Close Read the Two Texts, Looking for “Points of Intersection”
Here’s what “close reading” looks like…

David Foster Wallace is a self-proclaimed Prescriptivist, albeit with a pragmatic philosophy. In his essay “Tense Present,” he contends that the conventions of a language are determined primarily by a desire to gain acceptance into a particular group, or Discourse Community:

People really do “judge” one another according to their use of language. . . [T]his judging involves acceptance, meaning not some touchy-feely emotional affirmation but actual acceptance or rejection of somebody’s bid to be regarded as a peer, a member of somebody else’s collective or community or Group.

This argument is integral to the early development of verlan. Its earliest forms were intended as a language of exclusion, of subversion against the police, and of protest against established French society. The notion of a discourse community could not be felt more strongly than in the case where outsiders find the language completely impenetrable.

However, Wallace goes further. He believes that a shared desire to be “taken seriously” is justification for the existence of a Standard Written English (SWE), or the standard language of the educated class. Though he supports the rights of various dialects to exist, he believes that this human impulse towards acceptance and respect by one’s peers motivates the widespread acceptance of SWE.

Language theorist Steven Pinker challenges Wallace’s ideas as being classist; he sees SWE as a tool of a hierarchical system to instill social differentiation. In his essay “Grammar Russ,” he shows how linguistic trends in the eighteenth century supported the rise of the intellectual elite:

Latin was considered the language of enlightenment and learning and it was offered as an ideal of precision and logic to which English should aspire. The period saw unprecedented social mobility, and anyone who wanted to distinguish himself as cultivated had to master the best version of English. . . [T]he manuals tried to outdo one another by including greater numbers of increasingly fastidious rules that no refined person could afford to ignore. (2)

By this account, Pinker asserts that the Prescriptivist rules were instated in order to preserve a kind of upper-class
Identify one concept (e.g., theory or idea) or key term that one of the authors (sometimes called “Interlocutors” presents that the other author ALSO discusses or uses.

Now, in two or three sentences—and using an accurate and strong verb in the “signal phrase”* (i.e., not writes, says, states, or discusses)—describe how each author presents or uses the concept or key term. You can paraphrase or quote [THIS IS EVIDENCE]—but in either event, be sure to include an “in-text citation”

Once you have done that, reflect on how each concept or key term “relates to” (e.g., draws on, conflicts with, or complicates) the way it is interpreted or used by the second author.

Note: if you are not yet ready for this exercise, then spend the time making a detailed list (or chart) of potential “points of intersection” in the two texts that you have selected.
Step 2: Brainstorm for an Exhibit

The goal is to choose an Exhibit that is focused enough so as not to require a tremendous amount of research but rich enough (with what I like to call “multiple facets”) to offer room for deep inquiry. Although you will need to find a source or two to present your Exhibit and controversy clearly, you should not be embarking on a major research project for this essay.

“Rich” Exhibits are often those that involve ongoing disputes or controversies (e.g., should we remove Confederate monuments?)

Here are two examples of Exhibits:

- Where the issue in the texts pertains to the ethics of spectatorship, a rich Exhibit might be an incident where bystanders videotaped a crime but did not step in to help the victim
- Where the issue in the texts pertains to the right of an artist to copy or incorporate parts of someone else’s work, a rich Exhibit might be a dispute between two companies over whether one company can bar the other from producing shoes with red soles

Remember: The source texts are not there to “spice” up the essay; they must be crucial to the argument of the essay. The selection of your Exhibit—and project design—are incredibly important.

**Issue/Question Raised by Seed Text:** Dawes interviews former Japanese soldiers who committed terrible war crimes during WWII to understand how and why people commit such atrocious acts.

**Titles of Successful Essays:**

- "The Sins of Our Fathers: Denial of the Armenian Genocide in Turkey Today"
- "Black Futures, Black Plans: A Case for More than Reparations"
- "Governments as Bystanders: Turning a Blind Eye to Srebrenica"
- "Opportunities or Ruins?: Forced Relocation in Shanghai"
- "Massacre Now, Peace Later: Implications of Israeli Militarism in the 1982 Lebanon War"
- "The World Behind a Wall: Sectarianism and Xenophobia in Belfast as a Model for Multicultural Europe"
- "The Amalekite Directive: Call to Genocide or Moral Exhortation?"
- "Nature Versus Nurture: Torture Victims and Their Ability to Forgive"

Here are some examples of essays with rich Exhibits…
How does a writer develop a Conversation Essay?

(cont.)

**Step 3: Test Drive Your Exhibit**

Does your proposed Exhibit prompt a philosophical, moral, or ethical question? [This is usually a GOOD thing]

Is the question or issue exigent? [This is a GOOD thing]

Does your proposed Exhibit have an easy yes/no answer? [This is a BAD thing]

Now, see if you can articulate the problem that the proposed Exhibit raises. Is it a question or issue that your two texts can help answer or address? (Or is it beyond the scope of those texts?) Can you outline what each author MIGHT say about the issues raised by the Exhibit? In other words, how will you USE the texts?

**Common Pitfalls:**

- choosing an Exhibit that raises a question that has already been definitively answered
- choosing an Exhibit that is one sided—rather than multi-faceted
- choosing an Exhibit that does not raise an exigent issue
- clinging to an Exhibit even after you realize that it won’t work with your texts or that it leads to a dead end
In a few sentences, describe how the ideas, theories, definitions, etc. of the authors can help answer the question or address the issues posed by the Exhibit. As you apply their ideas to the problems posed by your Exhibit (i.e., “link back”), try to put the authors into conversation. Be sure to cite evidence to support what you say. Here are a few templates to help you get started:

[AUTHOR A’s] theory of [________] may help explain [_____________________/the problem posed by the EXHIBIT]. As [AUTHOR A] [ARGUES/CONTENDS/POSITS, etc.], “________________ [INSERT RELEVANT QUOTE/CITE].

In [AUTHOR B’s] view, however, the problem of __________ is the result of something else entirely: __________________ [DESCRIBE THEORY/CITE]. Indeed, according to [AUTHOR B], “____________________________ [INSERT RELEVANT QUOTE/CITE].

While each of these explanations offers some insight, neither theory can adequately explain [ONE PARTICULAR ASPECT OF THE EXHIBIT]. To understand that problem, we must [look at/consider ___________]
Common Pitfalls:
- spending too much time describing the Exhibit
- writing a compare-contrast essay (or a he-said, she-said essay)
- writing a summary of two writers, without applying (or “linking back”) their ideas to your Exhibit
- writing a summary of two writers, rather than making your own claim
- making passing reference to one of your sources, rather than doing an in-depth analysis and actually using the source to explain something
- oversimplifying an essay and skimming over the nuance or detail of the text
- letting your argument (and essay) be overtaken by the sources (or the Exhibit) you have included
- getting bogged down in a quasi-legal (rather than an academic or ethical) argument
- failure to “complexify” your analysis

Avoid Common Pitfalls a Conversation Essay
An Example of Complexification in a Conversation Essay

(Courtesy of Abby Rabinowitz)
Still have Questions?

- Ask them now!
- Schedule a conference with your professor
- Schedule an appointment at the Writing Center: [https://www.college.columbia.edu/core/uwp/writing-center](https://www.college.columbia.edu/core/uwp/writing-center)
- Check out other resources:
  - *How Scholars Write* (Ritzenberg and Mendelsohn)
  - *The Craft of Research* (Booth, Colomb, and Williams)
  - *The Elements of Reasoning* (Corbett and Eberly)
  - *They Say, I Say* (Graff and Birkenstein)
  - *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts* (Harris)
  - *Writing Analytically* (Rosenwasser and Stephen)
  - *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (Williams)

Please complete the WC Survey: [https://columbia.mywconline.net/survey.php](https://columbia.mywconline.net/survey.php)