

## THE CONVERSATION ESSAY

### Assignment:

In the conversation progression, you will write an essay driven by a *motivating question* that uses at least two sources in *conversation* centered around an *exhibit* to arrive at new knowledge or understanding of a particular *central problem*. The problem should be of significance to an audience of generally interested academics. Through close-reading and analysis, you will work to discover what putting these texts together reveals about the problem. You will build your own *argument*, using your own voice, with sparing inclusion of the personal pronoun, to act as moderator of this conversation and to guide your essay towards a *main claim or discovery*.

Essays do not exist in vacuums. They engage the ideas of other texts and contexts to explore ideas and build new arguments. In the same way, academic research and debate does not take place in a vacuum. Regardless of the discipline you choose to enter—Art History, Engineering, Philosophy, Biology, Law, etc.—you will need to learn how to take stock of the arguments people in that field have already articulated and discover ways to build upon their ideas, to enter the academic conversation with an argument of your own. While the content of debate in different disciplines may vary greatly, the way in which debate takes place is actually very similar across disciplines. The Conversation Essay offers you an opportunity to practice the rhetorical moves required to successfully engage in this sort of academic debate, whatever your field of interest.

### Important Background Information:

The Conversation Essay is also designed to help dispel some common and often paralyzing misconceptions about the nature of academic debate itself. There are two ineffective models that can seem to represent the nature of conversation between academics: the “combat model” and the “answer model.”

The combat model suggests that academic debate consists of experts trying to tear down each other’s theories in the hope of proving that their own theory is actually correct. It suggests an aggressive approach and a battle zone in which people “advance” arguments, “attack” each other’s claims, and “stake out” and “defend” their own positions.

The second model, the answer model, suggests it is only valuable to voice an idea if that idea offers a new solution to a problem. This “solution,” it seems, should either be an explanation of “why the problem exists” or “the way people should solve it.”

Neither of these models is particularly descriptive of the actual nature of academic debate and neither is helpful to you as an undergraduate writer. The first encourages a destructive disregard for texts and ideas that might be of use to you as a thinker and writer. The second encourages grandiose and unsupportable claims as well as a paralyzing fear of “getting the answer wrong.”

Rather than rely on these models, this progression asks you to consider a third, more useful and effective model: “the conversation.” This model suggests that academic debate consists of people interested in similar topics listening and talking to each other in an ongoing conversation. You can think of it like a long discussion you might have with friends in which you talk your way deeper and deeper into a problem and discover new ways to think about it during the course of the conversation. In this model, the goal is neither absolute proof nor unequivocal victory, but rather *to articulate an idea or perspective that advances the conversation as a whole*, that raises the overall level of discourse by considering the ideas that have come before in novel and unexpected ways.

### Texts and Argumentation:

You are required to choose *two* outside texts to engage in your Conversation Essay. These can be any two texts from tiers one through four of the progression readings. Because you will need to write an *essay* and not a *research report*, you will need to use the conversation between your texts to develop *your own argument about the topic at hand*. In doing this, be sure to observe the difference between using a text as Background, as an Example, as an Argument, or as a Method (B.E.A.M.). Using sources as argument sources will be especially important while writing this essay, as this will offer you arguments with which to agree, disagree, or agree partially. Remember, *the assessment of other people’s arguments offers you the opportunity to bring your own voice into the conversation*.

You will need to acknowledge counter-arguments, both your own and those suggested by the texts, so be sure to choose at least one “Argument” source that will help you create tension within your essay. *If all your sources are in perfect agreement, they won't have much to say to each other.*

While you may choose to use texts that all deal with the same topic (animal rights, the uses of photography, etc.), you are also encouraged (but not required) to choose texts that are linked only thematically, as this can often yield rich understanding. *Disparate ideas can be usefully considered alongside each other as a way of arriving at your own new knowledge.*

**Format:**

Your essay should be *1800-2100 words* and formatted according to the guidelines in the syllabus.

**Written Feedback and Conferences:**

I will give you detailed written feedback on your preliminary draft. You will also be required to meet with me outside of class at least once to discuss your essay before submitting your final draft. This is in order to ensure that your essay is building toward a promising conclusion and to address any questions and concerns. I'll cover conference scheduling in class. Beyond this, you are welcome to visit me during my office hours. If you can't see me then, I can schedule an alternate time that works for both of us.

**Due:**

Project Plan (Exercise 2.3) (“Prog 2 – Ex 2.3 – *Surname*”): Tuesday, October 14<sup>th</sup> (post to CourseWorks by 6:10pm, 1 copy in class)

Preliminary Draft (“Prog 2 – Preliminary Draft – *Surname*”): by Sunday, October 19<sup>th</sup> (post to CourseWorks by 11:59pm)

Final Draft (“Prog 2 – Final Draft – *Surname*”): Sunday, October 26<sup>th</sup> (post to CourseWorks by 11:59pm)