

Thinking of referencing as participating in an academic conversation

1 Joining a conversation that has already started

Think of writing an essay or report, or giving an oral presentation, as taking part in a conversation that is going on within your discipline. You are being invited to take part, but you can't jump in too quickly. Just like any other serious conversation, you will not be able to decide exactly what you think until you've had a chance to listen to others and think a little about the different perspectives. It's important to remember that you are certainly not the only person with a position on the matter. If you just start talking, without thinking first, and without having an idea of the background to the debate, then nobody will take your contribution seriously.

The conversation has already started before you join it, so you need to get up to speed on what others think, and find out what the major differences of opinion are. Your tutors help you out here, as they give you overviews of the field within their lectures or seminars, and they usually give you reading lists that point you in the right direction. As you start to engage with the conversation, you will make more of your own decisions about what to read next, and will start taking more focused notes for your specific task.

2 Making use of other people's ideas for your own purposes

As you research a topic, you should keep certain questions in mind, such as:

- What do YOU want to say?
- Why is this article/chapter/report helpful for YOUR purposes?
- Where will this piece of information fit into YOUR argument?

It usually helps to plan out the structure of your text so that you know what you are looking for in your research. This structure won't be fixed until much later, but it will guide you in what to look for.

You then need to make sure that you mobilise what you've read for YOUR purpose, rather than just showing what you've read. Some of what you've read simply won't fit into the text you are currently writing, so don't try to force it in. Can you file it away somewhere for a later essay or dissertation (or PhD proposal!)?

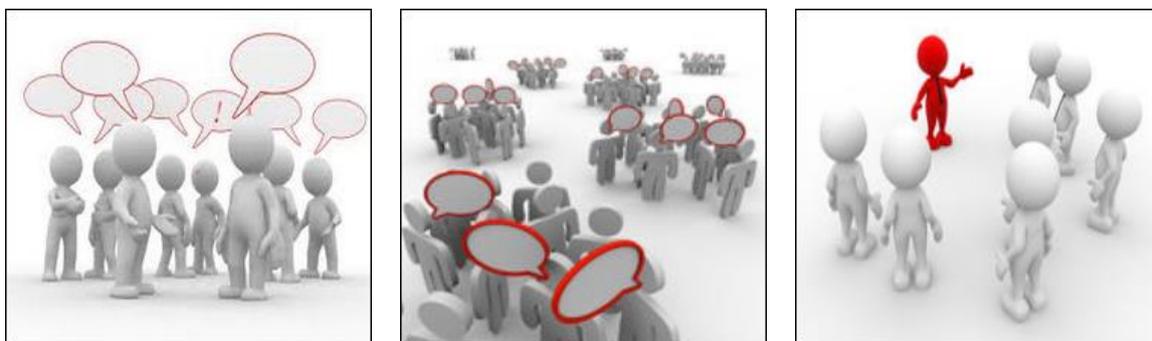
3 Finding your own voice within the conversation

When you first start to write, you probably won't have the whole picture clear in your mind. You will still be coming across a lot of new information in your reading, and several people's ideas may seem quite reasonable to you. Until you have worked out what your own position is, you may rely quite heavily on reproducing other voices, which will seem much louder than yours within the conversation.

Your first draft may therefore be a little bit stilted, as you attempt to report on what each individual author has to say:

Xiao (2012) argues this, while Watts (2011) argues that, and so on.

It might feel necessary to include quite a lot of detail about what each author has said. This is because you don't know exactly which part is the most relevant to your own position yet.



However, after a while, you will begin to see the connections between the different ideas you cite, and you will find it easier to combine and condense these points. Once this starts to happen, you will be able to reorganise your writing so that your own voice begins to come through. Other voices will begin to quieten down, so that your own will be heard above the others'. You will know how your own position is supported by other scholars within the field, and you will know how to refute arguments with which you disagree.