

# CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT

## WHY ENGAGE?

Engaging the ideas of other critical writers has several potential benefits for your writing: you can communicate the relevance of your argument to a field of interested scholars by showing where your ideas fit with those already established in the field; you can refine the terms of argument, arriving at a heightened degree of nuance by piggybacking off the work already done and making a specific niche for yourself that someone else didn't quite get to; or, you can add to the power and persuasion of your own argument by collaborating with ideas already in the field, or by posing a challenge to another critic. Writers who masterfully engage other critics do all of these things.

Crucially, we don't engage other critics in order simply to repeat their ideas as Truth, on the one hand, or to outright dismiss them as heresy, on the other. Rather, engagement entails either *building off* or *diverging from* another critic's argument. Think of it as participating in a give-and-take conversation with that other writer: if you both have the same things to say, the conversation falls flat—it won't go anywhere or lead to any new insight. (If you simply repeat the critic, it may show that you understand the critic's ideas, but it won't distinguish your own thinking or take the discussion further. Why wouldn't your reader just go and read that critic directly?) The conversation will be similarly truncated if you can find no common ground at all with the critical writer—even diplomatically worded versions of “I disagree with everything you say” or “you're an idiot” typically shut dialogue down. (In this case, your reader is likely to wonder why you value the critical writer enough to cite him/her. Isn't there someone else out there whose ideas have some purchase on the issue? Why waste our time?)

## HOW TO ENGAGE

### 1. Offer an overview of the critic's argument

When you engage critically, you can assume that your reader has a rudimentary understanding of the critical conversation that you are entering. For instance, it isn't necessary to give an exhaustive history of a theory or retrace a critical trend. However, don't assume that your reader is familiar with the specific essay you're engaging. That means that you need **to start out with an introduction to and characterization of the critic's argument** before you can build off or diverge from it. This overview also sets your audience up to see exactly how you differ from another author, even if by and large you agree.

### 2. Focus on a specific claim

Engagement, like close reading, relies on working with a very specific portion of a text. Although there may be an overall argument for the critical essay, that overall argument is built and substantiated by smaller sub-arguments. It's important to have a general sense of the essay's overall argument and to be able to describe it in your characterization, **but you actually build off or diverge from individual points in the essay.** These individual points need to be specific enough so that you can locate them in the text and paraphrase them. They should be sub-claims that could be readily detected by any reader of the argument—as with close reading, this means you stick dutifully to the explicit ideas of the text. If you use generalities you run the risk of neglecting the specificity or accuracy of the essayist's points. In addition, with generalities your engagement also becomes less specific; your audience will have a harder time seeing your stance and why it's original and significant.

Finally, avoid the “bait and switch”: when you engage, you need to *work through* someone's idea, not just present it and move on to a different idea that you would rather discuss. “Working through” means that

you represent some of the critic's evidence and analysis, which generates the opportunity for you to step in with your own perspective.

### 3. Craft your response: build on/extend or diverge from/challenge

Your response will necessarily extend or challenge the argument you engage with. In “*They Say/I Say*”: *The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*, Graff and Birkenstein develop a fine model for building on and diverging from. The options Graff and Birkenstein outline are to 1) disagree—and explain why; 2) agree—but with a difference; or 3) agree and disagree simultaneously with ample explanation. This model ensures it will be clear that you're not simply agreeing or disagreeing for the sake of it. By justifying why you agree or disagree, you make explicit how you're extending the conversation about a topic. The production of new knowledge begins with acknowledging what has been said before and recognizing that another author—you—has a different but meaningful take on the same topic. Whatever your response, you are effectively making a subclaim for your overall argument; as with any claim, this one needs to be supported by specific, closely read evidence from the text.

### 4. Present your own critical perspective: state the significance

Engagement results in your production of an original critical perspective that can then be used as a vantage point for close readings of literary texts. It's important to articulate this critical perspective by stating the significance of your engagement with the critic—this is where you offer your reader some pay off for having trotted him/her through another critic's argument, and your response to it. Where has this gotten us? What new insight emerges through your extension of or challenge to that argument? Be explicit about your contribution, and use this to build a transition to the next part of your argument.

## THE FINER POINTS

### Acknowledge validity

When you disagree, you don't want to completely discredit your source, because then your cited critic can no longer serve as a useful starting point. Ideally, disagreement is staged through acknowledgment of the validity of another argument and a clear statement of your alternative position regarding a particular part of it. Invalidating an argument destroys not only your critic's credibility, but also your purpose for speaking to his/her ideas at all. Further, recognizing the validity of the argument keeps you mindful of the author's overall purpose (which may differ radically from your own), which in turn helps you to consider individual points as parts of a larger whole. Like close reading, you don't want to lose sight of the larger text when concentrating on a smaller portion.

### Distinguish critical voices

When engaging another writer, it's imperative to diligently, persistently mark whose ideas are whose, and to explicitly signpost the places where you switch from one voice to another. To prevent jarring moments of uncertainty, tag each sentence. No matter how distinct the ideas may sound to you as writer, in the case of unmarked sentences, your reader will typically default to hearing them in *your* voice. Tagging each sentence will help clear up confusion about who argues what, and will also make your own contributions to the debate stand out unambiguously.

Here's an example. I'm responding here to a critic named Lustig. The text we are analyzing here is Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*. Both Lustig and I are interested in the way the novel's narrator, referred to as the governess, constructs knowledge in order to tell her story.

Confusion of voices: Lustig applies James' own motif of the novel's many “turns” in order to investigate the slipperiness of the text's absences and the fallacy of the governess' interpretive

strategies. The novel effectively critiques the governess' habit of constructing knowledge by "reading into" the gaps in the information available to her. Furthermore, the frame narrative sets the reader up to repeat the governess' mistakes by modeling the way in which listeners anticipate the turns of the story. [Is this all Lustig?? what do I think of Lustig's ideas? Note only a single voice tag in this example.]

Clarity of voices: Lustig applies James' own motif of the novel's many "turns" in order to investigate the slipperiness of the text's absences and the fallacy of the governess' interpretive strategies. In Lustig's reading, the novel effectively critiques the governess' habit of constructing knowledge by reading into the gaps in the information available to her. Lustig argues that the frame chapter serves as a "small-scale model" of the uncertainties that riddle the governess's narrative by setting up irresolvable discrepancies in time. To this I would add, however, that the frame narrative anticipates the governess's *reading strategies* in addition to the pattern of absences that characterize her narrative. Indeed, in my view, the frame narrative sets the reader up to repeat the governess' mistakes by modeling the way in which listeners anticipate the turns of a story. This is an important addition to Lustig's analysis because... [Note a voice tag attached to every sentence, and the explicit signposting to mark the switch from Lustig's voice to my own.]