

Engaging With Scholarship

Methods, pros & cons (adapted from Gaipa, “Entering the Conversation”)
Theory vs Criticism

Engaging with Criticism

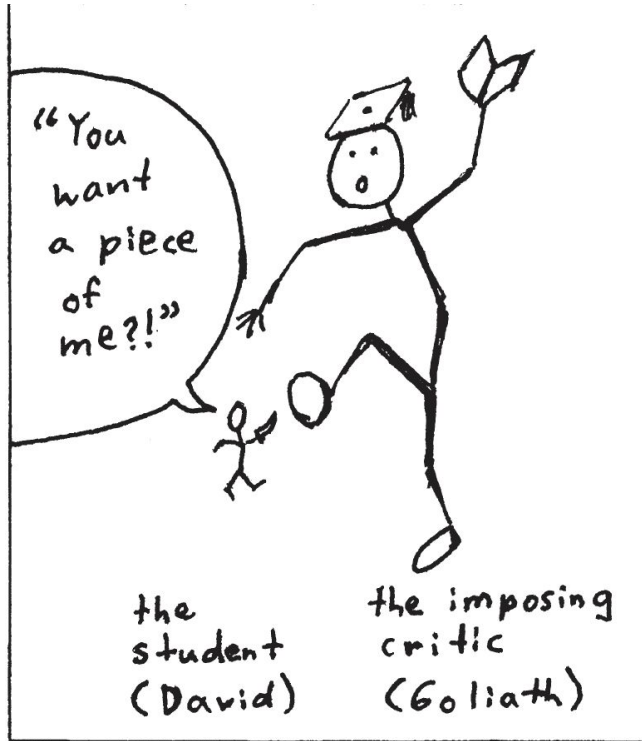
Scholarly study & analysis of works of art—including literature

Entering the Conversation

- Recognize that your take on a text is entering into an already-existing conversation between critics
- Engaging with critics:
 - helps bolster your authority
 - provides context on the conversation for your reader
 - allows you (and your reader) to understand where your take fits in
 - can help you better articulate your own ideas
 - can help you form connections to other topics

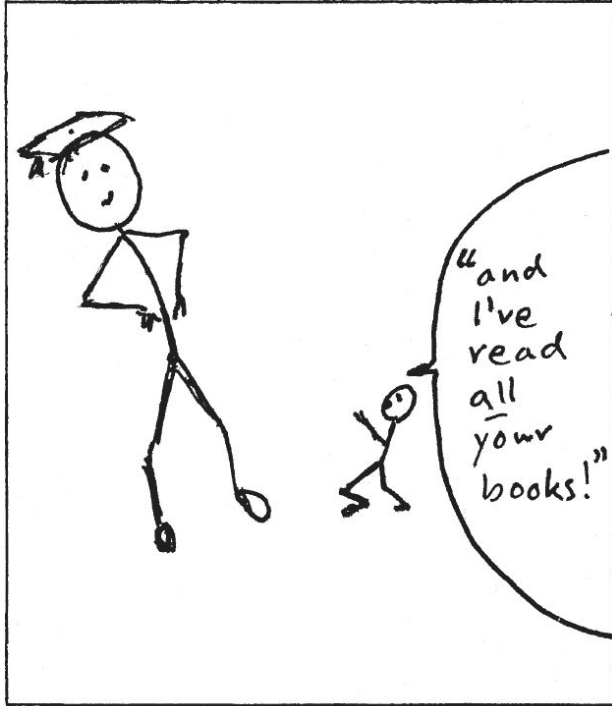
The following are some common modes of “entering the conversation”

1. Picking a Fight



“In this strategy, the student authors confront individual critics and try to steal their authority by **knocking them off their pedestals**” (427).

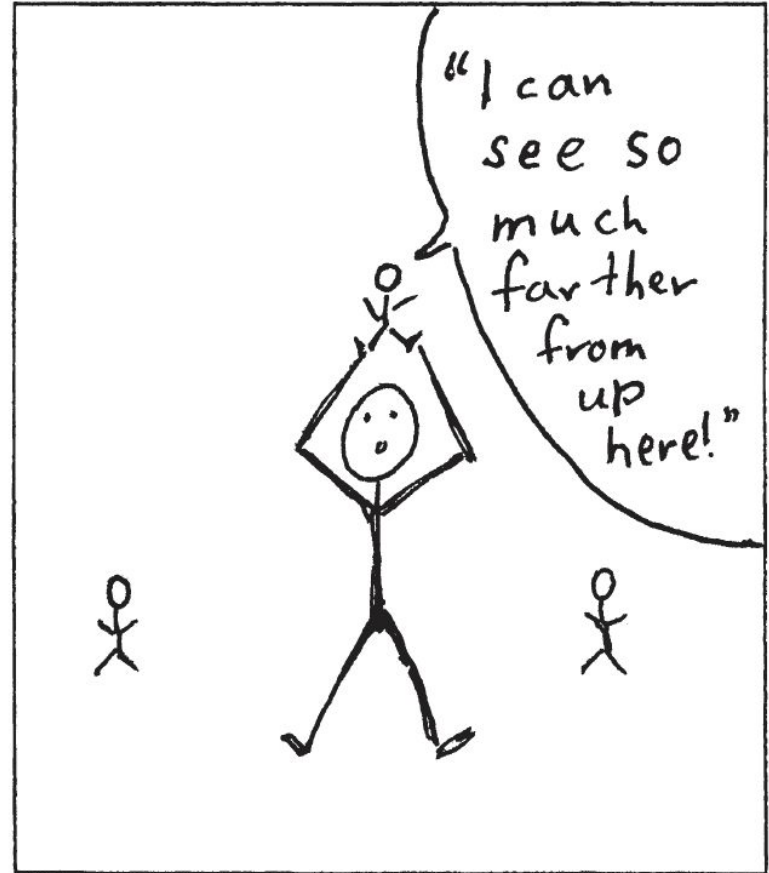
2. Ass-Kissing



“In this strategy, the student authors attempt to acquire authority by **closely associating—and ingratiating—themselves with an established critic**. [...] The drawback to such a strategy is clear: the students (along with their arguments) are likely to remain in the shadow of the critic [...]. Students here **need to find a way to distinguish their arguments from the critic’s** and to open a space near the critic for original arguments of their own” (427-8).

3. Piggybacking

“This strategy is a variant of ‘ass kissing,’ but it is much more effective. Not only do students ingratiate themselves with an authoritative critic, but they also make room for themselves by **completing or extending the work that the critic has left undone**” (428).



4. Leapfrog

“First the students align themselves with a prestigious critic whose work they praise and elevate in their essays; then they point out a problem in the critic’s work that their arguments alone can solve. Toward this end, students might locate oversights in the critics’ arguments, show us where their outlooks are inconsistent, or turn their own words against them” (429).



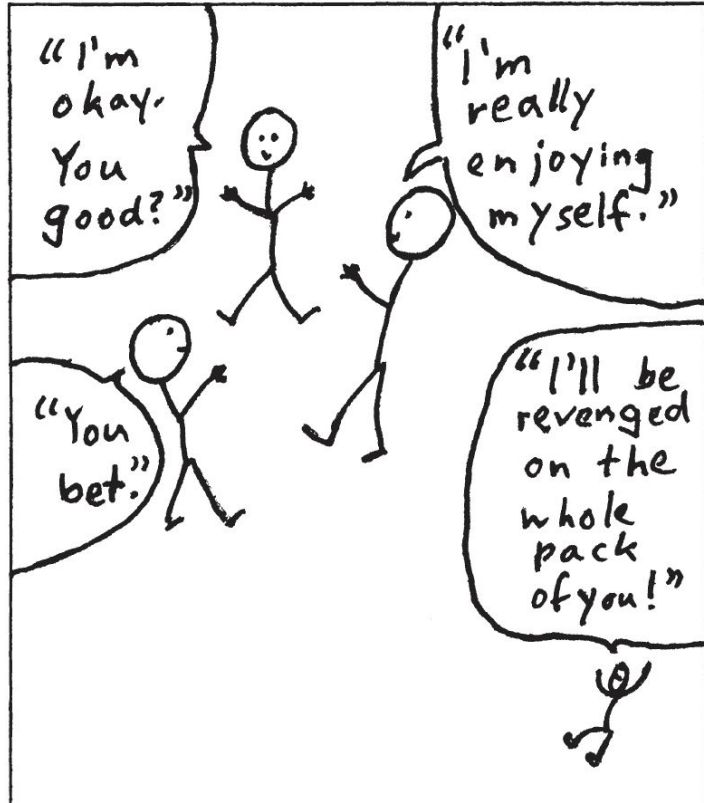
5. Peacemaker



“Here students **set out to resolve a conflict or settle a dispute between two or more critics.**

One strength of this strategy is that it enhances the authors’ ‘ethos’: **the students stand back from the critical bickering and show how a resolution lies in their own new or more encompassing perspectives.** This strategy has the power to strongly reshape some aspect of the critical terrain. The danger is that it lends itself to self-effacing ‘umbrella theses.’ ...What results is an essay that paraphrases two or more of the critics’ arguments, with the author’s own argument (and voice) disappearing behind them” (430).”

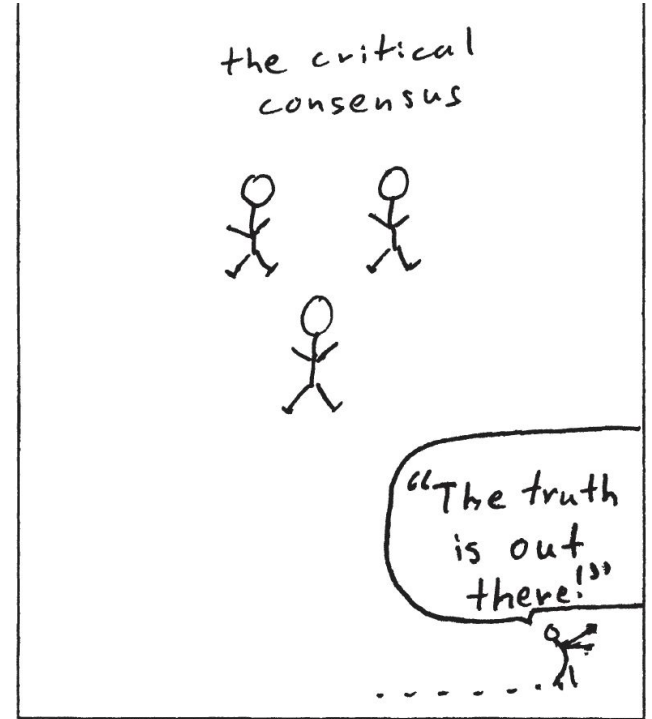
6. Paranoia



“This is the inversion of strategy 5: instead of bringing the critics together with an inclusive argument (‘in a way, you’re all right’), the **students alienate everyone by telling the disputants on some topic that they are all wrong.** We can also see this as a variant of strategy 1: instead of picking a fight with an individual critic, **the students now take on the critical establishment**” (431).

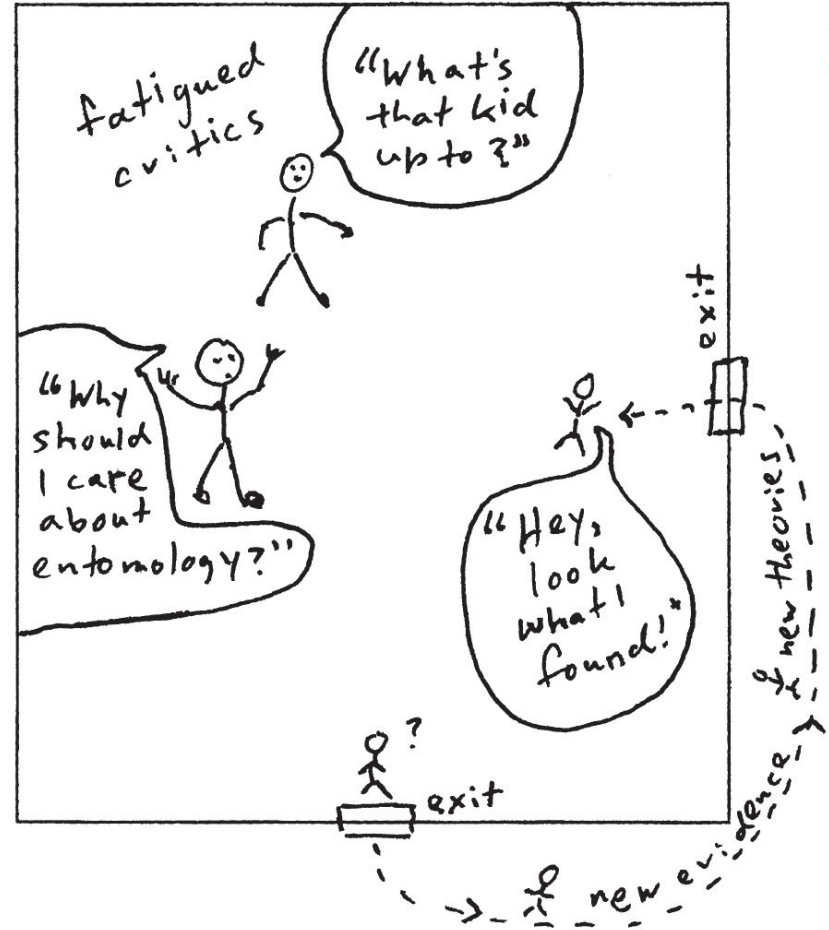
7. Dropping Out

“This is a less aggressive version of strategy 6: instead of taking on the system, **students simply turn their back on the critical consensus and troll the margins of the conversation** [...]. The trick here is for students to present their achievements in the margins so they **redefine what is central to the conversation**. When that happens, they are in a position to reshape the critical terrain” (432).



8. Crossbreeding

“All strategies for building an original argument presume to be doing something new, but some arguments powerfully revitalize (and reorient) the critical conversation by **injecting really new material into the debate**. This may involve a new theory for reinterpreting old evidence, or new evidence for upsetting an old theory or interpretation. This strategy runs the gamut from looking for holes and silences in the critical conversation to subjecting the critics’ subject matter to interpretations enabled by techniques borrowed from other disciplines” (433).



Questions to ask when engaging

1. Which 3 of these strategies are most appealing to you? You can also do a combination of a couple.
2. Which strategies seem least appealing to you and why?
 - a. What might be their benefits?
3. Which do you think work best for your sources?
 - a. What about them works well?
 - b. How will you apply these strategies to your critical sources?
 - c. What are the potential pitfalls of the approaches you have chosen, and how might you avoid them?

Engaging with Theory

The lenses through which critics understand the works they study

A much larger conversation

- Criticism may study a *specific* work or works
- Theory is the lens, framework, or methodology used to focus critical attention
 - Historicism
 - Structuralism
 - Formalism
 - Feminism, queer studies
 - Disability studies
 - Marxist criticism
 - Ecocriticism
 - Science & technology studies
 - Postcolonial
 - Posthumanist
 - And more!

Engaging with Theory

- What aspect of the text draws my attention?
 - The role of nature? Ecocrit
 - The role of class? Marxist theory & historicism
 - The construction of masculinity? Feminist & gender theory
 - etc.
- Which ideas are helpful to me in understanding this text?
 - You don't need to engage with the entire theoretical argument
 - Identify and *apply* terms & concepts selectively

Interested in learning more about theory?

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/writing_in_literature/literary_theory_and_schools_of_criticism/index.html

[The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature](#)

Norton Anthology of Theory & Criticism

Citations

Gaipa, Mark. “Breaking Into the Conversation: How Students Can Acquire Authority for Their Writing.” *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture* 4.3 (2004): 419, 422-433.

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