

Thesis as Conversation

Entering and Contributing to Scholarly Debates

Week 10 | June 17, 2025

Session Goals:

- Understand your thesis as joining ongoing scholarly conversations
- Learn to position your work within academic debates
- Develop strategies for creating authentic dialogue with sources
- Practice articulating your unique contribution to the field

Opening Reflection

In the chat, please respond with one word:

| *"How do you currently feel about engaging with other scholars' work?"*

Common responses we often see:

- Intimidated
- Overwhelmed
- Excited
- Confused
- Respectful
- Uncertain

Academic Writing as Conversation

Imagine walking into a room where an animated conversation is already happening:

- People have been talking for hours, maybe years
- There are ongoing debates, alliances, disagreements
- Some voices dominate, others are marginalized
- New perspectives can shift the entire discussion

Your thesis is your contribution to this conversation.

The question isn't whether you belong in the room—it's what unique perspective you bring to the discussion.

Ways to Join Scholarly Conversations

Extending

Building on existing work by applying it to new contexts or cases

Challenging

Respectfully disagreeing with established perspectives

Synthesizing

Bringing together different approaches or findings

Redirecting

Shifting focus to overlooked aspects or questions

Complicating

Adding nuance to simplified narratives

Bridging

Connecting separate scholarly conversations

Reporting vs. Conversing with Sources

Reporting (Less Effective)

Example:

"Smith (2019) argues that urban planning in Cairo reflects colonial legacies. Jones (2020) focuses on informal settlements. Ahmed (2021) examines gender and public space."

Problems:

- No connection between sources
- Your voice is absent
- Reads like a list
- No analytical insight

Conversing (More Effective)

Example:

"While Smith's analysis of colonial planning legacies provides crucial historical context, her framework overlooks the informal urban practices that Jones identifies. Building on both perspectives, this analysis argues that gender, as Ahmed suggests, mediates how residents navigate between formal and informal urban spaces."

Strengths:

- Sources dialogue with each other
- Your analytical voice guides
- Creates new insights
- Shows synthetic thinking

Scholarly Dinner Party Exercise

Individual Work (10 minutes):

Using your pre-session assignment, imagine hosting a dinner party with 6-8 scholars to discuss your research topic:

- Who would you invite and why?
- Include both supporters and skeptics of your approach
- Consider scholars from different disciplines and time periods
- Think about what each would contribute to the conversation
- What tensions or alliances would emerge?

Create a visual map or list with brief notes about each scholar's contribution

Dinner Party Conversations

Breakout Rooms (15 minutes):

Groups of 3-4 students:

1. Each person presents their dinner party (3 minutes each)
 - Who did you invite?
 - What conversation would emerge?
 - What tensions would arise?
2. Others ask questions:
 - "Who might be missing from this conversation?"
 - "What would [Scholar X] say in response to [Scholar Y]?"
 - "Where would your own voice fit in this debate?"
3. Identify one particularly interesting scholarly conversation to share with the whole group

Scholarly Conversations: What We Discovered

Share from breakout rooms:

- What was the most compelling scholarly conversation that emerged?
- Which tensions or alliances surprised you?
- What gaps or missing voices did you identify?

Common Patterns in Academic Conversations:

- **Interdisciplinary connections:** How different fields approach similar questions
- **Generational debates:** How perspectives evolve over time
- **Methodological tensions:** Different approaches to studying the same phenomena
- **Regional vs. universal perspectives:** Balancing context-specific and broader insights

Remember: Your thesis is your invitation to join and contribute to these ongoing conversations.

Academic GPS: Positioning Your Work

Where are you coming from?

What theoretical and methodological traditions inform your work?

- Which disciplinary approaches do you draw on?
- What theoretical frameworks guide your analysis?
- What methodological choices have you made?

Where is the field now?

What are the current debates, gaps, and consensus points?

- What do we already know about your topic?
- What are scholars currently debating?
- What questions remain unanswered?

Where are you going?

What is your unique contribution or intervention?

- What new insight or perspective do you offer?
- How does your work advance the conversation?
- Why does this contribution matter?

Academic GPS Example: Middle East Studies

Research Topic: Women's participation in post-2011 Egyptian civil society

Where are you coming from?

"This research draws on feminist political theory and social movement studies, using ethnographic methods and discourse analysis to understand how gender shapes political participation."

Where is the field now?

"Current scholarship focuses either on formal political participation or treats civil society as gender-neutral. There's a gap in understanding how women navigate informal political spaces in post-revolutionary contexts."

Where are you going?

"This thesis argues that women's civil society participation in post-2011 Egypt represents a distinct form of political engagement that challenges both formal political exclusion and traditional gender roles, creating new spaces for political agency."

Academic GPS Practice

Breakout Rooms (20 minutes):

Groups of 4-5 students:

1. Each person presents their Academic GPS (3 minutes each):
 - Where are you coming from? (theoretical/methodological background)
 - Where is the field now? (current debates and gaps)
 - Where are you going? (your contribution)
2. Others provide feedback on:
 - Clarity and specificity
 - Are the gaps genuine or artificial?
 - Is the contribution clear and significant?

Focus: Help each other articulate positioning clearly and confidently

Common Academic GPS Challenges

- **Gaps that are too broad:**

Problematic: "No one has studied Middle Eastern politics"

Better: "Limited attention to informal political networks in post-revolutionary contexts"

- **Gaps that are too narrow:**

Problematic: "No one has studied this exact village in this exact month"

Better: "How rural communities adapt traditional governance during rapid political change"

- **Artificial gaps:**

Problematic: "Scholars ignore the role of technology in Middle Eastern protests"

Better: "While digital activism is well-studied, less attention to offline organizing networks"

- **Overly modest contributions:**

Problematic: "This small study might add a tiny bit to our understanding"

Better: "This analysis reveals how gender shapes political participation in informal spaces"

- **Grandiose claims:**

Problematic: "This will revolutionize Middle Eastern studies"

Better: "This framework offers new insights into post-conflict political mobilization"

Individual Reflection

| *"What is the most important scholarly conversation your thesis joins?"*

Take a moment to reflect:

1. Which academic conversation is most central to your work?
2. What unique perspective do you bring to this conversation?
3. How will your work change or advance the discussion?
4. Who are the key scholars you're building on, agreeing with, or challenging?

Write down your response—this will be useful for your thesis introduction and conclusion.

Homework: Creating Authentic Dialogue

Assignment for Everyone:

1. **Find a paragraph** from your current writing where you cite 2-3 sources
2. **Rewrite it** to create genuine conversation between sources and your voice
3. **Focus on:**
 - Transition phrases that show relationships between ideas
 - Synthesis language that brings sources into dialogue
 - Maintaining your analytical voice throughout
4. **Bring both versions** (before and after) to our next session for peer review

Goal: Transform source citation from reporting to conversation

Key Takeaways

- **Your thesis is your voice in an ongoing conversation**—you belong in the room
- **Academic writing is dialogue, not reporting**—make sources talk to each other and to you
- **Positioning is crucial**—know where you're coming from, where the field is, and where you're going
- **Genuine gaps matter more than artificial ones**—focus on meaningful contributions
- **Confidence is earned through preparation**—the better you know the conversation, the more confidently you can contribute

Remember: Your research matters because you have a unique perspective shaped by your experiences, training, and analytical approach.

Next Steps

- **Complete the homework assignment**—practice creating authentic dialogue with sources
- **Refine your Academic GPS**—keep working on clearly articulating your positioning
- **Schedule individual consultations** if you want to work on specific positioning challenges
- **For Writing Group participants:** Session begins at 1:00 PM - "Breaking Through Barriers"

Questions before we conclude the morning session?