



PROJECT MUSE®

Breaking into the Conversation: How Students Can Acquire Authority for Their Writing

Mark Gaipa

Pedagogy, Volume 4, Issue 3, Fall 2004, pp. 419-437 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ped/summary/v004/4.3gaipa.html>

Editors' Note: Since the inaugural issue of *Pedagogy*, the From the Classroom section has featured three to five essays, each ranging from five hundred to two thousand words. This issue is different. The two essays it showcases, by Mark Gaipa and Madeleine Kahn, are much longer than the typical From the Classroom piece. While the section will remain devoted to short, practical articles focused on the classroom, the substance, wit, and interest of these essays justified a change in format for this issue.

Breaking into the Conversation: How Students Can Acquire Authority for Their Writing

Mark Gaipa

What is an author's "authority," and where does it come from? Expertise, an air of confidence, reliability, and trustworthiness—all contribute to what we think of as a writer's authority, yet each of these traits obscures how writers acquire their authority by focusing unduly on the character of the author. Authority, I would contend, is less a characteristic than a relationship that a writer has with other authors, measuring how powerfully his or her work affects theirs. In a field such as literary criticism, writers gain authority only when they can relate their arguments to those of other critics and show how their arguments participate in, and extend, the work these critics have done on the writers' topic. An argument may be solid and interesting, but it will lack authority until its author clarifies its contribution to a larger critical community.

When I discuss authority this way, it may seem that I am taking it wholly out of the reach of undergraduate students. What authority do they have as writers in our classes? Apart from some little firsthand experience, not much; and when they write on a subject they are just learning—as they do in my expository writing class, when I assign an eight- to ten-page essay on Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* and insist that their arguments respond to the criticism of the novel—authority would seem to be the last thing one could expect students to achieve. Yet it is through such assignments that I ask students to develop their authority as writers. At stake here is how students use sources in their writing, as well as how they relate their writing to scholarship. Because student writers come to the field of criticism with virtually no authority, they must look to the work and reputation of professional critics to underwrite their own; whatever authority they achieve will come to them metonymically, through the association they form with scholars who already have it. In what follows, I will discuss how I help my students do this by having them “make room” for their arguments in the conversation critics have had about Hemingway’s novel. As students develop their own arguments about this book, they also develop a rhetorical relationship with professional critics. No longer bystanders, students become scholars by participating, with their essays, in a scholarly debate.

The Rude Awakening:

Introducing Students to the Malthusian Universe of Criticism

The essay assignment that I will be describing here—a multiple-source essay on Hemingway’s novel—represents the third, and longest, essay that students compose in my class; it is also the first time in the semester that I ask my students (all first-year college students) to deal with professional criticism (or “secondary sources”) in their own writing. In previous essays, we have either avoided sources (by conducting a close reading of an isolated primary text) or have worked with something we might call “primary” sources (by reading a novel in light of historical and biographical material). Only now do I ask students to address scholars’ interpretations of the primary text, and I make them responsible for quite a bit of criticism: twenty-four articles (or pieces of articles) about *The Sun Also Rises*, from which they eventually select at least three to incorporate into their essay. The overriding purpose of this assignment is to show students how to produce a genuine scholarly essay—one that is both aware of and responsible to the criticism about Hemingway’s text. This means that students cannot simply express what they think about the novel apart from what other critics have said about it, nor can they simply

report on the views and claims of these other critics without adding something of their own. They must instead devise an “original” argument about the novel that has importance in the field—or at least when measured against the backdrop of the criticism we read.

One of the key benefits of this unit is that it helps demystify *motive*—the term we use in Harvard’s Expository Writing Program to describe what makes an essay important and interesting. In previous units, motive was always imagined and conjectural—what students think someone else might find interesting or important about their essays. In the absence of an actual rhetorical context, students have to imagine a controversy in which their theses could be debated and perhaps make a difference. In my first two units, some students even react to the absence of such a scholarly context by inventing one, invoking in their papers a host of unnamed, dim-witted critics against whom they may launch their argument. Such a ploy is admirable in intent but always too vague to be convincing in practice. Happily, in their third essay, this particular difficulty has been removed because the criticism gives students access to the actual controversies that scholars have produced about their text. Because I now ask students to place their writing in a real writerly context, they may supply a motive for their essays by demonstrating how their arguments intervene in these ongoing critical debates.

There is a downside to all this: if in my first two units students have too much freedom to imagine alternatives to their point of view, in the third they often feel they do not have enough freedom, given all these other outlooks, to produce a worthwhile argument of their own. Now they must compete with other authors—who are, on the whole, more learned and eloquent than they—to say something important, interesting, and *original* about Hemingway’s book. At the start of the unit, students often feel overwhelmed by the criticism, and more than a few lament that they cannot say anything about the novel that the critics have not already said. They believe, in other words, that the field of criticism is saturated and that all the good arguments have been taken.

To some extent, this is precisely what I want students to feel. One reason I overload them with criticism is to simulate the reality of competition in the marketplace of ideas. Their fear that the field may be saturated is very much the anxiety of scholars who cannot call an idea their own if someone got to it before they did—something that happens all the time. Instead of protecting my students from feeling squeezed out, I try to get them to experience the scholar’s anxiety and then give them the tools to work through it. The apparent saturation of the critical field also makes essential (rather than

simply helpful) the strategies we discuss for making room for their own arguments; students now can build a distinctive and important argument of their own only if they confront—press up against, relate themselves to, and perhaps push back—what other critics have said. My job is to show them that the field is not saturated after all and that they can indeed find in it room to speak.

If this vision of scholarship—as a competition for original ideas—seems ruthless, there is another, more civil reason for overloading the students with criticism: only with a critical mass of interpretations can I breathe life into the metaphor of criticism as an ongoing “conversation” among scholars. When students read enough criticism about Hemingway’s book, they can see how each article responds—directly or indirectly—to the ones that came before it and fits into a continuing controversy about some aspect of the novel. They can also see how controversies and trends emerge over time, how scholarship has a history and a direction; it is not just a competition but also a common endeavor—collaborative knowledge about a text that unfolds dialectically over time.

Criticism as Conversation: Exercising in the Conference Ballroom

It is precisely this metaphor—of criticism as a conversation—that I use to induct students into the world of scholarship. Early in the unit, I draw a square on the blackboard and tell students that we are peering into the ballroom of one of the plush hotels in Key West where the Hemingway Society is holding its annual convention. I then begin to fill in the square with stick figures, which I identify as the various authors represented in our critical readings; they are all attending the conference (though some have to be revived from the dead), and they are all discussing the outlook on Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* that they wrote about in the articles we have read. With the criticism framed by this metaphor (and my crude drawings), I ask students to consider how they might map, onto this space, the various arguments they encounter in the criticism. Figure 1 illustrates one way we can picture this critical arena.

I have a few reasons for belaboring the metaphor in this way. First, I hope it personalizes the criticism by giving human faces (as it were) to the authors’ names; one cannot, after all, have a conversation with an abstraction. I also hope the metaphorical ballroom makes the overall field of criticism more visible to students: by collecting the criticism into a common frame, we recast the critics’ apparently disconnected arguments into a continuing exchange of ideas. Finally, I believe the metaphor offers students a clear path

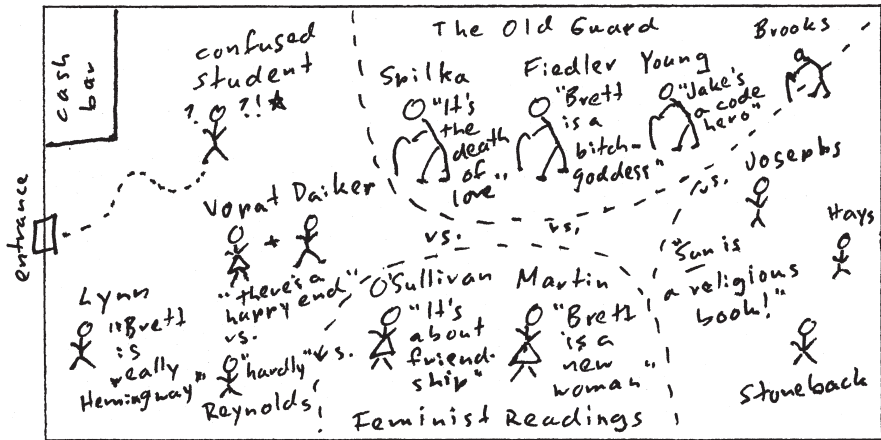


Figure 1. A cartoon of the conversation critics have had about Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*

into the scholars' debate: their reading and understanding of the criticism becomes the first step in relating themselves to the authors and in seeing themselves as potential participants in the critical discussion of the novel. Indeed, when students undertake a predraft exercise for this essay (which I will discuss presently), I emphasize how everyone who has published on Hemingway's novel—and thus everyone talking in the hotel ballroom—has had to go through the same basic steps the students are now undergoing in approaching their essays: first they have to enter the room and discern what the critics already inside are saying; then they have to evaluate the arguments and make some judgments about the position of authors and arguments in the critical terrain; and finally they need to discover where in the conversation they can step in. These are the three basic steps they perform in completing this exercise. For obvious reasons, we overlook the other rites of passage, such as specialized training and graduate degrees, that scholars are expected to satisfy before participating in this conversation.

First, students need to familiarize themselves with the criticism. In terms of our framing metaphor, they enter the ballroom and begin to take stock of what they see: they quietly wind about the authors and eavesdrop on their various conversations, trying to identify who's who and understand the critics' various positions, one by one. In their exercise, this correlates with their thinking about which topic they want to write on (I give them four choices), and also with their review of the related criticism (I have correlated

each topic with ten to twelve articles). To speed them along, I give students a quick annotation of each article, and I ask them to improve on that overview by reading the articles' opening and closing paragraphs.

Once students have gained some knowledge about the shape of this critical terrain, they are ready to take the next step—to begin evaluating the criticism that relates to their topic. I ask students to choose three articles they think may be useful to them and to study their arguments by noting such things as thesis, motive, and evidence—a procedure that can be repeated for all of the criticism. In terms of the metaphorical conference room, the students now begin to piece together the critics' ongoing conversation or controversy. How does the outlook of any critic constitute a distinctive view of Hemingway's novel? How does that argument relate to the arguments produced by other critics, working before or after? More broadly, are any of the student's three critics central to the conversation and thus standing in the middle of the ballroom? Are any of them instead more eccentric (or daring, or weird) in their arguments, and thus wandering alone along the walls, away from the crowd? What parts of the book—and what evidence from outside of it—are their authors invoking to advance their arguments? Can we distinguish which critics agree in outlook and stand together in the room and which are hotly arguing opposing views? Are any authors so opposed that they deliberately avoid one another by standing on different sides of the room? Are some authors so far removed in terms of assumptions and outlooks that they could not understand each other even if they were to meet in the room? One way I get students to consider such matters in this exercise is by asking them to study places in the essays where the authors are clearly interacting with other critics: Which critics do the authors call on to support their claims? Which critics do they defend their arguments against—or invoke as counterarguments in their essays? Here it becomes useful if we think of an article's motive as an “anti-thesis”: that view of the novel that the author is explicitly or implicitly arguing *against*. To foreground further this exchange between critics, I also ask students to examine what sources or other criticism authors list in the “works cited” section of their articles, as this will suggest how each article relates to previous criticism and which criticism may be more authoritative in the field.

Once students have evaluated the critical terrain and digested the criticism important to their topic, they have earned the right to take the next step—which is to speak, and thus add to the critical conversation about Hemingway's novel. But to do that, they also need to find a way in, and the

price of admission is to have an original idea (we might note, too, that only now are students in a position to judge whether an idea they have is original or not). Thus the last thing I ask students to think about in this exercise is where, in this ongoing conversation, they can find room for an argument of their own. This can be a sloppy operation, and it usually unfolds by jerks and starts as students draft and redraft their essays. Students need to figure out how they feel about Hemingway's novel, how they feel about the critical conversation, where in the room they want to stand, and with whom they want to interact. They will likely have to make concessions, and further differentiate their outlook, since they often discover that some critic is already standing on the spot they want to occupy with their argument. Some students begin the process already having fashioned arguments of their own, which they then must fit into the conversation; others approach the essay from the other direction, finding an opening in the criticism (which may be a problem, an oversight, an unfinished project) that they can then fill with an original argument about the novel. In the end, most students move back and forth between these two approaches as they draft the essay, working alternately with the novel and with the criticism.

Strategies for Opening a Space in the Conversation

As they begin to draft their essays, students are still likely to regard the field of criticism as saturated, or closed off to them; thus they have to develop a deliberate strategy for making room for themselves and for authorizing their arguments. Their first decision is to figure out where they want to stand in the overall conversation. I tell them that there are two basic maneuvers they can pursue at this point: they can push their argument toward the center of the room, or they can move it toward the margins. Each maneuver comes with pluses and minuses (see fig. 2).

On the one hand, if students pursue the first maneuver and move their arguments toward the center of the conversation, they may achieve a lot of authority for their arguments, because authority is concentrated in the center of the metaphorical ballroom. Yet the center of the room is also the most congested part of the conversation, and it is occupied by the most prestigious, intimidating scholars. To make room for their arguments amid this crowd, the students must rise to the challenge of pushing some of these people out of the way—or show us (their audience) that there is more room in the middle than we had imagined.

On the other hand, if students pursue the second maneuver and move

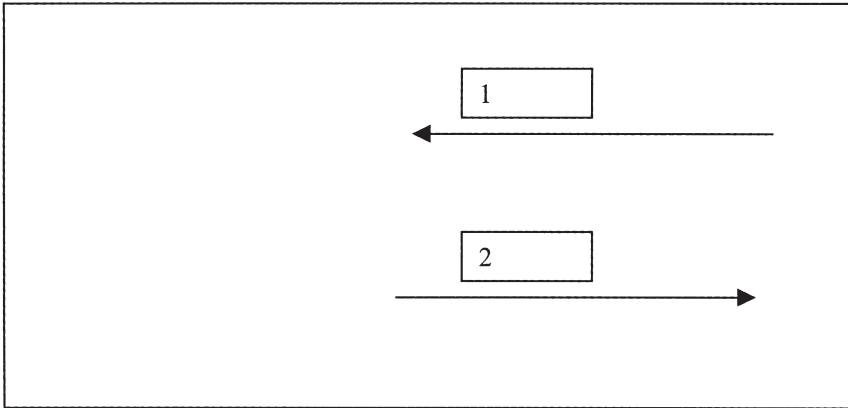


Figure 2. Two basic maneuvers for entering the conversation

their arguments toward the margins of the conversation, they will certainly meet less resistance to their arguments; unfortunately, this is because critics see little merit in this area of the critical debate—the margin is the resting place for trivial claims and implausible arguments. If students light out for this territory, they will likely have to shout loudly to attract attention and persuade their audience that there is indeed merit to their positions; their challenge is to show us (and those at the center of the conversation) why we should move in their direction.

As students draft their essays and better discern how their arguments relate to the arguments of other critics, I also discuss a series of more detailed strategies for positioning their outlooks. Over time, this advice has developed into a handout—eight strategies for relating to the critics, which I have essentially reproduced below. I explain to students the strengths and weaknesses of each strategy, and I also include diagrams to illustrate each maneuver. Students may already be familiar with some of these strategies, since many of them are modeled by the critics we have been reading. However, because these maneuvers are not clearly visible when we first view the criticism as a whole (as in fig. 1), these eight strategies allow us to magnify, as it were, what is happening in various sectors of that room and to differentiate the methods the critics use to relate to one another—methods students may now use to relate to them. The diagrams I draw to illustrate the strategies are not essential for the lesson, but I believe their cartoonish simplicity helps soften the otherwise daunting experience of taking on the pros.

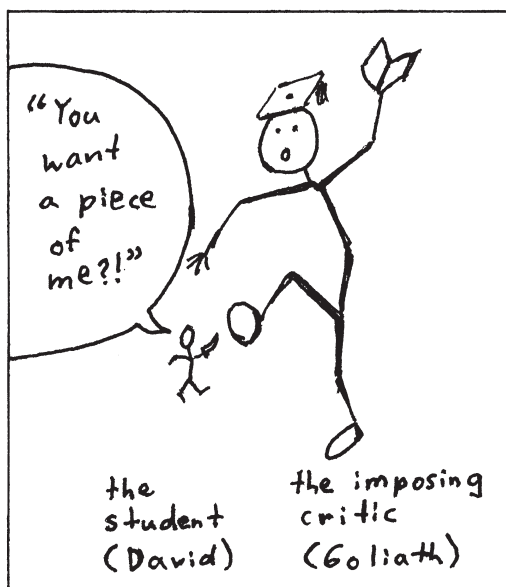


Figure 3. The picking-a-fight strategy

Strategy 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 (see fig. 3). In student writing, the strategy of “picking a fight” always evokes the story of David and Goliath. The advantage here for the students is that we like to root for the underdog; the students will get a big boost of authority (and dividends in motive) if—with their arguments—they can whittle the critics down to size, knock them to one side, and stand in the place they once occupied in the conversation. The disadvantage is that the students might appear presumptuous and delusional in attacking a critic who is clearly out of their league. This strategy is especially painful to witness if we suspect that students are in fact battling a straw man they have concocted by reducing a complicated argument to a level where they can finally knock it down. Rather than engage a critic at the center of the conference room, students may only be arguing with themselves in a closet next door.

Strategy 2: Ass Kissing

In this strategy, the student authors attempt to acquire authority by closely associating—and ingratiating—themselves with an established critic (see fig. 4). We can also label this technique “riding a critic’s coattails.” The drawback to such a strategy is clear: the students (along with their arguments) are likely to remain in the shadow of the critic, who has not budged from his or



Figure 4. *The ass-kissing strategy*

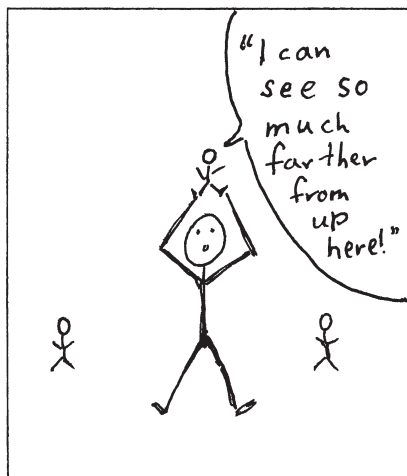


Figure 5. *The piggybacking strategy*

her spot on the floor. 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, even as they stay in the critic's good graces. That probably brings us to "piggybacking" (strategy 3). But students can still "kiss ass," and do it well, if they intervene in a critical dispute and defend one critic against another. Here they might perform the important work of resolving a controversy, even as their essays do little more than vindicate someone else's argument. The advantage of this strategy is that it puts the critic in the student's debt; it probably works best if the student comes to the defense of a critic who is being bullied by a more established critic. (Then again, how much authority can the student get from someone who has little of it?)

Strategy 3: Piggybacking

This strategy is a variant of "ass kissing," but it is much more effective (see fig. 5). 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. If we think of the student as David to the critic's Goliath, here the student-dwarves have found space for themselves in the crowded conversation by standing on the shoulders of a giant. This strategy can work wonderfully if the students borrow something from the critic (a theory, an idea) and apply it to a new subject or new part of the conversation: even as they extend the critic's influence, the students promote themselves (and build up their newfound authority) through the service they



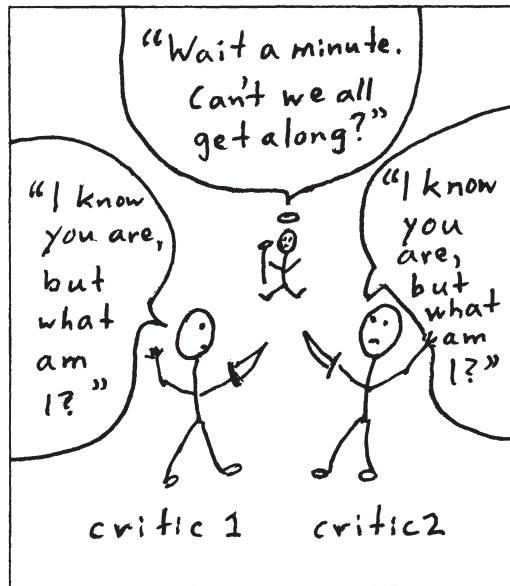
Figure 6. The leapfrogging strategy

are performing. Their authority (and power) is essentially that of preachers who exert their own will while speaking in God's name.

Strategy 4: Leapfrogging

This strategy (see fig. 6) is really a two-part maneuver that combines strategies 2 and 3 with strategy 1. 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. We might be tempted to label this approach "biting the hand that feeds you," but that would obscure the positive transfer of authority at the heart of this strategy. In fact, the compliment that students initially pay to individual critics (and to their authority) is later repaid in authority of their own: the critic remains in place but stands not quite as tall as before, and students have diminished him or her just enough to launch themselves (and their arguments) into a space nearby. "Leapfrogging" is an effective strategy in most college writing—partly because it appears to be evenhanded (students show us that they can see both the strengths and weaknesses of another argument), and partly because it is the basic mechanism for professional inheritance within the academy (where disciples pursue the most efficient route to professional advancement by turning dialectically on the

Figure 7. The peacemaker strategy



work of their mentors). The only drawback is that students may become overwhelmed by the oedipal conflict of having to wound their “mentors.”

Strategy 5: Playing Peacemaker

Here students set out to resolve a conflict or settle a dispute between two or more critics (see fig. 7). 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.” Students who have discerned a controversy in the criticism, but have not yet come up with a new argument of their own, will sometimes “play peacemaker” by contending that a “full understanding” of the novel becomes available only when we combine the valid but necessarily “partial” perspectives of the other critics. 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 (“playing peacemaker” here has perhaps morphed into “kissing the ass” of more than one critic). If I see this happening in a draft, I ask the students to consolidate into a sharp conflict the multiple views they have assembled, so their arguments do not just combine these outlooks but truly resolve their clear differences of opinion.

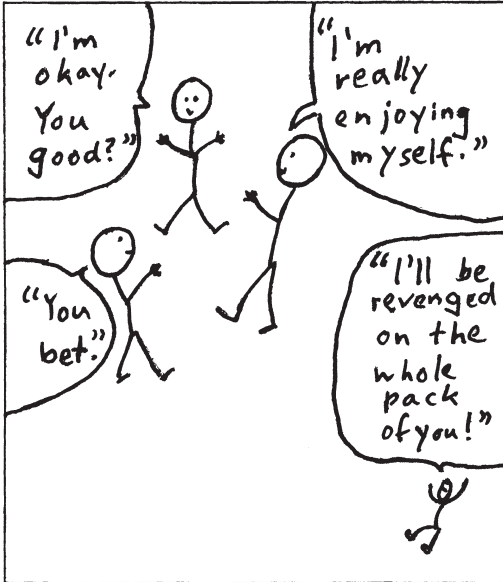
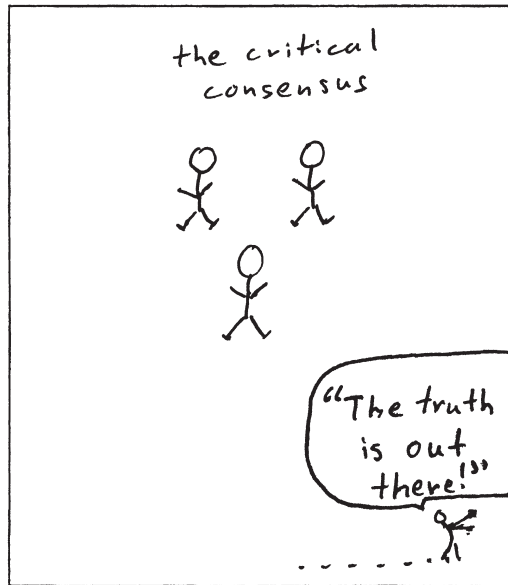


Figure 8. *The paranoid strategy*

Strategy 6: Acting Paranoid

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 (see fig. 8). 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. This strategy has all the power—and problems—of conspiracy theories, for the students have set out to upset basic warrants that inform a variety of arguments across the critical terrain. Such an argument can be compelling if students pull it off—especially if they show how a dispute between two or more critics is founded on a faulty assumption shared by all parties. This strategy also works if students can show us how agreement among critics is ill-founded or how a controversy that presumably has been settled is really still unresolved; after they have revealed the holes in the critical consensus, students can go on to settle the controversy in their own ways—and accept as their own the authority that others before them received for settling the debate. The drawback of this strategy is that it is hard to overturn warrants. When poorly executed, this argument will strike the reader as being unfairly dismissive of the other critics, and the author’s ethos will likely suffer—he or she will appear self-consumed, delusional, and antisocial.

Figure 9. *The dropping-out strategy*



Strategy 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 (see fig. 9). No doubt some of the strongest and more important arguments have been conducted by such critical wallflowers, but the drawback to this strategy is that students cannot win authority for their arguments if they do not somehow relate their ideas back to what others have done. 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. One worries, however, that students who embrace this strategy may simply be avoiding the difficulty of seriously engaging the criticism.

Strategy 8: Crossbreeding the Conversation with Something New

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 (see fig. 10). 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. On the one hand, the student identifies

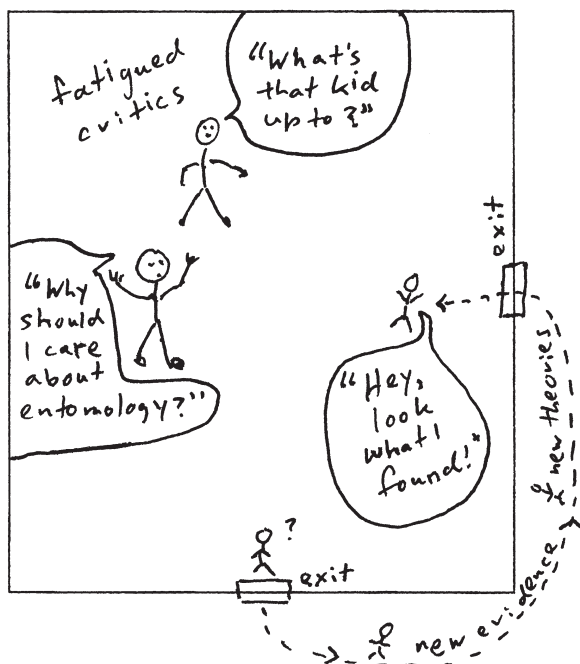


Figure 10. The crossbreeding strategy

something in the novel that scholars are not (but should be) talking about, perhaps by calling attention to an important detail in the text that everyone else has ignored. But often we can see important holes in a conversation only by reading the novel in some new way—which suggests (on the other hand) that the student may have to leave the conversation momentarily and return to it with something new. (This happened in Hemingway criticism in the early 1980s when scholars began to revise their thoughts on gender in Hemingway’s work—in part because of the influence of feminist theory, in part because scholars gained access to the *Garden of Eden* manuscript.) The danger of such cross-pollination is that the critical consensus may not recognize the relevance and authority of the theory the student has borrowed from another discipline.

■

I have deliberately stereotyped each of the above strategies, since this labeling makes the maneuvers seem more generic and transportable, and students can manipulate them more readily as a set of interchangeable argumentative tools. As students draft their papers, they generally benefit from such flexibility; a common problem early on is that they focus so intensely on

distinguishing themselves from one critic that they back into the argument of another, having lost sight of the overall critical terrain. Students' theses in this assignment have to be distinct not only from the arguments they cite but also from all of the arguments we read on their topic; so when students unwittingly step on the toes of another critic, I call that overlooked article to their attention—as will, hopefully, others in the class who have read the draft in a workshop or group conference—so the students can make the necessary adjustments. Sometimes this means finding a new argument, but more often students can expand the scope of their argument and triangulate their position amid the old and new critical views. The result is a more articulated argument that relates to the criticism in a variety of ways. (In the appendix, I offer some other advice that I give students for arriving at their own distinctive positions.) When students complete their final drafts, they usually wind up citing more than the three required critics, using them in different ways to advance their argument.

Students are generally proud of the essays they compose in this unit, citing the assignment as the one in which they learned the most during the semester. I worry, however, about a few things. It remains debatable, for instance, whether I should devote so much effort in class to writing as scholarship. This unit clearly asks students to take literary criticism seriously (should they?), and I sometimes promote the essay they write as being more “real” than the other writing they have produced in the semester. Some students respond by resisting the entire venture—denying the relevance and value of literary criticism and seeing the writing they produce as a pointless academic game. To some degree, I want to affirm their resistance, and I would worry if my students bought into the world of academia without reservation; certainly we witness, in the criticism we read, not only the good but the bad and the ugly, petty side of scholarship. However, I believe one of the strengths of the assignment is that it can accommodate their complaints, and the strategies I give students for entering the conversation are broad enough to encompass their resistance. If students want to take issue with the whole critical establishment, strategies 6, 7, and 8 give them three different ways to do so.

I also take seriously the criticism that this essay assignment—despite its heavy reliance on the metaphorical conversation among critics—ultimately winds up endorsing an agonistic, cutthroat view of scholarship. Indeed, many of the above strategies attest to just that—particularly strategies 1 and 6, where authority is not “earned” so much as stolen or appropriated, physically wrested away from authors who have it. Yet not all of the strategies are

combative; strategies 3 and 4, which are among the most effective, essentially involve collaborative relationships with another author, while strategy 5 is the very picture of consensus building. My hope is that students can find a strategy that suits their dispositions—or, better yet, one that suits the rhetorical demands of their evolving arguments. Naturally, I welcome any additional strategic relationships students may discover while working through the criticism.

In the end, I believe that the strategies I give students for entering the critical conversation are empowering, since they encourage students to use sources in ways they had never imagined. Instead of regarding secondary sources one-dimensionally—as something that gets in the way of their argument or threatens to preempt it—students may come to see their engagement with the criticism as an invaluable way to motivate, develop, and refine their own point of view. Certainly they become better readers of Hemingway for working so intimately with the sharp readings of his critics, and they come to care about this scholarship precisely because it has become personal to them. Even more important for students is the fact that the criticism is not *simply* personal; through the long process of drafting their essays, they have become other than themselves, crafting along the way their professional persona as scholars.

The last thing I ask students to do, before they hand in their final draft, is to write a cover letter in which they explain to me the strategy they have employed for entering the critical conversation—and naturally I insist that they illustrate their intervention with a picture. After humbling myself before them with my silly stick figures, I delight in turning this task over to students and daring them to do better (alas, they always do). I include two such pictures (figs. 11 and 12) drawn by students in my class. To the untrained eye, these drawings may seem to be simplistic, childish cartoons. In reality, each signals how these students have become “authors”—and “authorized”—as never before. Instead of simply using scholarship, they are now making it.

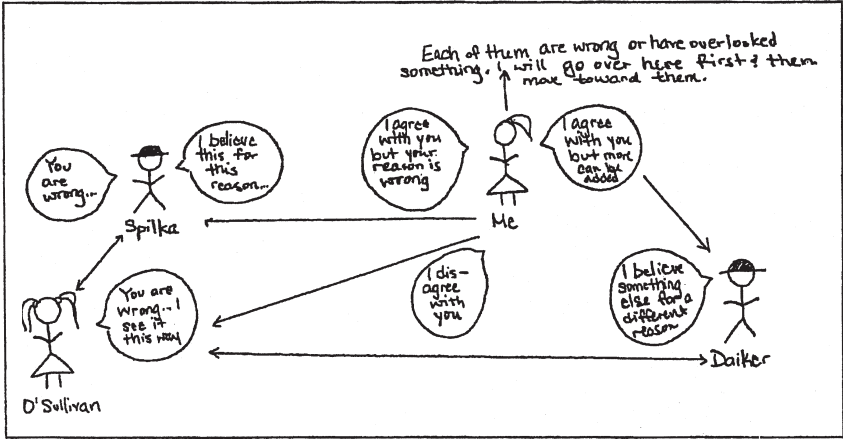


Figure 11. How Li, in her essay, opens a space for herself in the criticism

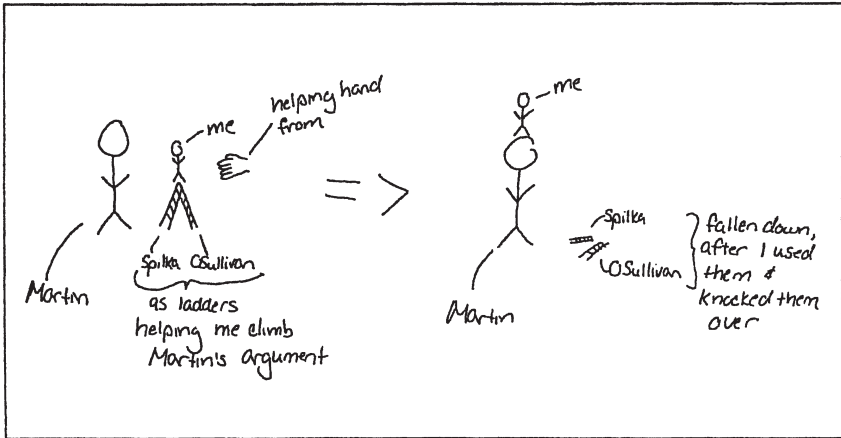


Figure 12. How Jenn, in her essay, opens a space for herself in the criticism

Appendix: Some Advice I Give Students for Handling the Criticism as They Craft Their Arguments

1. Be wary about invoking critics in your essay whose opinions are not well respected by the community of critics; if they are truly unworthy of attention, engaging these critics (or their arguments) will only drag your essay down. You can best build up your argument by agreeing (or disagreeing) with authoritative critics whose opinions carry weight—though you can always champion an argument that you think has been unfairly overlooked.
2. Consider an article's date of publication. Are the arguments in certain essays dated, since the critical conversation has moved on to new issues and outlooks?

Are the arguments in the most recent articles too trendy or narrow in scope? When building your argument, don't confine yourself to old criticism—written, say, in the 1950s; that will make your argument sound out of touch. You need to show your audience that your argument is relevant today and that you are aware of recent trends in the criticism. But an essay that is not aware of earlier criticism on your topic (or the broad contours of Hemingway criticism over time) may itself seem shortsighted.

3. When studying the criticism, you should try to engage articles you completely agree with, as well as those you completely disagree with. Realize that both kinds of articles pose a threat to your outlook: the arguments you disagree with aim to silence your outlook, while the pieces you agree with also silence you by preempting what you have to say. Try to find a space in the critical terrain in which your argument can speak back to both parties: you'll want to defend your argument against those critics who would dispute your outlook, and you'll also want to clarify how your outlook is indeed different from the views of critics who seem to agree with you.
4. Don't feel that you have to treat all three (or more) pieces of criticism *equally* in your essay. These articles can play different roles in your argument, and some of these roles may be more important (and prominent) than others. For instance, one article of the three may be crucial for defining your outlook, while the other two can function more peripherally as support for your argument. Likewise, you may want to launch your argument off of the thesis of one essay, but your interest in another article may be confined to the way it interprets a certain passage. There are innumerable ways to situate your argument and essay amid these three other articles.
5. After you've drafted your essay, you'll probably want to go back to the criticism and read other articles on your subject. Why? You now have an investment in a particular reading of Hemingway's novel, and you'll want to know how well it stands up against what other critics say: Do they agree or disagree with your reading? Where have they come close to saying the same thing you're saying? Just how original is your idea? You may discover that you can better promote your argument by framing it with articles that you initially overlooked.

Note

I presented a version of this essay in April 2001 at the Harvard Expository Writing Program's Teaching Colloquium. I thank my colleagues (past and present) in the program—especially Nancy Watterson and Gordon Harvey—for their thoughtful comments and suggestions.