Writing is a Conversation

Slide 1 (Introduction)
Hi, everyone! This is Heather from the Purdue Writing Lab. In today's video, we're going to be talking about ways to think about how scholarly writing is a conversation. The goal of this video is to help new graduate students approach writing as an opportunity to participate in an ongoing dialogue with other scholars. Whether you are a new master's student or a PhD student, you will be asked to make and defend arguments through your writing, and it is important to recognize how your claims contribute to the existing scholarship of your field. In this video, we will discuss strategies to *locate* and *join* the current scholarly conversation by finding relevant and reputable sources, and we will also discuss ways to build your self-confidence as a graduate student writer by positioning yourself as an active participant within these academic conversations.

This is the first video in our fall 2020 vidcast series for new graduate students, so be sure to check out our upcoming additions to this Introduction to Graduate Writing Series. In addition to discussing how writing is a scholarly conversation, this series will include videos describing how writing is a process, a social endeavor, and a disciplinary practice. We hope these videos help you to feel more prepared and more confident as graduate student writers.

Slide 2 (Unpacking the idea of a scholarly conversation)
Throughout this video, we will be framing writing as a conversation. Thinking about writing in this way helps us to recognize how the existing published work in your academic discipline or field allows scholars to engage—or "talk"—with one another. Academic discourse allows scholars to respond to each other's arguments, address and shape publishing trends, and move the conversation forward by offering new or nuanced insight into a topic.

As with any other type of conversation, academic dialogues play by a specific set of rules in terms of what is considered appropriate for each discipline or field. To unpack this idea of conversational rules, let's think about how you might shape different personal conversations in your everyday life. For example, imagine how you would describe your weekend activities to your best friend. Next, think about explaining that same information to a respected elder in your family. Finally, how would you respond to one of your advisors or professors if they asked about your weekend? Even though these three conversations engage with the same subject matter, how would you navigate those discussions differently based on your conversation partner? For example, how might your vocabulary change? How would you adjust the structure or organization of your story? Would you change the main focus or content of your story altogether

depending on your conversation partner? What assumptions about existing shared knowledge could you make depending on who you're talking to?

We make these kinds of conversational decisions every time we talk to someone. The goal of this video, then, is to help you feel more prepared to translate these skills you already possess into your own academic writing. Whether you are writing a seminar paper, a journal article, or a chapter for your thesis or dissertation, you are entering a scholarly conversation governed by your field's discipline-specific rules for a particular type of writing. These rules—or genre conventions—establish the norms and standards of a writing project. Keep in mind that these norms and expectations shift over time. With that said, this is a friendly reminder to check out our other videos in this series for new graduate student writers, especially if you would like to learn more about how writing is *disciplinary* and how discipline-specific writing expectations shape genre conventions in your field.

Slide 3 (Genre)

Let's continue to break down this idea of genre conventions. Remember, these shift over time, and they establish expectations around things like argument structure and execution, and they establish the expected citation format and level of hedging for a particular type of writing. Discipline-specific genre conventions also help shape sentence-level factors like vocabulary, idiom usage, and whether active or passive voice is appropriate for a particular type of writing.

The hope for this video is to help you figure out how you can better understand your field's existing scholarly conversation and genre conventions so you can enter that conversation with success.

Slide 4 (Reflect on your own field!)
The previous slides went through quite a bit of information, so let's take a few moments to pause and reflect. In a moment, I'll ask you to set a timer for ten minutes and to journal about your current understanding of your field's scholarly conversation. There are a couple of ways you can approach this reflection time, and if you don't have all of the answers now, do not fret! If you don't feel confident answering any of these prompts, find someone who can help you. After this slide, we'll talk more about resources and next steps.

For now, thought, let's pause here and set a ten-minute timer. What do you know about your field's scholarly expectations? What do you know about the document-level, paragraph level, and sentence level writing expectations in your field? For example, what citation style are you expected to use? How are journal articles in your field usually structured? You can also reflect on your field more broadly here, if that is helpful to you. Who are some of the foundational voices in the existing published conversation? Who are some of the more recent writers who

have continued to shape your field and who inspire your work? How have those more recent writers gone about challenging or building upon older arguments? How do scholars in your field organize their arguments altogether? If you're unsure about any of these questions, again, that's okay. Make a list of questions you have and make a plan to talk to your advisor, your course professors, or your colleagues about them. When you're ready, set your timer and start journaling. We'll continue in a moment.

Slide 5 (Locating the conversation)
Welcome back. Now that we've taken some time to reflect on what you already know about your field's ongoing scholarly conversation and what questions you still have, let's talk about ways to actually locate that conversation that you're going to enter as a graduate student writer. This is an opportunity to talk to your advisor, meet up with fellow students in your program who are at least a few semesters ahead of you, and to comb through your course syllabi. Reading through seminar syllabi can help you get a sense of the major journals in your field and it can also help you to find other sources to engage with. It's worth noting here that finding these resources can provide you with a bibliography that you can use to find other texts involved with and considered important to a particular scholarly conversation. Once you find a reputable article, for example, check out the sources listed in that text's reference list. This strategy, sometimes called "source mining" or "data mining," helps you to trace a scholarly conversation as you dig through reference lists. Techniques like these can help you to more easily and more thoroughly engage with scholarly dialogue.

As you navigate through scholarly conversations, it's important to consider the caliber of your sources. Many of us have probably heard of peer reviewed sources before, but what does this actually mean? The peer review process is a rigorous process within academic publishing that aims to elevate the integrity, credibility, and quality of published works within a field. Peer review sources have been vetted by a group of experts within a particular field. This means that a peer reviewed source has been assessed not only by an editor but also by a panel of anonymous reviewers made up of esteemed scholars within a particular discipline. This process is meant to allow scholars to self-regulate and maintain a high standard of work.

If you're looking to better understand the existing scholarly conversation within your field, finding peer reviewed sources is a way to ensure that a particular text is credible.

Slide 6 (library)
If you need help finding peer reviewed works or if you are struggling to find reputable works that relate to your own research interests, libraries often have features to help get you started. If you are a Purdue student, for example, one of the best ways to locate an existing scholarly conversation is to use the "Ask a Librarian" chat feature that is available on our library page or to schedule a consultation with a reference librarian. If you're viewing this video from a different

institution, check out the resources available to you through your university.

Once you've found a few journal articles, you might also consider checking out the free online resources provided by the Purdue OWL (Online Writing Lab) to learn more about tools like reverse outlining or genre analysis. These tools are great ways to make sense of the different components that make up a published work so you can more easily produce those components in your own academic writing.

This is a moment to recognize that writing is a process. We'll talk more about this in a future video for this new graduate student writer series, but for now, keep in mind that locating and working with academic sources plays a large part of that process. Even when you're not actively accumulating words on the page, you are engaging with the writing process each time you work with your sources.

Slide 5 (Organizing and using sources)
Now that we've talked a bit about locating the scholarly conversation, let's talk briefly about keeping all of this information organized. One of the most helpful things you can do for yourself as a new graduate student is to keep track of your sources now. Down the road, when you're preparing your preliminary exams or prospectus or even a regular seminar paper, you can save yourself a lot of headaches by keeping track of your sources. Citation managers like Zotero or Endnote help you to generate proper citations for your sources, and even more helpful, they allow you to keep track of the different texts you're engaging with throughout your coursework. As you start to keep track of your sources, you might find that you are engaging with the same source across multiple occasions, course discussions, research projects, and so on. Here we can start to think about how texts move through scholarly dialogue and serve the conversation differently depending on how you choose to use that text.

Citation managers also often allow you to annotate your sources so that you can look back on a particular source later and have notes to remember the main argument and significance of that text. Creating an annotation that's even just three or four quick sentences can help make a huge difference down the road when you're trying to reflect back on a collection of research. Annotations should be brief, and they should offer a clear of the text's main argument or contribution to a scholarly conversation. You might also use your annotations to assess how a particular source relates to other texts in your bibliography.

For those of you affiliated with Purdue, our library has LibGuides or library guides dedicated to helping you navigate different citation managers. Additionally, the Purdue Writing Lab consults with Purdue writers about citation usage and management all the time, so reach out to us. Play around and see what works best for you! Again, if you're feeling lost, reach out to a librarian or schedule an appointment at your local writing center. What resources are available to you

through your university or community?

Slide 6 (general tips)
We have covered a lot of information so far, so let's slow things down a bit and go over some general dos and donts about how to enter a scholarly conversation.

First, *do* Seek out feedback from multiple outside readers. This is a friendly reminder to those of you at Purdue that the writing lab is here to help writers of *all levels.* Strong writers benefit from working with the lab, too!

Next, use proper citations. Although citation guidelines will shift overtime, it's helpful to establish a base of understanding sooner rather than later. If you need help, try exploring Zotero or Endnote.

It's also essential to Synthesize information and Draw connections between your sources. To successfully enter a scholarly conversation, you need to enter with an actual understanding of the existing conversation. It's crucial here to showcase your comprehension and retention of key concepts, but you won't just be repeating what everyone else has already said.

Remember that having a conversation with someone involves listening to and soliciting information from someone, of course, but it also involves you contributing something to the dialogue as well. If you're not contributing to a discussion, that exchange becomes more of a lecture than a conversation. Look for gaps or limitations or lingering questions in the existing conversation and attempt to address those gaps in your own work. It's also appropriate to Posit critiques and ask critical questions in your work. After all, points of dissent are what move academic conversations forward.

As for things to avoid in your academic writing, resist the urge to be overly formal or casual in your work. Again, explore the existing conversation to get a sense of appropriate tone, word choice, and phrasing patterns.

Next, avoid generalizations or making sweeping statements in your work. Instead, be specific in your writing and stay within the scope of your project. You won't be demonstrating everything you know in any particular piece of writing.

Our next point here might feel obvious, but it's one we still need to talk about. As you enter a scholarly conversation, do not plagiarize. Present work that is your *own*, and when you use outside sources to back up or support your claims, be sure to offer proper citations. Like plagiarism, we also want to avoid writing that paraphrases too closely to the original source material. This is sometimes called patchwriting. When a writer relies heavily on paraphrasing or

patchwriting, they often need to revisit the source material and strengthen their comprehension of that material.

If you need help integrating your sources in your written work, consider exploring the Purdue Online Writing Lab, or OWL's discussion of quoting, summarizing and paraphrasing sources. If you are a student, staff member, or faculty member of Purdue's main campus, you can also come chat with a tutor in the writing lab or check out our free workshops that cover a series of topics like how to use citation managers and how to integrate sources in your work. If you are affiliated with Purdue's main campus, come visit us! We are here to help you. If you are working at a different institution, check out the resources available to you through your campus, and you're always welcome to check out our free materials through the Purdue OWL as well as through our YouTube channel.

Slide 7

Thank you all for joining me today. I hope this video helps to give you a better understanding of how writing is a scholarly conversation. Go forth and converse with confidence, Everyone!