

What does it mean to “connect your work to an ongoing conversation”?

*Placing your research within a wider academic discourse or ‘conversation’ is a standard requirement for academic writing, but what does it actually mean? In this cross-post, **Pat Thomson**, explores the concept and suggests that three principles: supporting an argument, indicating an approach and evaluation to outline a new position, form the basic elements of connecting your work to a research conversation.*

We often hear that writing about your research is, or ought to be, joining a conversation. Other people have discussed your topic before and your writing needs to connect with that conversation. And “the conversation” actually means the published literature.

Why? But why?

Well, connecting your research with other writings in the field means that you aren’t engaged in a monologue over in your own little corner, but are talking with a community which is interested in the same question, topic, puzzle. And by plugging your work into what has gone before you are helping the scholarly community to build knowledge and develop greater understandings. When you refer to other writings, you are also orienting your readers – they can place your work within the discussions they know about.

However, the more pressing question for academic writers may not be *why* you need to interact with existing texts, but *how* you tie your work in. What does this conversation-connecting look like in and as writing? Unfortunately, this is a how-long-is-a-bit-of-string question, that is, the answer could go on forever. But it is nevertheless possible to see and say something about joining, and textual fasteners.



Here are three common examples of connecting your work to a pre-existing conversation. These are not all there is. You will find other examples every time you read. It’s helpful to occasionally focus on these, as understanding the range of options you have for conversation-connection-work allows you to make choices about what you will do in your own writing. So my examples are only illustrative. My intention is to show you what focusing on the textual minutiae of connection to the wider and ongoing conversation looks like – and show you what it means when people like me say – read for the writing, look at what writers are doing and how.

I happen to be re-reading a book about professionalism ([Freidson, 2004](#)), so I’ve plucked the three examples from this text. I could have used any piece of academic writing. But this was at hand.

Writers connect their writing to the field by referring to the literatures and they **make sure they are engaging with what is already being discussed**. They refer to existing literatures to:

1. Support an argument

The literatures provide evidence for an argument that the author is building, move by move. Below my chosen writer, [Freidson](#), is making a point and drawing on other studies that exist in the field to do so. In the extract Freidson wants to say that there are different types of tacit knowledge – he makes this case through referencing different studies and so stitches his current work into the pre-existing field at the same time.

“What is tacitly known and used of course depends on the particular work: it is one thing for business executives and college professors (Wagner and Sternberg, 1986), quite another for tellers in a bank and machine operators in a paper products factory (Kusterer 1978) and still another for the bricoleur (Levi-Strauss, 1966; Berry and Irvine 1986, 271-4).”

Freidson connects by taking three pieces of supporting evidence from the field. And look at how he rhetorically makes his links – *it is one thing for... quite another ... and still another..*

But making a connection with other work can be much more explicit, as in:

“The concept of discretion is central to (worker autonomy and control) and deserving of special status. As Fox (1974, 26-35) has shown at some length in analyzing industrial work, the right of discretion implies being trusted, being committed, even being morally involved in one’s work.”

Here Freidson names the particular evidence and its author. *As Fox as shown...* Freidson uses Fox’s empirical study to underpin and advance his own argumentation. Note the use of *at some length* which suggests that Fox has provided empirical evidence, not just asserted something.

We often think of this kind of referencing as simply evidencing, which it is, but it is also simultaneously coupling your textual carriage into a train of thought in your field. And who you join with might be important – you generally need to choose references that really do connect with yours. Flimsy connections can easily be seen by people who know the field. You have to make your joins solid.

2. Indicate the approach they are taking

Rather than inventing his own terminology, Freidson uses a term already common in the field.

“Borrowing from Kusterer (1978) we might call all of the knowledge and skill used in work, whatever the source and the content, whether everyday or formal, working knowledge.”

The use of a pre-existing term signalled by *Borrowing from* pins Freidson’s work to an existing line of thinking and writing. When the reader encounters the familiar term, they are prompted to remember what they know of the existing work and to associate their current reading with it. They understand that Freidson is following a precedent. You often see this kind of connecting-via-borrowing-and-defining in this written form – description of the thing followed by *what (name) calls (term)*.

You will also read connections made to other work in order to avoid a lengthy rationale for a particular approach. Justifying taking a particular approach to a topic can mean a comprehensive review of the literatures. To avoid an unnecessary diversion, a writer can use a pre-existing approach. Here, Freidson uses other people’s literatures to support his take. This is an economical way to build your work with writing that has gone before.

“I shall use the word “ideology” to refer to those elements. Unlike some writers (for reviews of usage, see Lichtheim 1967; Larrain 1979; McLellan 1986) I do not use the term to imply either empirical falsity or deliberate efforts to mask group, class, or institutional interests.”

Freidson states his interpretation of a term, and justifies it by referring to other literature reviews – his references in brackets say he’s not the only one to use this definition of the term ideology, but he knows that there is another approach. *I shall .. unlike some writers..I do not...* And he is neatly connected in with both those who share his line of attack, and those who don’t.

Academic writers also use literatures to **signal where and how they are offering something new.**

3. Evaluate the field and offer a new position

Below Freidson outlines what appear to be very different understandings of “work”, but which, he suggests, have some commonality as far as he is concerned. (I haven’t copied this paragraph in full, and I hope you can still see how Freidson is both spelling out his particular and different position, yet still interacts with ongoing conversations.)

“Several useful surveys of the meanings imputed to work in the Western world are available to use. Tilgher (1958) was concerned primarily with ... Applebaum (1992) on the other hand, was more concerned with... and Meakin (1976) with the (see also Anthony, 1977). As varied as are the intentions of those surveys, two basic issues run through them all – the value of meaning of work in and of itself, and the value of different kinds of work.”

Freidson’s concern is with these latter two points.

He has a more fundamental concern, Freidson is suggesting, than focusing on various variants that have been dominant in the field. His work is unifying as well as challenging. – *two basic issues run through them all.*

Now, Freidson could have just written that there are two basic issues which underpin all of the surveys of the meanings imputed to work and then referred to the authors in brackets, or written them as a list. But foregrounding the different understandings brings together different strands of thinking, and connects all of them with his own argument.

Now what?

So, three examples of what connecting to the conversation looks like – three examples of the use of [academic meta-discourse](#). As I’ve said, these aren’t the only ways to tie your work into your field. There are loads of options. But these three particular actions – supporting an argument, indicating an approach, evaluating and offering something new – are pretty common to academic argument. You have to show you know what’s gone before and how and where your work relates. And you have to indicate where and how you’re going to add something. All this depend on you being able to work with – analyse, evaluate – the literatures and then construct the bridges to your own argument.

And as I said. getting down and dirty with the detail of how other people do the conversation-connection work in their writing can be useful. You find out what you *want* to do in your text, as well as what you *can*. And you’ll be strengthening your writing as you do.

This post originally appeared on [Pat Thomson’s](#) blog, Patter, as: [what does “connect your work to an ongoing conversation” mean?](#)

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