

**GRADUATE STUDENT
TIP:**

The literature review as a party

For a while now I have been reading about the kinds of writing that happen in different disciplines. One of the best descriptions I came across was a metaphor about graduate school and the learning curve academic discourse (the way we write, speak, and display knowledge in each discipline) requires. Burke (1967) describes discipline-specific academic discourse as a party:

You enter, listen to the conversation, add your thoughts, someone else adds to those thoughts, you agree with someone, and someone disagrees with you. Eventually you leave the party and others arrive.

I extend this metaphor to graduate writing so it encompasses the experience of learning to add your voice and thoughts to the conversation that is happening in your discipline. Here's my version of Burke's metaphor:

You enter a party, late. You don't know anyone, but they are engaged in a heated debate. You can't enter the discussion until you have listened long enough to know who has said what, and who is agreeing with whom. The issues become clearer the more you listen, and you learn the names of the people that most of the party-goers are listening to. Eventually you build up enough contextual and background knowledge to add your own ideas to the conversation, but not before you understand how to appropriately add your ideas.

As a graduate student, you enter the party of academia as a latecomer. Take solace in knowing that all graduate students enter late. You can also take solace in knowing that after you have left the party, more newcomers will arrive and be as equally surprised by how people talk about the research and theories in the field.

Writing a literature review is like writing a review of a party. Who was there, who said what, and who agreed with whom informs the reader of the context in which your research and thesis occur.

If you'd like some pointers on how to talk about what others said or wrote, check out the templates at the end of the great little book, *They Say, I Say*, by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein (2006).



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