

Contextualizing Your Argument

You've written your literature review, and you're ready to embark on your last project of the semester, the argument contribution. Chances are that by now, you've focused your primary claim, you've already begun thinking of which of your sources can best support your argument, and you're ready to start writing.

But wait!

Remember Burke's parlor theory of composition. In this, he argues that writing in the academic mode is akin to listening to a conversation at a party. To join the conversation, first you need to listen and be able to position your own arguments within the larger discussion. In some papers, this will be served by an entire literature review before the argument. For our purposes, this will be a condensed, focused discussion. Some of this may be borrowed from your literature review, but some of it may be adapted or newly drafted material.

In your first two (or so) pages following your introduction, you should provide any historical, cultural, scientific, or theoretical context that serves as “background” to your argument.

Imagine that a hypothetical student (we'll refer to her as Sarah) is writing a paper on colorblind casting in media today. She feels passionately about it, has done a great deal of research, and is ready to discuss why she feels it is so valuable. She begins by discussing why she believes it is important for Hollywood to practice colorblind casting, and lists several examples of when films produced in the last ten years have not done so. She explains that these films have been panned, and goes on to quote several scholars as to why this lack of representation matters to people of color. She goes on to analyze several television shows that have practiced colorblind casting to great critical and popular acclaim. She quotes a film scholar, a professor in African American studies, and a study that discusses how children who grow up with media representation tend to have better self-esteem. She concludes with a paragraph on how films can take a cue from television in the future.

But . . .

As you probably have noticed in the last paragraph, there are some critical pieces missing from Sarah's argument.

- *Key terms:* What is colorblind casting? She could be more specific about what she means by this (is it colorblind casting to cast a black actor in the role that has been traditionally cast with a white actor?).
- *Historical context:* Hollywood has a long history of casting white actors to play the roles of people of color. Acknowledging this seems an important part of the discussion.

- *Cultural context:* It seems remiss to not at least briefly discuss the Broadway show *Hamilton*, which has prompted live theatre to think much more carefully about how they have cast their shows—and it has raised a discussion about how to portray historical characters in a way that makes them relevant today.

Adding these elements won't only fulfill the assignment; it'll offer Sarah a more complex and nuanced foundation for her argument. It's much more compelling for her to argue that Hollywood's history has long favored representation of certain ethnic groups over others than it is for her to simply begin discussing several different films. And if she goes on to add that this conversation is even more relevant because of the recent cultural phenomenon of *Hamilton*, it adds urgency and tension to the argument that she plans to make.

One last note!

If you haven't already covered some of the historical or cultural context in your literature review, be sure to conduct some research that will answer these questions for you. Be careful not to make assumptions! Our predecessors have often grappled with many of the same issues that we continue to face today. It might be tempting to make a claim based on cultural osmosis of a particular time or idea, but the realities are often much more complicated.

Be wary of statements like these that declare absolutes in history:

- “Before 1950, nobody questioned the idea that the nuclear family was the best option.”
- “In the Victorian era, marriage was much more sacred than it is now.”
- “Today's students are far more lazy and dependent on technology than they ever have been before.”