

# Risk Assessment

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Setting the Stage for More Daring Performances in Academic Writing

‘... An essay is ... a site of experiment ...’.

Robert Crawshaw, *The Essay as Performance*

‘... writing consists of making choices, an important insight for young writers to develop.’

Ilona Leki, *Twenty-Five Years of Contrastive Rhetoric*

## Point of Departure: A Proposition

A memorable theatrical performance = strong **CHARACTERISATION**

acts of **changing one's voice, body language, movements, gestures, twitches ...**

A memorable academic writing performance = articulating a **POSITION**

acts of employing rhetorical devices: **relational language, argument strategies, hedging, reporting, emphasis, ...**

# Presentation outline

1. Two performance problems: 1. for the student; 2. for the educator
2. Two teaching responses – one being a slightly risky suggestion re tenses!
3. Two further teaching suggestions:
  - Marking criteria
  - Small group work
4. Final thoughts

## Example text: Student 1

Lopez (2000) stated that it's illegal for country to invade another even to stop humanitarian disaster if there was no vote in United Nations. On the contrary, Patel (2007) said it's okay.

## Example text: Student 2

Patel (2007) diverges from Lopez (2000) in a bold and ethical argument. She agrees that invading another country is illegal, but she states that it is not always *unacceptable* even if there has not been a vote in the United Nations first. She points out that the United Nations takes a long time to organize votes so intervention could be crucial, for example, to prevent a humanitarian disaster. . .

## Questions for the Teacher:

NOT: ~~Which is the better of the two examples?~~

RATHER: What *risks* might Student 2 have taken to achieve this level of writing?

AND: Have I, as an assessor, acknowledged (rewarded?) the risks taken by the student?

## Context: conversations & academic discourse communities

**Students join conversations** = ideas, theories, beliefs – need to become familiar with / listen to >>>>> contribute to what is being said

BUT:

**Academic Discourse Communities** also have (academic) cultural expectations not just in terms of academic conventions and practices but regarding use of ...

**rhetorical strategies** = devices used to articulate a line of argument



## Problem 1 (student)

Every time a student sits down to write for us, he [she] has to invent the university for the occasion – invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like History or Anthropology or Economics or English. He [she] has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community.

David Bartholomae (1986: p. 4)

## Rhetorical strategies: some examples

**Context** – saves reader having to infer/deduce meaning

**Relational** connections – ideas/authors relative to each other (SOHO Taxon.)

**Tenses** – to show stance by revealing proximity to cited ideas

**Caution** – demonstrates judgement dictated by evidence cited

**Interpretation** – demonstrates understanding of data and/or idea

**Reporting** – inclusion of verbs to convey subtle messages

**Positioning** – where others in discourse community stand relative to each other  
– your stance relative to others in discourse community

# Expectations & responsibilities

**Academics:** in general, take for granted rhetorical devices

- some they **EXPECT** e.g., incl. context, being cautious, evaluation ...
- others they **HOPE FOR** e.g., varied use of reporting verbs, wide vocab ...

**EAP Teacher: responsibility** to introduce students to use of rhetorical devices > build student confidence to encourage risk-taking

**Student responsibility:** take risks > **try on unfamiliar ways of expressing oneself**

## Problem 2

‘...the ability to understand may far exceed the skill to use that understanding’.

(Leki, 1991: p. 138)

In other words: what is practised and “understood” in the classroom is not always applied in essays

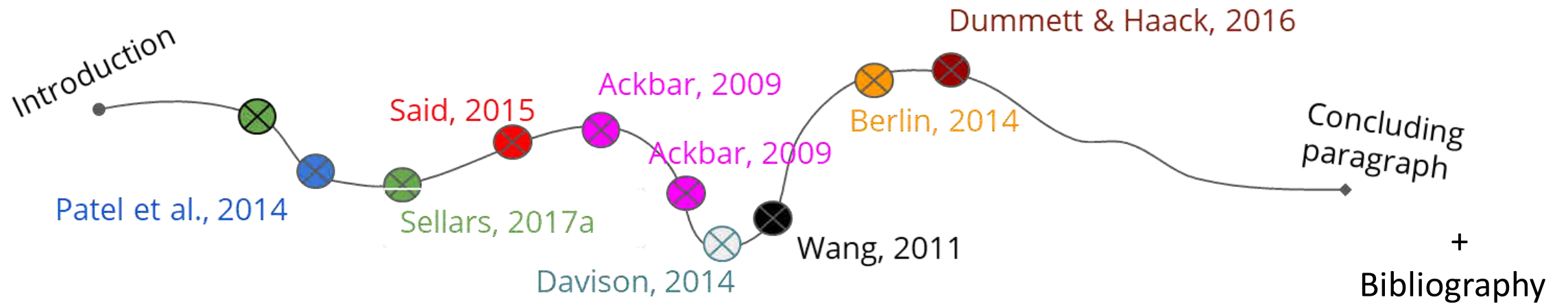
Why? – Because risky! Easier to stay within comfort zone of what you know

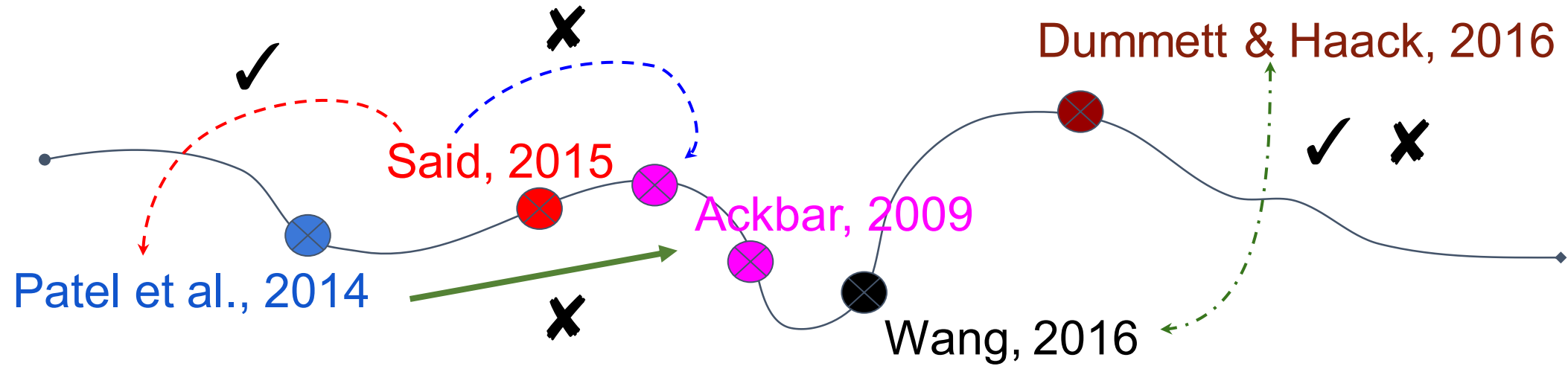
## Take steps to discourage risk-aversion: 4 suggestions based on working with Pre-Masters students

‘Performance in writing, in painting, or in dance is made up of thousands of tiny movements, each made with a calculation that is also its innocence’.

Richard Poirier (1971: p. 71)

# Suggestion 1. Show students how to highlight relationships





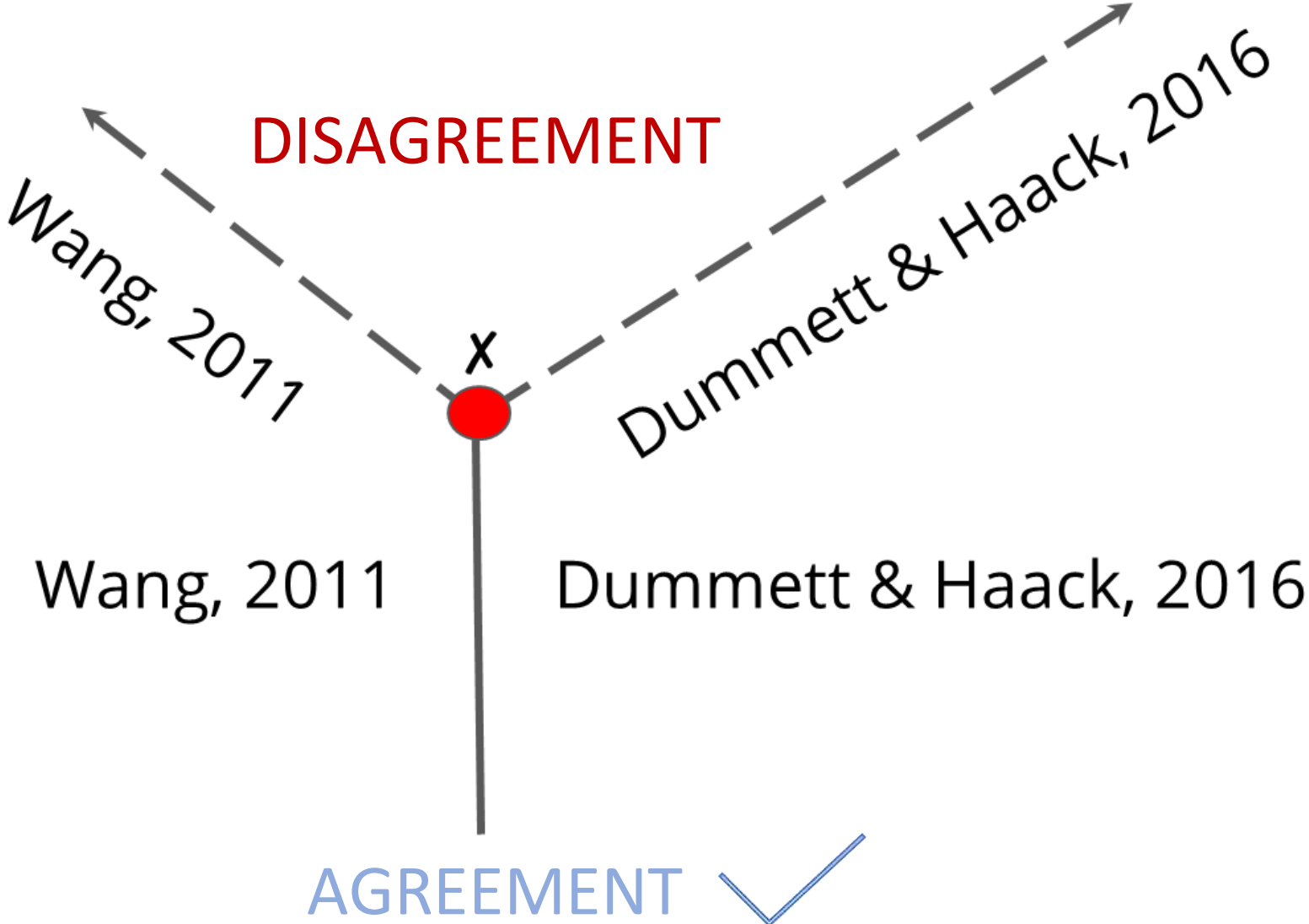
Identify the type of relationship

✓ = Agreement / Convergence

✗ = Disagreement (indirectly expressed - - - - - / directly expressed →)

✓ ✗ = Partial Agreement (Divergence)

# Divergence





## From Student 2.

Patel (2007) *diverges from* Lopez (2000) in a bold and ethical argument.

Also:

*differs in regard to ... overlaps with ..., shares the same/common ground as ..., disagrees on ..., holds discrete views to ... etc*

(see Godfrey 2019, e.g., B3)

## Suggestion 2. Stance expressed through choice of tenses: (a risky proposal re positioning by choosing between present and past)

### A.

In her paper, Aaberg (2001) **argued** that Plato's allegory of the cave in Book 7 of *The Republic* is flawed. She **claimed** that ...

### B.

In her paper, Aaberg (2001) **argues** that Plato's allegory of the cave in Book 7 of *The Republic* is flawed. She **observes** that ... Aaberg **makes a strong case** because ...

### C.

In her paper, Aaberg (2001) **has argued** that Plato's allegory of the cave in Book 7 of *The Republic* is flawed. She **has observed** that ...

## A. Past Simple

In her paper, Aaberg (2001) **argued** that Plato's allegory of the cave in Book 7 of *The Republic* is flawed. She **claimed** that ... **However**, ...

Lewis (*The English Verb*): simple past tense = remoteness / completion

Academic interpretation: use to **distance yourself from the message**.

That is: conceptually remote = **signals disagreement**

## B. Simple Present

In her paper, Aaberg (2001) **argues** that Plato's allegory of the cave in Book 7 of *The Republic* is\* flawed. She **observes** that ... Aaberg **makes a strong case** because ...

Lewis (*The English Verb*): simple present tense = **immediacy**

Academic interpretation: use to **indicate (conceptual) nearness to an idea.**

That is: **signals agreement** (sympathetic towards an idea)

\* NB: '*The Republic* is inherently flawed'. The verb here is also in the present simple tense indicating the book's proximity, relevance = part of the Western canon.

## C. Present Perfect

In her paper, Aaberg (2001) **has argued** that Plato's allegory of the cave in Book 7 of *The Republic* is flawed. She **has observed** that ... **To some extent what Aaberg argues is justified ... However, where this paper disagrees with her line of reasoning is ...**

Lewis (*The English Verb*): present perfect tense = **indefiniteness**

Academic interpretation: use to **indicate “incomplete” agreement.**

That is: **signals partial agreement**

Patel (2007) diverges from Lopez (2000) in a bold and ethical argument. She **agrees** that invading another country is illegal, but she **states** that it is **not always** *unacceptable* even if there has not been a vote in the United Nations first. She **points out** that the United Nations takes a long time to organize votes so intervention **could** be crucial, for example, to prevent a humanitarian disaster. . .

- bold and ethical = evaluative language (See Swales & Feak – pairing of adjectives typical in critiques)
- **diverges, agrees, states, points out** = tense suggests agreement of author (after Lewis)
- **not always** / **could** = judgement / caution (see Hean Read)
- *unacceptable* = emphasis (italics) (see Hean Read)

# Suggestion 3. Acknowledge risk-taking in marking criteria

50-59%

## **CLARITY & CONSISTENCY OF ANALYSIS**

- Generally, clearly written and coherent though inaccuracies may cause some strain for the reader
- Appropriately organised though there may be some arbitrary sections
- A mostly consistent line of reasoning developed but there may be some ambiguity

## **CONTEXTUAL AWARENESS**

- Conveys some awareness of the wider context and background relevant to the topic

## **RELATIONAL AWARENESS**

- A personal position is partially articulated relative to a variety of sources
- Connections and relationships between some ideas/authors identified

## **ACADEMIC STYLE & CONVENTIONS**

- Some evidence of additional rhetorical devices being employed
- Mostly observes referencing conventions though there may be some inconsistencies

## Suggestion 4. Dress rehearsals

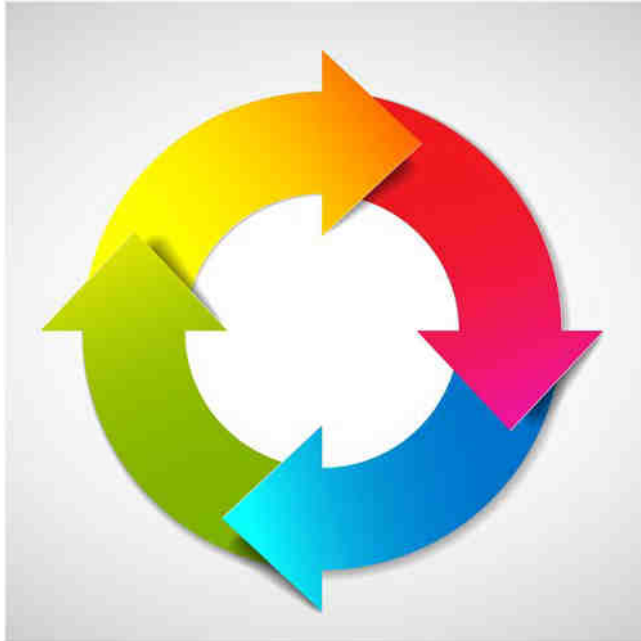
Divide students into small groups to support each other by explaining their **language choices** to each other



See Annas & Tenney (1996) Positioning Oneself: A Feminist Approach to Argument



# Final thoughts



- Virtuous circles = improvements in critical thinking have been shown to improve language proficiency and vice versa (see Tanaka & Gilliland: 2017)
- CAUTION: ‘Risk = rewards – but sometimes = abject failure, too!!’

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