

THINKING ABOUT THE ACADEMIC CONVERSATION

MATH 105-6: FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR: THEORIES OF MIND AND MATHEMATICS
PROF. THEO JOHNSON-FREYD, NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY, FALL 2015

FUGUE IN THE KEY OF ESSAY MAJOR (DUE MONDAY, DECEMBER 7)

The academic conversation is an ongoing symphony of millions of people (depending on the estimate, there are currently about six million research faculty members at universities around the world) and spanning centuries. It is carried on through conferences, informal conversations, classes, and books and articles. Within that grand discourse are many smaller conversations — fugues, if you will — in which a small number of voices discuss a similar theme.

The goal of this final assignment is to explore one such fugue from among the themes in this class. Choose two main texts to focus on — these can be among the required readings for the class or they can be other texts related to the class (but check with me before using other texts to confirm their appropriateness) — and choose one particular question that those texts both speak to. In an eight- to ten-page (double spaced, standard margins, standard font and size, etc.) essay, explore that question and explain in detail the positions your two texts take; clarify the arguments and evidence those texts present; and discuss dimensions of the question that your authors agree on and dimensions that they disagree on. In a word, put the two texts into dialog. Once you've established the dialog between those two texts, enter as a third voice: express (and argue for, with evidence) your own educated, well thought out, and nuanced position on your chosen question. “Trialog” is not a word, but if it were, it would be your goal.

While putting together your essay and studying the positions of your authors, be sure to look at other texts (or at least reviews thereof) by the same authors, at the texts those authors cite, and at texts that have cited those authors. Use (and cite!) these sources as appropriate in your essay.

Your essay should follow the conventions of a standard academic paper: it should have an informative title, it should have an introduction that sets the stage and specifies your position, it should be clearly sign-posted, it should be well-argued, it should be well-written, it should be copyedited and correctly formatted, and so on. Do not assume that your reader is particularly familiar with the material you discuss. I encourage you to seek out each other's ideas and suggestions about both the content and form of your papers.

Your essays are due by email to theo.jf@math.northwestern.edu by 12 noon on Monday, December 7 (the start of the official “final exam” time for the class).

PRELUDE IN SYMPOSIUM SHARP (TUESDAY, DECEMBER 1, AND THURSDAY, DECEMBER 3)

During the Reading Week (December 1 and 3), we will hold an “end-of-term symposium,” in which you will present an overview of your final essay. Your presentation should last between five and seven minutes. In your presentation, explain the main points of your essay: what texts are you focusing on? what question? how do the two texts speak to each other about that question? what position do you take as a third voice? Give a sense of your evidence and argument, but don't try to explain all the nuances and details: five minutes is too short a time for more than an overview.