

"A brilliant book. . . . It's like a membership card in the academic club."

— Eileen Seifert, DePaul University

The Moves That Matter in  
Academic Writing



They Say



I Say

**WITH READINGS**

**GERALD GRAFF  
CATHY BIRKENSTEIN  
RUSSEL DURST**

# “THEY SAY / I SAY”

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in Academic Writing*

**WITH READINGS**



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To the great rhetorician Wayne Booth,  
who cared deeply about the democratic art  
of listening closely to what others say.

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## PREFACE



OUR GOAL IN WRITING *“They Say / I Say”* has been to offer students a user-friendly model of writing that will help them put into practice the important principle that writing is a social activity. Proceeding from the premise that effective writers enter conversations of other writers and speakers, this book encourages students to engage with those around them—including those who disagree with them—instead of just expressing their ideas “logically.” Our own experience teaching first-year writing students has led us to believe that to be persuasive, arguments need not only supporting evidence but also motivation and exigency, and that the surest way to achieve this motivation and exigency is to generate one’s own arguments as a response to those of others—to something “they say.” And to help students write their way into the often daunting conversations of academia and the wider public sphere, the book provides templates to help them make sophisticated rhetorical moves that they might otherwise not think of attempting.

That *“They Say”* is now being taught at hundreds of colleges and universities suggests that there is a need for such a book, and that there is a widespread desire for explicit instruction that helps writers negotiate the basic moves necessary to “enter

the conversation.” Instructors at schools across the country have told us how much this book helps their students learn how to write academic discourse, and some students have written to us saying that it’s helped them to “crack the code,” as one student put it.

At the same time, many instructors have told us that they wish the book included more readings—to provide examples of the moves taught in this book, and also to spark discussion and writing. Hence this new version, which adds more than thirty readings on four compelling and controversial issues. The readings provide a glimpse into some important conversations of our day—and will, we hope, provoke students to respond and thus to join in those conversations.

## HIGHLIGHTS

**Thirty-one readings that will provoke students to think—and write.** Taken from a wide range of sources, including the *New York Times*, *Slate*, the *National Review*, *Al Jazeera*, best-selling trade books, and more, these readings represent a range of perspectives on four contemporary issues:

- Is Fast Food the New Tobacco? (Chapter 13)
- Are *24*, *Family Guy*, and *Grand Theft Auto* Actually Good For You? (Chapter 14)
- Is Economic Mobility Just a Dream? (Chapter 15)
- Is America Over? (Chapter 16)

The readings function as sources for students’ own writing, and the study questions that follow each reading focus students’ attention on how each author uses the key moves and invite them to respond with their own views.

A chapter on reading (Chapter 12) encourages students to think of reading as an act of entering conversations. Instead of teaching students merely to identify the author's argument, this chapter shows them how to read with an eye for what arguments the author is responding to—in other words, to think carefully about why the writer is making the argument in the first place, and thus to recognize (and ultimately become a part of) the larger conversation that gives meaning to reading the text.

**Two books in one, with the rhetoric up front and the readings in the back.** The two parts are linked by cross-references in the margins, leading from the rhetoric to specific examples in the readings and from the readings to the corresponding writing instruction. Teachers can therefore begin with either the rhetoric or the readings, and the links will facilitate movement between one section and the other.

We hope that this new version of “*They Say / I Say*” will spark students' interest in some of the most pressing conversations of our day, and provide them with some of the tools they need to engage in those conversations with dexterity and confidence.

Gerald Graff  
Cathy Birkenstein  
Russel Durst

## PREFACE TO “THEY SAY / I SAY”



**E**XPERIENCED WRITING INSTRUCTORS have long recognized that writing well means entering into conversation with others. Academic writing in particular calls upon writers not simply to express their own ideas, but to do so as a response to what others have said. The mission statement for the first-year writing program at our own university, for example, describes its goal as helping students “enter a conversation about ideas.” A similar statement by another program holds that “intellectual writing is almost always composed in response to others’ texts.” These statements echo the ideas of rhetorical theorists like Kenneth Burke, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Wayne Booth as well as recent composition scholars like David Bartholomae, Patricia Bizzell, Peter Elbow, Joseph Harris, Andrea Lunsford, Elaine Maimon, Gary Olson, Tilly Warnock, Mike Rose, and others who argue that writing well means engaging the voices of others and letting them in turn engage us.

Yet despite this growing consensus that writing is a social, conversational act, helping student writers actually “enter a conversation about ideas” remains a formidable challenge. This book aims to meet that challenge. Its goal is to demystify academic writing by isolating its basic moves, explaining them clearly, and representing them in the form of templates. In this way, we hope

to help students become active participants in the important conversations of the academic world and the wider public sphere.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- *Shows that writing well means entering a conversation*, first summarizing others ("they say") to set up one's own argument ("I say").
- *Demystifies academic writing*, showing students "the moves that matter" in language they can readily apply.
- *Provides user-friendly templates* to help writers make those moves in their own writing.

## HOW THIS BOOK CAME TO BE

The original idea for this book grew out of our shared interest in democratizing academic culture. First, it grew out of arguments that Gerald Graff has been making throughout his career that schools and colleges need to invite students into the conversations and debates that surround them. More specifically, it is a practical, hands-on companion to his recent book, *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind*, in which he looks at such conversations from the perspective of those who find them mysterious and proposes ways in which such mystification can be overcome. Second, this book grew out of writing templates that Cathy Birkenstein developed in the 1990s, for use in writing and literature courses she was teaching. Many students, she found, could readily grasp what it meant to summarize an author, to support a thesis with evidence, to entertain a counterargument, or to identify a textual



contradiction, but they often had trouble putting these concepts into practice in their own writing. When Cathy sketched out templates on the board, however, giving her students some of the language and patterns that these sophisticated moves require, their writing—and even their quality of thought—significantly improved.

This book began, then, when we put our ideas together and realized that these templates might have the potential to open up and clarify academic conversation. We proceeded from the premise that all writers rely on certain stock formulas that they themselves didn’t invent—and that many of these formulas are so commonly used that they can be represented in model templates that students can use to structure and even generate what they want to say.

As we developed a working draft of this book, we began using it in first-year writing courses that we teach at UIC. In classroom exercises and writing assignments, we found that students who otherwise struggled to organize their thoughts, or even to think of something to say, did much better when we provided them with templates like the following.

- ▶ In discussions of \_\_\_\_\_, a controversial issue is whether \_\_\_\_\_. While some argue that \_\_\_\_\_, others contend that \_\_\_\_\_.
  
- ▶ This is not to say that \_\_\_\_\_.

One virtue of such templates, we found, is that they focus writers’ attention not just on what is being said, but on the *forms* that structure what is being said. In other words, they help students focus on the rhetorical patterns that are key to academic success but often pass under the classroom radar.

In order to grasp Hurston's point here, we need to be able to reconstruct the implicit view she is responding to: that racial identity is an innate quality we are simply born with. On the contrary, Hurston suggests, our race is imposed on us by society—something we "become" by virtue of how we are treated.

As these examples suggest, the "they say / I say" model can improve not just student writing, but student reading comprehension as well. Since reading and writing are deeply reciprocal activities, students who learn to make the rhetorical moves represented by the templates in this book figure to become more adept at identifying these same moves in the texts they read. And if we are right that effective arguments are always in dialogue with other arguments, then it follows that in order to understand the types of challenging texts assigned in college, students need to identify the views to which those texts are responding.

Working with the "they say / I say" model can also help with invention, finding something to say. In our experience, students best discover what they want to say not by thinking about a subject in an isolation booth, but by reading texts, listening closely to what other writers say, and looking for an opening in which they can enter the conversation. In other words, listening closely to others and summarizing what they have to say can help writers generate their own ideas.

## THE USEFULNESS OF TEMPLATES

Our templates themselves have a generative quality, prompting students to make moves in their writing that they might not otherwise make or even know they should make. The templates in this book can be particularly helpful for students who are unsure about what to say, or who have trouble finding

enough to say, often because they see their own beliefs as so self-evident that they need not be argued for. Students like this are often helped, we've found, when we give them a simple template like the following one for entertaining a counterargument (or planting a naysayer, as we call it in Chapter 6).

- ▶ Of course some object that \_\_\_\_\_. Although I concede that \_\_\_\_\_, I still maintain that \_\_\_\_\_.

What this particular template helps students do is make the seemingly counterintuitive move of questioning their own beliefs, of looking at them from the perspective of those who disagree. In so doing, templates can bring out aspects of students' thoughts that, as they themselves sometimes remark, they didn't even realize were there.

Other templates in this book will help students make a whole host of sophisticated moves that they might not otherwise make: summarizing what someone else says, framing a quotation in one's own words, indicating the view that the writer is responding to, marking the shift from a source's view to the writer's own view, offering evidence for that view, entertaining and answering counterarguments and explaining what is at stake in the first place. In showing students how to make such moves, templates do more than organize students' ideas; they help bring those ideas into existence.

### OKAY, BUT TEMPLATES?

We are aware, of course, that some instructors may have reservations about templates. Some, for instance, may object that such formulaic devices represent a return to prescriptive forms

of instruction that encourage passive learning or lead students to put their writing on automatic pilot.

This is an understandable reaction, we think, to kinds of rote instruction that have indeed encouraged passivity and drained writing of its creativity and dynamic relation to the social world. The trouble is that many students will never learn on their own to make the key intellectual moves that our templates represent. While seasoned writers pick up these moves unconsciously through their reading, many students do not. Consequently, we believe, students need to see these moves represented in the explicit ways that templates provide.

The aim of the templates, then, is not to stifle critical thinking but to be direct with students about the key rhetorical moves that comprise it. Admittedly, no teaching tool can guarantee that students will engage in hard, rigorous thought. Our templates do, however, provide concrete prompts that can stimulate and shape such thought: What do "they say" about my topic? What would a naysayer say about my argument? What is my evidence? Do I need to qualify my point? Who cares?

In fact, templates have a long and rich history. Public orators from ancient Greece and Rome through the European Renaissance studied rhetorical *topoi* or "commonplaces," model passages and formulas that represented the different strategies available to public speakers. In many respects, our templates echo this classical rhetorical tradition of imitating established models.

In our own day, the journal *Nature* offers aspiring contributors a templatelike guideline on the opening page of each manuscript: "Two or three sentences explaining what the main result [of their study] reveals in direct comparison with what was thought to be the case previously, or how the main result adds to previous knowledge."

In the field of education, a form designed by the education

theorist Howard Gardner asks postdoctoral fellowship applicants to complete the following template: "Most scholars in the field believe \_\_\_\_\_. As a result of my study, \_\_\_\_\_." That these two examples are geared toward postdoctoral fellows and advanced researchers shows that it is not only struggling undergraduates who can use help making these key rhetorical moves, but experienced academics as well.

Templates have even been used in the teaching of personal narrative. The literary scholar Jane Tompkins devised the following template to help student writers make the often difficult move from telling a story to explaining what it means: "X tells a story about \_\_\_\_\_ to make the point that \_\_\_\_\_. My own experience with \_\_\_\_\_ yields a point that is similar/different/both similar and different. What I take away from my own experience with \_\_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_\_. As a result, I conclude \_\_\_\_\_." We especially like this template because it suggests that "they say / I say" argument need not be mechanical, impersonal, or dry, and that telling a story and making an argument are more compatible activities than many think.

## HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

Because of its centrality, we have allowed the "they say / I say" format to dictate the structure of this book. So while Part 1 addresses the art of listening to others, Part 2 addresses how to offer one's own response. Part 1 opens with a chapter on "Starting with What Others Are Saying" that explains why it is generally advisable to begin a text by citing others rather than plunging directly into one's own views. Subsequent chapters take up the arts of summarizing and quoting what these others have to say. Part 2 begins with a chapter on different ways of respond-

ing, followed by chapters on marking the shift between what "they say" and what "I say," on introducing and answering objections, and on answering the all-important questions "so what?" and "who cares?" Part 3 offers strategies for "Tying It All Together," beginning with a chapter on connection and coherence; followed by a chapter on style, arguing that academic discourse is often perfectly compatible with the informal language that students use outside of school; and concluding with a chapter on the art of metacommentary, showing students how to guide the way readers understand their text. At the end of the book we include an appendix suggesting how the "they say / I say" model can improve classroom discussions, three model essays that we refer to in various chapters, and finally an Index of Templates.

## WHAT THIS BOOK DOESN'T DO

There are some things that this book does not try to do. We do not, for instance, cover logical principles of argument such as syllogisms, warrants, logical fallacies, or the differences between inductive and deductive reasoning. Although such concepts can be useful, we believe most of us learn the ins and outs of argumentative writing not by studying logical principles in the abstract, but by plunging into actual discussions and debates, trying out different modes of response, and in this way getting a sense of what works to persuade different audiences and what doesn't. In our view, people learn more about arguing from hearing someone say, "You miss my point. What I'm saying is not \_\_\_\_\_, but \_\_\_\_\_," or, "I agree with you that \_\_\_\_\_, and would even add that \_\_\_\_\_," than they do from studying the differences between inductive and deductive reasoning. Such formulas give students an immediate sense

of what it feels like to enter a public conversation in a way that studying abstract warrants and logical fallacies does not.

We also do not cover the various modes of writing like description, definition, narrative, and comparison/contrast. Nor do we cover the different conventions of writing in the disciplines. It is our belief, that the "they say / I say" pattern cuts across different disciplines and genres of writing, including creative writing. Although students must eventually master the specific writing conventions of their majors, we believe that there is no major or discipline that does not require writers to frame their own claims as a response to what others before them have said. Indeed, students who master the elemental moves prompted by the templates in this book should actually become *better* able to appreciate the differences between disciplines and genres.

## ENGAGING THE VOICE OF THE OTHER

A major virtue of the "they say / I say" model is that it returns writing to its social, conversational base. Although writing does require some degree of solitude, the "they say / I say" model shows students that they can best develop their arguments not just by looking inward, but also by looking outward, listening carefully to other views, and engaging the voice of the other. As a result, this approach to writing has an ethical dimension: it asks students not simply to keep proving and reasserting what they already believe, but to stretch what they believe by putting it up against the beliefs of our increasingly diverse, global society, to engage in the reciprocal exchange that characterizes true democracy.

Gerald Graff  
Cathy Birkenstein

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