THEY SAY
I SAY

The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing

Gerald Graff • Cathy Birkenstein
FOURTH EDITION

“THEY SAY / I SAY”

The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing

GERALD GRAFF
CATHY BIRKENSTEIN

both of the University of Illinois at Chicago

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Experienced 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 first-year writing program at our own university, according to its mission statement, asks “students to participate in ongoing conversations about vitally important academic and public issues.” 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, John Bean, Patricia Bizzell, Irene Clark, Greg Colomb, Lisa Ede, Peter Elbow, Joseph Harris, Andrea Lunsford, Elaine Maimon, Gary Olson, Mike Rose, John Swales and Christine Feak, Tilly Warnock, 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 participate in these conversations 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.
PREFACE

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, 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.
• Shows that reading is a way of entering a conversation—not just of passively absorbing information but of understanding and actively entering dialogues and debates.

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 academic 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 support a thesis with evidence, to entertain
a counterargument, to identify a textual contradiction, and
ultimately to summarize and respond to challenging arguments,
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 class-
room 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 _________.

  x v
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 make students more conscious of the rhetorical patterns that are key to academic success but often pass under the classroom radar.

**THE CENTRALITY OF “THEY SAY / I SAY”**

The central rhetorical move that we focus on in this book is the “they say / I say” template that gives our book its title. In our view, this template represents the deep, underlying structure, the internal DNA as it were, of all effective argument. Effective persuasive writers do more than make well-supported claims (“I say”); they also map those claims relative to the claims of others (“they say”).

Here, for example, the “they say / I say” pattern structures a passage from an essay by the media and technology critic Steven Johnson.

> For decades, we’ve worked under the assumption that mass culture follows a path declining steadily toward lowest-common-denominator standards, presumably because the “masses” want dumb, simple pleasures and big media companies try to give the masses what they want. But . . . the exact opposite is happening: the culture is getting more cognitively demanding, not less.
> 
> **Steven Johnson,** “Watching TV Makes You Smarter”

In generating his own argument from something “they say,” Johnson suggests why he needs to say what he is saying: to correct a popular misconception.
Even when writers do not explicitly identify the views they are responding to, as Johnson does, an implicit “they say” can often be discerned, as in the following passage by Zora Neale Hurston.

I remember the day I became colored.

ZORA NEALE HURSTON, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me”

In order to grasp Hurston’s point here, we need to be able to reconstruct the implicit view she is responding to and questioning: 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 through 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 also 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 consider their own beliefs 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 might 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 help students make a 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.
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 the 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 it comprises. Since we encourage students to modify and adapt the templates to the particularities of the arguments they are making, using such prefabricated formulas as learning tools need not result in writing and thinking that are themselves formulaic. 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.

The journal *Nature* requires aspiring contributors to follow a guideline that is like a template on the opening page of their 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 veteran 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 and educational theorist 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.

**WHY IT’S OKAY TO USE “I”**

But wait—doesn’t the “I” part of “they say / I say” flagrantly encourage the use of the first-person pronoun? Aren’t we aware
that some teachers prohibit students from using “I” or “we,” on the grounds that these pronouns encourage ill-considered, subjective opinions rather than objective and reasoned arguments? Yes, we are aware of this first-person prohibition, but we think it has serious flaws. First, expressing ill-considered, subjective opinions is not necessarily the worst sin beginning writers can commit; it might be a starting point from which they can move on to more reasoned, less self-indulgent perspectives. Second, prohibiting students from using “I” is simply not an effective way of curbing students’ subjectivity, since one can offer poorly argued, ill-supported opinions just as easily without it. Third and most important, prohibiting the first person tends to hamper students’ ability not only to take strong positions but to differentiate their own positions from those of others, as we point out in Chapter 5. To be sure, writers can resort to various circumlocutions—“it will here be argued,” “the evidence suggests,” “the truth is”—and these may be useful for avoiding a monotonous series of “I believe” sentences. But except for avoiding such monotony, we see no good reason why “I” should be set aside in persuasive writing. Rather than prohibit “I,” then, we think a better tactic is to give students practice at using it well and learning its use, both by supporting their claims with evidence and by attending closely to alternative perspectives—to what “they” are saying.

**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 responding, 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 academic language, encouraging students to draw on their everyday voice as a tool for writing; and including chapters on the art of metacommentary and using templates to revise a text. Part 4 offers guidance for entering conversations in specific academic contexts, with chapters on entering class discussions, writing online, reading, and writing in literature courses, the sciences, and social sciences. Finally, we provide five readings and 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 patterns 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.

**ENGAGING WITH THE IDEAS OF OTHERS**

One central goal of this book is to demystify academic writing by returning it to its social and conversational roots. Although writing may require some degree of quiet and solitude, the “they say / I say” model shows students that they can best develop their arguments not just by looking inward but by doing what they often do in a good conversation with friends and family—by listening carefully to what others are saying and engaging with other views.

This approach to writing therefore has an ethical dimension, since it asks writers not simply to keep proving and reasserting what they already believe, but to stretch what they believe by putting it up against beliefs that differ, sometimes radically, from their own. In an increasingly diverse, global society, this ability to engage with the ideas of others is especially crucial to democratic citizenship.

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