

"THEY SAY / I SAY"

*The Moves That Matter
in Academic Writing*



GERALD GRAFF

CATHY BIRKENSTEIN

both of the University of Illinois at Chicago



W · W · NORTON & COMPANY

NEW YORK LONDON

PREFACE

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

X V I I I

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Entering the Conversation



THINK ABOUT AN activity that you do particularly well: cooking, playing the piano, shooting a basketball, even something as basic as driving a car. If you reflect on this activity, you’ll realize that once you mastered it you no longer had to give much conscious thought to the various moves that go into doing it. Performing this activity, in other words, depends on your having learned a series of complicated moves—moves that may seem mysterious or difficult to those who haven’t yet learned them.

The same applies to writing. Often without consciously realizing it, accomplished writers routinely rely on a stock of established moves that are crucial for communicating sophisticated ideas. What makes writers masters of their trade is not only their ability to express interesting thoughts, but their mastery of an inventory of basic moves that they probably picked up by reading a wide range of other accomplished writers. Less experienced writers, by contrast, are often unfamiliar with these basic moves, and unsure how to make them in their own writing. This book is intended as a short, user-friendly guide to the basic moves of academic writing.

One of our key premises is that these basic moves are so common that they can be represented in *templates* that you can use right away to structure and even generate your own writ-

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ing. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of this book is its presentation of many such templates, designed to help you successfully enter not only the world of academic thinking and writing, but also the wider worlds of civic discourse and work.

Rather than focus solely on abstract principles of writing, then, this book offers model templates that help you to put those principles directly into practice. Working with these templates can give you an immediate sense of how to engage in the kinds of critical thinking you are required to do at the college level and in the vocational and public spheres beyond.

Some of these templates represent simple but crucial moves like those used to summarize some widely held belief.

- ▶ Many Americans assume that

Others are more complicated.

- ▶ On the one hand, On the other hand,
- ▶ Author X contradicts herself. At the same time that she argues, she also implies
- ▶ I agree that
- ▶ This is not to say that

It is true, of course, that critical thinking and writing go deeper than any set of linguistic formulas, requiring that you question assumptions, develop strong claims, offer supporting reasons and evidence, consider opposing arguments, and so on. But these deeper habits of thought cannot be put into practice unless you have a language for expressing them in clear, organized ways.

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STATE YOUR OWN IDEAS AS A RESPONSE TO OTHERS

The single most important template that we focus on in this book is the “they say _____, I say _____” formula that gives our book its title. If there is any one point that we hope you will take away from this book, it is the importance not only of expressing your ideas (“I say”), but of presenting those ideas as a *response to some other person or group* (“they say”). For us, the underlying structure of effective academic writing—and of responsible public discourse—resides not just in stating our own ideas, but in listening closely to others around us, summarizing their views in a way that they will recognize, and responding with our own ideas in kind. Broadly speaking, academic writing is argumentative writing, and we believe that to argue well you need to do more than assert your own ideas. You need to enter a conversation, using what others say (or might say) as a launching pad or sounding board for your own ideas. For this reason, one of the main pieces of advice in this book is to write the voices of others into your text.

In our view, then, the best academic writing has one underlying feature: it is deeply engaged in some way with other people’s views. Too often, however, academic writing is taught as a process of saying “true” or “smart” things in a vacuum, as if it were possible to argue effectively without being in conversation *with* someone else. If you have been taught to write a traditional five-paragraph essay, for example, you have learned how to develop a thesis and support it with evidence. This is good advice as far as it goes, but it leaves out the important fact that in the real world we don’t make arguments without being provoked. We make arguments because someone has said or done something (or perhaps *not* said or done something) and we need to respond: “I can’t

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see why you like the Lakers so much”; “I agree: it was a great film”; “That argument is contradictory.” If it weren’t for other people and our need to challenge, agree with, or otherwise respond to them, there would be no reason to argue at all.

To make an impact as a writer, you need to do more than make statements that are logical, well supported, and consistent. You must also find a way of entering a conversation with others’ views—with something “they say.” In fact, if your own argument doesn’t identify the “they say” that you’re responding to, then it probably won’t make sense. As Figure 1 suggests, *what* you are saying may be clear to your audience, but *why* you are saying it won’t be. For it is what others are saying and thinking that motivates our writing and gives it a reason for being. It follows, then, as Figure 2 suggests, that your own argument—the “I say” moment of your text—should always be a response to the arguments of others.

Many writers make explicit “they say/I say” moves in their writing. One famous example is Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Let-

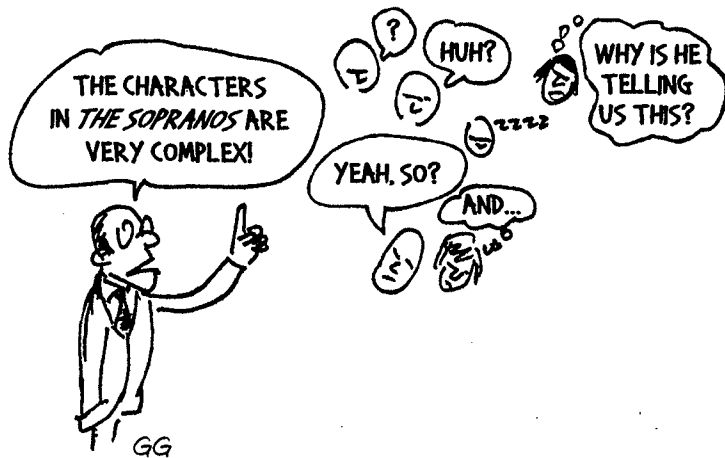


FIGURE 1

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FIGURE 2

ter from Birmingham Jail,” which consists almost entirely of King’s eloquent responses to a public statement by eight clergymen deploring the civil rights protests he was leading. The letter—which was written in 1963, while King was in prison for leading a demonstration in Birmingham—is structured almost entirely around a framework of summary and response, in which King summarizes and then answers their criticisms. In one typical passage, King writes as follows.

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations.

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

King goes on to agree with his critics that “It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham,” yet he

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hastens to add that “it is even more unfortunate that the city’s white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative.” King’s letter is so thoroughly conversational, in fact, that it could be rewritten in the form of a dialogue or play.

King’s critics:

King’s response:

Critics:

Response:

Clearly, King would not have written his famous letter were it not for his critics, whose views he treats not as objections to his already-formed arguments, but as the motivating source of those arguments, their central reason for being. He quotes not only what his critics have said (“Some have asked: ‘Why didn’t you give the new city administration time to act?’”), but also things they *might* have said (“One may well ask: ‘How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?’”)—all to set the stage for what he himself wants to say.

A similar “they say/I say” exchange opens an essay about American patriotism by the social critic Katha Pollitt, who uses her own daughter’s comment to represent the national fervor of post-9/11 patriotism that Pollitt goes on to oppose.

My daughter, who goes to Stuyvesant High School only blocks from the former World Trade Center, thinks we should fly the American flag out our window. Definitely not, I say: The flag stands for jingoism and vengeance and war.

KATHA POLLITT, “Put Out No Flags”

As Pollitt’s example shows, the “they” you respond to in crafting an argument need not be a famous author, or even some-

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one known to your audience. It can be a family member like Pollitt’s daughter, or a friend or classmate who has made a provocative claim. It can even be something an individual or a group might say—or a side of yourself, something you once believed but no longer do, or something you partly believe but also doubt. The important thing is that the “they” (or “you” or “she”) represent some wider group—in Pollitt’s case, those who patriotically believe in flying the flag.

While King and Pollitt both identify the views they are responding to, in some cases those views, rather than being explicitly named, are left to the reader to infer. See, for instance, if you can identify the implied or unnamed “they say” that the following claim is responding to.

I like to think I have a certain advantage as a teacher of literature because when I was growing up I disliked and feared books.

GERALD GRAFF, “Disliking Books at an Early Age”

In case you haven’t figured it out already, the phantom “they say” here is anyone who thinks that in order to be a good teacher of literature, one must have grown up liking and enjoying books.

As you can see from these examples, many writers use the “they say/I say” format to disagree with others, to challenge standard ways of thinking, and thus to stir up controversy. This point may come as a shock to you if you have always had the impression that in order to succeed academically you need to play it safe and avoid controversy in your writing, making statements that nobody can possibly disagree with. Though this view of writing may appear logical, it is actually a recipe for flat, lifeless writing, and for writing that fails to answer what we call the “so what?” and “who cares?” questions. “William Shakespeare wrote many famous plays and sonnets” may be a per-

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fectly true statement, but precisely because nobody is likely to disagree with it, it goes without saying and thus would seem pointless if said.

WAYS OF RESPONDING

Just because much argumentative writing is driven by disagreement, it does not follow that *agreement* is ruled out. Although argumentation is often associated with conflict and opposition, the type of conversational “they say/I say” argument that we focus on in this book can be just as useful when you agree as when you disagree.

- ▶ She argues _____, and I agree because _____.
- ▶ Her argument that _____ is supported by new research showing that _____.

Nor do you always have to choose between either simply agreeing or disagreeing, since the “they say/I say” format also works to both agree and disagree at the same time.

- ▶ He claims that _____, and I have mixed feelings about it. On the one hand, I agree that _____. On the other hand, I still insist that _____.

This last option—agreeing and disagreeing simultaneously—is one we especially recommend, since it allows you to avoid a simple yes or no response and present a more complicated argument, while containing that complication within a clear “on the one hand/on the other hand” framework.

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While the templates we offer in this book can be used to structure your writing at the sentence level, they can also be expanded as needed to almost any length, as the following elaborated “they say/I say” template demonstrates.

- ▶ In recent discussions of _____, a controversial issue has been whether _____. On the one hand, some argue that _____. From this perspective, _____. On the other hand, however, others argue that _____. In the words of one of this view’s main proponents, “_____.” According to this view, _____. In sum, then, the issue is whether _____ or _____.
- ▶ My own view is that _____. Though I concede that _____, I still maintain that _____. For example, _____. Although some might object that _____, I reply that _____. The issue is important because _____.

If you go back over this template, you will see that it helps you make a host of challenging moves (each of which is taken up in forthcoming chapters in this book). First, the template helps you open your text by identifying an issue in some ongoing conversation or debate (“In recent discussions of _____, a controversial issue has been”), then to map some of the voices in this controversy (by using the “on the one hand/on the other hand” structure). The template also helps you to introduce a quotation (“In the words of”), to explain the quotation in your own words (“According to this view”), and—in a new paragraph—to state your own argument (“My own view is that”), to qualify your argument (“Though I concede that”), and then to support your argument with evidence (“For example”). In addition, the template helps you make one of the most

crucial moves in argumentative writing, what we call “planting a naysayer in your text,” in which you summarize and then answer a likely objection to your own central claim (“Although it might be objected that _____, I reply _____”). Finally, this template helps you shift between general, overarching claims (“In sum, then”) and smaller-scale, supporting claims (“For example”).

Again, none of us is born knowing these moves, especially when it comes to academic writing. Hence the need for this book.

DO TEMPLATES STIFLE CREATIVITY?

If you are like some of our students, your initial response to templates may be skepticism. At first, many of our students complain that using templates will take away their originality and creativity and make them all sound the same. “They’ll turn us into writing robots,” one of our students insisted. Another agreed, adding, “Hey, I’m a jazz musician. And we don’t play by set forms. We create our own.” “I’m in college now,” another student asserted; “this is third-grade level stuff.”

In our view, however, the templates in this book, far from being “third-grade level stuff,” represent the stock in trade of sophisticated thinking and writing, and they often require a great deal of practice and instruction to use successfully. As for the belief that pre-established forms undermine creativity, we think it rests on a very limited vision of what creativity is all about. In our view, the above template and the others in this book will actually help your writing become *more* original and creative, not less. After all, even the most creative forms of expression depend on established patterns and structures. Most songwriters, for instance, rely on a time-honored verse-

chorus-verse pattern, and few people would call Shakespeare uncreative because he didn’t invent the sonnet or dramatic forms that he used to such dazzling effect. Even the most avant-garde, cutting-edge artists (like improvisational jazz musicians) need to master the basic forms that their work improvises on, departs from, and goes beyond, or else their work will come across as uneducated child’s play. Ultimately, then, creativity and originality lie not in the avoidance of established forms, but in the imaginative use of them.

Furthermore, these templates do not dictate the *content* of what you say, which can be as original as you can make it, but only suggest a way of formatting *how* you say it. In addition, once you begin to feel comfortable with the templates in this book, you will be able to improvise creatively on them and invent new ones to fit new situations and purposes. In other words, the templates offered here are learning tools to get you started, not structures set in stone. Once you get used to using them, you can even dispense with them altogether, for the rhetorical moves they model will be at your fingertips in an unconscious, instinctive way.

But if you still need proof that writing templates do not stifle creativity, consider the following opening to an essay on the fast-food industry that we’ve included at the back of this book.

If ever there were a newspaper headline custom-made for Jay Leno’s monologue, this was it. Kids taking on McDonald’s this week, suing the company for making them fat. Isn’t that like middle-aged men suing Porsche for making them get speeding tickets? Whatever happened to personal responsibility?

I tend to sympathize with these portly fast-food patrons, though. Maybe that’s because I used to be one of them.

DAVID ZINCZENKO, “Don’t Blame the Eater”

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Although Zinzchenko relies on a version of the “they say/I say” formula, his writing is anything but dry, robotic, or uncreative. While Zinzchenko does not explicitly use the words “they say” and “I say,” the template still gives the passage its underlying structure: “*They say* that kids suing fast-food companies for making them fat is a joke; but *I say* such lawsuits are justified.”

PUTTING IN YOUR OAR

Though the immediate goal of this book is to help you become a better writer, at a deeper level it invites you to become a certain type of person: a critical, intellectual thinker who, instead of sitting passively on the sidelines, can participate in the debates and conversations of your world in an active and empowered way. Ultimately, this book invites you to become a critical thinker who can enter the types of conversations described eloquently by the philosopher Kenneth Burke in the following widely cited passage. Likening the world of intellectual exchange to a never-ending conversation at a party, Burke writes:

You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. . . . You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you. . . . The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

KENNETH BURKE, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*

What we like about this passage is its suggestion that stating an argument and “putting in your oar” can only be done in

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conversation with others; that we all enter the dynamic world of ideas not as isolated individuals, but as social beings deeply connected to others who have a stake in what we say.

This ability to enter complex, many-sided conversations has taken on a special urgency in today’s diverse, post-9/11 world, where the future for all of us may depend on our ability to put ourselves in the shoes of those who think very differently from us. The central piece of advice in this book—that we listen carefully to others, including those who disagree with us, and then engage with them thoughtfully and respectfully—can help us see beyond our own pet beliefs, which may not be shared by everyone. The mere act of crafting a sentence that begins “Of course, someone might object that _____” may not seem like a way to change the world; but it does have the potential to jog us out of our comfort zones, to get us thinking critically about our own beliefs, and perhaps even to change our minds.

Exercises

1. Read the following paragraph from an essay by Emily Poe, a student at Furman University. Disregarding for the moment what Poe says, focus your attention on the phrases Poe uses to structure what she says (*italicized here*). Find a paragraph or two in some other text that makes similar moves, and underline the words the writer uses to structure what he or she says. Essays, newspaper editorials, and textbooks might be good places to look.

The term “vegetarian” tends to be synonymous with “tree-hugger” in many people’s minds. *They see* vegetarianism as a cult that brainwashes its followers into eliminating an essential part of their daily diets for an abstract goal of “animal welfare.” *However*, few vege-

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tarians choose their lifestyle just to follow the crowd. *On the contrary*, many of these supposedly brainwashed people are actually independent thinkers, concerned citizens, and compassionate human beings. *For the truth is* that there are many very good reasons for giving up meat. Perhaps the best reasons are to improve the environment, to encourage humane treatment of livestock, or to enhance one's own health. *In this essay, then*, closely examining a vegetarian diet as compared to a meat-eater's diet will show that vegetarianism is clearly the better option for sustaining the Earth and all its inhabitants.

2. Write a short essay in which you first summarize our rationale for the templates in this book and then articulate your own position in response. If you want, you can use the template below to organize your paragraphs, expanding and modifying it as necessary to fit what you want to say. If you choose not to use the template, explain why you believe your own writing method is preferable.

- ▶ In the Introduction to "*They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*," Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein provide templates designed to _____. Specifically, Graff and Birkenstein argue that the types of writing templates they offer _____. As the authors themselves put it, "_____." Although some people believe _____, Graff and Birkenstein insist that _____. In sum, then, their view is that _____.

I agree/disagree/have mixed feelings. In my view, the types of templates that the authors recommend _____. For instance, _____. In addition, _____. Some might object, of course, on the grounds that _____. Yet I would argue that _____. Overall, then, I believe _____—an important point to make given _____.

1

"THEY SAY"



ONE

“THEY SAY”

Starting with What Others Are Saying



NOT LONG AGO we attended a talk at an academic conference where the speaker's central claim seemed to be that a certain sociologist—call him Dr. X—had done very good work in a number of areas of the discipline. The speaker proceeded to illustrate his thesis by referring extensively and in great detail to various books and articles by Dr. X and by quoting long passages from them. The speaker was obviously both learned and impassioned, but as we listened to his talk we found ourselves somewhat puzzled: the argument—that Dr. X's work was very important—was clear enough, but why did the speaker need to make it in the first place? Did anyone dispute it? Were there commentators in the field who had argued against X's work or challenged its value? Was the speaker's interpretation of what X had done somehow novel or revolutionary? Since he gave no hint of an answer to any of these questions, we could only wonder why he was going on and on about X. It was only after the speaker finished and took questions from the audience that we got a clue: in response to one questioner, he referred to several critics who had vigorously questioned Dr. X's ideas and convinced many sociologists that Dr. X's work was unsound.

This little story illustrates an important lesson: that to give writing the most important thing of all—namely, a point—a writer needs to indicate clearly not only his or her thesis, but also what larger conversation that thesis is responding to. Because our speaker failed to mention what others had said about Dr. X's work, he left his audience unsure about why he felt the need to say what he was saying. Perhaps the point was clear to other sociologists in the audience who were more familiar with the debates over Dr. X's work than we were. But even they, we bet, would have understood the speaker's point better if he'd sketched in some of the larger conversation his own claims were a part of and reminded the audience about what "they say."

This story also illustrates an important lesson about the *order* in which things are said: to keep an audience engaged, a writer needs to explain what he or she is responding to—either before offering that response or, at least, very early in the discussion. Delaying this explanation for more than one or two paragraphs in a very short essay, three or four pages in a longer one, or more than ten or so pages in a book-length text reverses the natural order in which readers process material—and in which writers think and develop ideas. After all, it seems very unlikely that our conference speaker first developed his defense of Dr. X and only later came across Dr. X's critics. As someone knowledgeable in his field, the speaker surely encountered the criticisms first and only then was compelled to respond and, as he saw it, set the record straight.

Therefore, when it comes to constructing an argument (whether orally or in writing), we offer you the following advice: remember that you are entering a conversation and therefore need to start with "what others are saying," as the title of this chapter recommends, and then introduce your own

ideas as a response. Specifically, we suggest that you summarize what "they say" as soon as you can in your text, and remind readers of it at strategic points as your text unfolds. Though it's true that not all texts follow this practice, we think it's important for all writers to master it before they depart from it.

This is not to say that you must start with a detailed list of everyone who has written on your subject before you offer your own ideas. Had our conference speaker gone to the opposite extreme and spent most of his talk summarizing Dr. X's critics with no hint of what he himself had to say, the audience probably would have had the same frustrated "why-is-he-going-on-like this?" reaction. What we suggest, then, is that as soon as possible you state your own position and the one it's responding to *together*, and that you think of the two as a unit. It is generally best to summarize the ideas you're responding to briefly, at the start of your text, and to delay detailed elaboration until later. The point is to give your readers a quick preview of what is motivating your argument, not to drown them in details this early.

Starting with a summary of others' views may seem to contradict the common advice (which you may have heard from many instructors) that writers lead with their own thesis or claim. Although we agree that you shouldn't keep readers in suspense too long about your central argument, we also believe that you need to present that claim as part of some larger conversation—and that it's important to indicate something about the arguments of others that you are supporting, opposing, amending, complicating, or qualifying. One added benefit of summarizing others' views as soon as you can: those others do some of the work of framing and clarifying the issue you're writing about.

Consider, for example, how George Orwell starts his famous essay "Politics and the English Language" with what others are saying.

Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent and our language—so the argument runs—must inevitably share in the general collapse. . . .

[But] the process is reversible. Modern English . . . is full of bad habits . . . which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble.

GEORGE ORWELL, "Politics and the English Language"

Orwell is basically saying, "Most people assume that we cannot do anything about the bad state of the English language. But I say we can."

Of course, there are many other powerful ways to begin. Instead of opening with someone else's views, you could start with an illustrative quotation, a revealing fact or statistic, or—as we do in this chapter—a relevant anecdote. If you choose one of these formats, however, be sure that it in some way illustrates the view you're addressing or leads you to that view directly, with a minimum of steps.

In opening this chapter, for example, we devote the first paragraph to an anecdote about the conference speaker and then move quickly at the start of the second paragraph to the anecdote's "important lesson" regarding what speakers should and shouldn't do. In the following opening, from a 2004 opinion piece in the *New York Times Book Review*, Christina Nehring also moves quickly from an anecdote illustrating something she

dislikes to her own claim—that book lovers think too highly of themselves.

"I'm a reader!" announced the yellow button. "How about you?" I looked at its bearer, a strapping young guy stalking my town's Festival of Books. "I'll bet you're a reader," he volunteered, as though we were two geniuses well met. "No," I replied. "Absolutely not," I wanted to yell, and fling my Barnes & Noble bag at his feet. Instead, I mumbled something apologetic and melted into the crowd.

There's a new piety in the air: the self congratulation of book lovers.

CHRISTINA NEHRING, "Books Make You a Boring Person"

Nehring's anecdote is really a kind of "they say": book lovers keep telling themselves how great they are.

TEMPLATES FOR INTRODUCING WHAT "THEY SAY"

There are lots of conventional moves for introducing what others are saying. Here are some standard templates that we would have recommended to our conference speaker.

- ▶ A number of sociologists have recently suggested that X's work has several fundamental problems.
- ▶ It has become common today to dismiss X's contribution to the field of sociology.
- ▶ In their recent work, Y and Z have offered harsh critiques of Dr. X for _____.

**TEMPLATES FOR INTRODUCING
"STANDARD VIEWS"**

The following templates can help you make what we call the "standard view" move, in which you introduce a view that has become so widely accepted that by now it is essentially the conventional way of thinking about a topic.

- ▶ Americans today tend to believe that
- ▶ Conventional wisdom has it that
- ▶ Common sense seems to dictate that
- ▶ The standard way of thinking about topic X has it that
- ▶ It is often said that
- ▶ My whole life I have heard it said that
- ▶ You would think that
- ▶ Many people assume that

These templates are popular because they provide a quick and efficient way to perform one of the most common moves that writers make: challenging widely accepted beliefs, placing them on the examining table and analyzing their strengths and weaknesses.

**TEMPLATES FOR MAKING WHAT "THEY SAY"
SOMETHING YOU SAY**

Another way to introduce the views you're responding to is to present them as your own.

- ▶ I've always believed that
- ▶ When I was a child, I used to think that
- ▶ Although I should know better by now, I cannot help thinking that
- ▶ At the same time that I believe, I also believe

**TEMPLATES FOR INTRODUCING
SOMETHING IMPLIED OR ASSUMED**

Another sophisticated move a writer can make is to summarize a point that is not directly stated in what "they say" but is implied or assumed.

- ▶ Although none of them have ever said so directly, my teachers have often given me the impression that
- ▶ One implication of X's treatment of is that
- ▶ Although X does not say so directly, she apparently assumes that
- ▶ While they rarely admit as much, often take for granted that

These are templates that can really help you to think critically—to look beyond what others say explicitly and to consider their unstated assumptions, as well as the implications of what they say or assume.

TEMPLATES FOR INTRODUCING AN ONGOING DEBATE

Sometimes you'll want to open by summarizing a debate that presents two or more views. This kind of opening demonstrates your awareness that there are many ways to look at your subject, the clear mark of someone who knows the subject and therefore is likely to be a reliable, trustworthy guide. Furthermore, opening with a summary of a debate can help you to frame and explore the issue you are writing about before declaring your own view. In this way, you can use the writing process itself to help you discover where you stand instead of having to take a position before you are ready to do so.

Here is a basic template for opening with a debate.

- ▶ In discussions of X, one controversial issue has been On the one hand, argues On the other hand, contends Others even maintain My own view is

The cognitive scientist Mark Aronoff uses this kind of template in an essay on the workings of the human brain.

Theories of how the mind/brain works have been dominated for centuries by two opposing views. One, rationalism, sees the human mind as coming into this world more or less fully formed—preprogrammed, in modern terms. The other, empiricism, sees the mind of the newborn as largely unstructured, a blank slate.

MARK ARONOFF, "Washington Slept Here"

Another way to open with a debate involves starting with a proposition many people agree with in order to highlight the point(s) on which they ultimately disagree.

- ▶ When it comes to the topic of, most of us will readily agree that Where this agreement usually ends, however, is on the question of Whereas some are convinced that, others maintain that

The political writer Thomas Frank uses a variation on this sophisticated move.

That we are a nation divided is an almost universal lament of this bitter election year. However, the exact property that divides us—elemental though it is said to be—remains a matter of some controversy.

THOMAS FRANK, "American Psyche"

While templates like these help you introduce what others are saying at the start of your text, Chapters 2 and 3 explore the arts of summarizing and quoting in more detail.

KEEP WHAT "THEY SAY" IN VIEW

We can't urge you too strongly to keep in mind what "they say" as you move through the rest of your text. After summarizing the ideas you are responding to at the outset, it's very important to continue to keep those ideas in view. Readers won't be able to follow your unfolding response, much less any compli-

cations you may offer, unless you keep reminding them what claims you are responding to.

In other words, even when presenting your own claims, you should keep returning to the motivating "they say." The longer and more complicated your text, the greater the chance that readers will forget what ideas originally motivated it—no matter how clearly you lay them out at the outset. At strategic moments throughout your text, we recommend that you include what we call "return sentences." Here is an example.

- In conclusion, then, as I suggested earlier, defenders of _____ can't have it both ways. Their assertion that _____ is contradicted by their claim that _____.

We ourselves use such return sentences at every opportunity in this book to remind you of the view of writing that our book challenges—that good writing means making true or smart or logical statements about a given subject with little or no reference to what others say about it.

By reminding readers of the ideas you're responding to, return sentences ensure that your text maintains a sense of mission and urgency from start to finish. In short, they help ensure that your argument is a genuine response to others' views rather than just a set of observations about a given subject. The difference is huge. To be responsive to others and the conversation you're entering, you need not only to start with what others are saying, but also to continue keeping it in the reader's view.

Exercises

1. The following claims all provide an "I say." See if you can supply a plausible "they say" for each one. It may help to

use one of the Templates for Introducing What "They Say" (p. 21).

- a. Our experiments suggest that there are dangerous levels of Chemical X in the Ohio groundwater.
- b. My own view is that this novel has certain flaws.
- c. Football is so boring.
- d. Male students often dominate class discussions.
- e. In my view the film is really about the problems of romantic relationships.
- f. I'm afraid that templates like the ones in this book will stifle my creativity.

2. Below is a template that we derived from the opening of David Zinczenko's "Don't Blame the Eater" (p. 139). Use the template to structure a passage on a topic of your own choosing. Your first step here should be to find an idea that you support that others not only disagree with, but also actually find laughable (or, as Zinczenko puts it, worthy of a Jay Leno monologue). You might write about one of the topics listed in the previous exercise (the environment, sports, gender relations, the meaning of a book or movie) or any other topic that interests you.

- If ever there was an idea custom-made for a Jay Leno monologue, this was it: _____ . Isn't that like _____ ?
Whatever happened to _____ ?
I happen to sympathize with _____ , though,
perhaps because _____ .

FOUR

“YES / NO / OKAY, BUT”

Three Ways to Respond



THE FIRST THREE chapters discuss the “they say” stage of writing, in which you devote your attention to the views of some other person or group. In this chapter we move to the “I say” stage, in which you offer your own argument as a response to what “they” have said.

There are a great many ways to respond, but this chapter concentrates on the three most common and recognizable ways: agreeing, disagreeing, or some combination of both. Although each way of responding is open to endless variation, we focus on these three because readers come to any text needing fairly quickly to learn where the writer stands, and they do this by placing the writer on a mental map of familiar options: the writer agrees with those he or she is responding to, disagrees with them, or presents some combination of both agreeing and disagreeing.

When writers take too long to declare their position relative to views they’ve summarized or quoted, readers get frustrated, wondering, “Is this guy agreeing or disagreeing? Is he for what this other person has said, against it, or what?” For this reason, this chapter’s advice applies to reading as well as to

writing. Especially with difficult texts, you not only need to find the position the writer is responding to—the “they say”—but you also need to determine whether the writer is agreeing with it, challenging it, or both.

Perhaps you’ll worry that fitting your own response into one of these three categories will force you to oversimplify your argument or lessen its complexity, subtlety, or originality. In fact, however, the more complex and subtle your argument is, and the more it departs from the conventional ways people think, the more your readers will need to be able to place it on their mental map in order to process the complex details you present. That is, the complexity, subtlety, and originality of your response are more likely to stand out and be noticed if readers have a baseline sense of where you stand relative to any ideas you’ve cited. As you move through this chapter, we hope you’ll agree that the forms of agreeing, disagreeing, and both agreeing and disagreeing that we discuss, far from being simplistic or one-dimensional, are able to accommodate a high degree of creative, complex thought.

It is always a good tactic to begin your response not by launching directly into a mass of details, but by stating clearly whether you agree, disagree, or both, using a direct, no-nonsense move such as: “I agree,” “I disagree,” or “I am of two minds. I agree that _____, but I cannot agree that _____.” Once you have offered one of these straightforward statements (or one of the many variations discussed below), readers will have a strong grasp of your position and then be able to appreciate whatever complexity you offer as your response unfolds.

Still, you may object that these three basic ways of responding don’t cover all the options—that they ignore interpretive or analytical responses, for example. In other words, you might

think that when you interpret a literary work you don’t necessarily agree or disagree with anything, but simply explain the work’s meaning, style, or structure. Many essays about literature and the arts, it might be said, take this form—they interpret a work’s meaning, thus rendering matters of agreeing or disagreeing irrelevant.

We would argue, however, that the best interpretations do in fact agree, disagree, or both—that instead of being offered solo, the best interpretations take strong stands relative to other interpretations. In fact, there would be no reason to offer an interpretation of a work of literature or art unless you were responding to the interpretations or possible interpretations of others. Even when you point out features or qualities of an artistic work that others have not noticed, you are implicitly disagreeing with what those interpreters have said by pointing out that they missed or overlooked something that, in your view, is important. In any effective interpretation, then, you need to not only state what you yourself take the work of art to mean, but to do so relative to the interpretations of other readers—be they professional scholars, teachers, classmates, or even hypothetical readers (as in, “Although some readers might think that this poem is about _____, it is in fact about _____”).

DISAGREE—AND EXPLAIN WHY

Disagreeing may seem like one of the simpler moves a writer can make, but in fact it poses hidden challenges. You need to do more than simply assert that you disagree with a particular view; you also have to offer persuasive reasons *why* you disagree. After all, disagreeing means more than adding “not” to what someone else has said, more than just saying, “Although they

say women's rights are improving, I say women's rights are not improving." Such a response merely contradicts the view it responds to and fails to add anything interesting or new. To make an argument, you need to give reasons why you disagree: because another's argument fails to take relevant factors into account; because it is based on faulty or incomplete evidence; because it rests on questionable assumptions; or because it uses flawed logic, is contradictory, or overlooks what you take to be the real issue. To move the conversation forward (and, indeed, to justify your very act of writing), you need to demonstrate that you yourself have something to contribute.

You can even disagree by making what we call the "duh" move, in which you disagree not with the position itself but with the assumption that it is a new or stunning revelation. Here is an example of such a move, used to open a 2003 essay on the state of American schools.

According to a recent report by some researchers at Stanford University, high school students with college aspirations "often lack crucial information on applying to college and on succeeding academically once they get there."

Well, duh. . . . It shouldn't take a Stanford research team to tell us that when it comes to "succeeding academically," many students don't have a clue.

GERALD GRAFF, "Trickle-Down Obfuscation"

Like all of the other moves discussed in this book, the "duh" move can be tailored to meet the needs of almost any writing situation. If you find the expression "duh" too brash to use with your intended audience, you can always dispense with the term itself and write something like "It is true that . . . ; but we already knew that."

TEMPLATES FOR DISAGREEING, WITH REASONS

- ▶ I think X is mistaken because she overlooks _____.
- ▶ X's claim that _____ rests upon the questionable assumption that _____.
- ▶ I disagree with X's view that _____ because, as recent research has shown, _____.
- ▶ X contradicts herself/can't have it both ways. On the one hand, she argues _____. But on the other hand, she also says _____.
- ▶ By focusing on _____, X overlooks the deeper problem of _____.
- ▶ X claims _____, but we don't need him to tell us that. Anyone familiar with _____ has long known that _____.

You can also disagree by making what we call the "twist it" move, in which you agree with the evidence that someone else has presented, but show through a twist of logic that this evidence actually supports your own position. For example:

X argues for stricter gun control legislation, saying that the crime rate is on the rise and that we need to restrict the circulation of guns. I agree that the crime rate is on the rise, but that's precisely why I oppose stricter gun control legislation. We need to own guns to protect ourselves against criminals.

In this example of the "twist it" move, the second speaker agrees with the first speaker's claim that the crime rate is on the rise,

but then argues that this increasing crime rate is in fact a valid reason for *opposing* gun control legislation.

At times you might be reluctant to express disagreement, for any number of reasons—not wanting to be unpleasant, to hurt someone's feelings, or to make yourself vulnerable to being disagreed with in return. One of these reasons may in fact explain why the conference speaker we describe at the start of Chapter 1 avoided mentioning the disagreement he had with other scholars until he was provoked to do so in the discussion that followed his talk.

As much as we understand this reluctance and have felt it ourselves, we nevertheless believe it is better to state our disagreements in frank yet considerate ways than to deny them. After all, suppressing disagreements doesn't make them go away; it only pushes them underground, where they can fester in private unchecked. Nevertheless, there is no reason why disagreements need to take the form of personal put-downs. Furthermore, there is usually no reason to take issue with *every* aspect of someone else's views. You can single out for criticism only those aspects of what someone else has said that are troubling, and then agree with the rest—although that situation, as we will see, leads to the somewhat more complicated terrain of both agreeing and disagreeing at the same time, taken up later in this chapter.

AGREE—BUT WITH A DIFFERENCE

Like disagreeing, agreeing is less simple than it may appear. Just as you need to avoid simply contradicting views you disagree with, you also need to do more than simply echo views you agree with. Even as you're agreeing, it's important to bring

something new and fresh to the table, adding something that makes you a valuable participant in the conversation.

There are many moves that enable you to contribute something of your own to a conversation even as you agree with what someone else has said. You may point out some unnoticed evidence or line of reasoning that supports X's claims that X herself hadn't mentioned. You may cite some corroborating personal experience, or a situation not mentioned by X that her views help readers understand. If X's views are particularly challenging or esoteric, what you bring to the table could be an accessible translation—an explanation for readers not already in the know. In other words, your text can usefully contribute to the conversation simply by pointing out unnoticed implications or explaining something that needs to be better understood.

Whatever mode of agreement you choose, the important thing is to open up some difference between your position and the one you're agreeing with rather than simply parroting what it says.

TEMPLATES FOR AGREEING

- ▶ I agree that _____ because my experience _____ confirms it.
- ▶ X is surely right about _____ because, as she may not be aware, recent studies have shown that _____.
- ▶ X's theory of _____ is extremely useful because it sheds insight on the difficult problem of _____.
- ▶ I agree that _____, a point that needs emphasizing since so many people believe _____.
- ▶ Those unfamiliar with this school of thought may be interested to know that it basically boils down to _____.

Some writers avoid the practice of agreeing almost as much as others avoid disagreeing. In a culture like America's that prizes originality, independence, and competitive individualism, writers sometimes don't like to admit that anyone else has made the same point, seemingly beating them to the punch. In our view, however, as long as you can support a view taken by someone else without merely restating what he or she has said, there is no reason to worry about being "unoriginal." Indeed, there is good reason to rejoice when you agree with others since those others can lend credibility to your argument. While you don't want to present yourself as a mere copycat of someone else's views, you also need to avoid sounding like a lone voice in the wilderness.

But do be aware that whenever you agree with one person's view, you are most likely disagreeing with someone else's. It is hard to align yourself with one position without at least implicitly positioning yourself against others. The feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan does just that in an essay in which she agrees with scientists who argue that the human brain is "hard-wired" for cooperation, but in so doing aligns herself against anyone who believes that the brain is wired for selfishness and competition.

These findings join a growing convergence of evidence across the human sciences leading to a revolutionary shift in consciousness. . . . If cooperation, typically associated with altruism and self-sacrifice, sets off the same signals of delight as pleasures commonly associated with hedonism and self-indulgence; if the opposition between selfish and selfless, self vs. relationship biologically makes no sense, then a new paradigm is necessary to reframe the very terms of the conversation.

CAROL GILLIGAN, "Sisterhood Is Pleasurable:
A Quiet Revolution in Psychology"

In agreeing with some scientists that "the opposition between selfish and selfless . . . makes no sense," Gilligan implicitly disagrees with anyone who thinks the opposition *does* make sense. Basically, what Gilligan says could be boiled down to a template.

- ▶ I agree that _____, a point that needs emphasizing since so many people believe _____.
- ▶ If group X is right that _____, as I think they are, then we need to reassess the popular assumption that _____.

What such templates allow you to do, then, is to agree with one view while challenging another—a move that leads into the domain of agreeing and disagreeing simultaneously.

AGREE AND DISAGREE SIMULTANEOUSLY

This last option is often our favorite way of responding. One thing we particularly like about agreeing and disagreeing simultaneously is that it helps us get beyond the kind of "is too"/"is not" exchanges that often characterize the disputes of young children and the more polarized shouting matches of talk radio and TV.

TEMPLATES FOR AGREEING AND DISAGREEING SIMULTANEOUSLY

"Yes and no." "Yes, but . . ." "Although I agree up to a point, I still insist . . ." These are just some of the ways you can make your argument complicated and nuanced while maintaining a clear, reader-friendly framework. The parallel structure—"yes

and no"; "on the one hand I agree, on the other I disagree"—enables readers to place your argument on that map of positions we spoke of earlier while still keeping your argument sufficiently complex.

Another aspect we like about this option is that it can be tipped subtly toward agreement or disagreement, depending on where you lay your stress. If you want to stress the disagreement end of the spectrum, you would use a template like the one below.

- ▶ Although I agree with X up to a point, I cannot accept his overall conclusion that

Conversely, if you want to stress your agreement more than your disagreement, you would use a template like this one.

- ▶ Although I disagree with much that X says, I fully endorse his final conclusion that

The first template above might be called a "yes, but . . ." move, the second a "no, but . . ." move. Other versions include the following.

- ▶ Though I concede that, I still insist that
- ▶ X is right that, but she seems on more dubious ground when she claims that
- ▶ While X is probably wrong when she claims that, she is right that
- ▶ Whereas X provides ample evidence that, Y and Z's research on and convinces me that instead.

Another classic way to agree and disagree at the same time is to make what we call an "I'm of two minds" or a "mixed feelings" move.

- ▶ I'm of two minds about X's claim that On the one hand, I agree that On the other hand, I'm not sure if
- ▶ My feelings on the issue are mixed. I do support X's position that, but I find Y's argument about and Z's research on to be equally persuasive.

This move can be especially useful if you are responding to new or particularly challenging work and are as yet unsure where you stand. It also lends itself well to the kind of speculative investigation in which you weigh a position's pros and cons rather than come out decisively either for or against. But again, as we suggest earlier, whether you are agreeing, disagreeing, or both agreeing and disagreeing, you need to be as clear as possible, and making a frank statement that you are ambivalent is one way to be clear.

Nevertheless, many writers are as reluctant to express ambivalence as they are to disagree or agree. Some may worry that by expressing ambivalence they will come across as evasive, wishy-washy, or unsure of themselves. Or they may think that their ambivalence will end up confusing readers who require clear-cut statements. In fact, however, expressing ambivalent feelings can serve to demonstrate deep sophistication as a writer. There is nothing wrong with forthrightly declaring that you have mixed feelings, especially after you've considered various options. Indeed, although you never want to be merely evasive, leaving your ambivalence thoughtfully

unresolved can demonstrate your integrity as a writer, showing that you are not easily satisfied with viewing complex subjects in simple yes-or-no terms.

Exercises

1. Read the following passage by Jean Anyon, an education professor at Rutgers University, Newark. As you'll see, she summarizes the arguments of several other authors before moving on to tell us what she thinks. Does she agree with those she summarizes, disagree, or some combination of both? How do you know?

Scholars in political economy and the sociology of knowledge have recently argued that public schools in complex industrial societies like our own make available different types of educational experience and curriculum knowledge to students in different social classes. Bowles and Gintis, for example, have argued that students in different social-class backgrounds are rewarded for classroom behaviors that correspond to personality traits allegedly rewarded in the different occupational strata—the working classes for docility and obedience, the managerial classes for initiative and personal assertiveness. Basil Bernstein, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michael W. Apple, focusing on school knowledge, have argued that knowledge and skills leading to social power and regard (medical, legal, managerial) are made available to the advantaged social groups but are withheld from the working classes, to whom a more "practical" curriculum is offered (manual skills, clerical knowledge). While there has been considerable argumentation of these points regarding education in England, France, and North America, there has

been little or no attempt to investigate these ideas empirically in elementary or secondary schools and classrooms in this country.

This article offers tentative empirical support (and qualification) of the above arguments by providing illustrative examples of differences in student *work* in classrooms in contrasting social-class communities. . . .

JEAN ANYON, "Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work"

2. Read one of the essays at the back of this book, underlining places where the author agrees with others, disagrees, or both. Then write an essay of your own, responding in some way to the essay. You'll want to summarize and/or quote some of the author's ideas and make clear whether you're agreeing, disagreeing, or both agreeing and disagreeing with what he or she says. Remember that there are templates in this book that can help you get started; see Chapters 1–3 for templates that will help you represent other people's ideas, and Chapter 4 for templates that will get you started with your response.