

They say I say

by Gerald Graff · Language: EN

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Overview

Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's "They Say / I Say" is a groundbreaking guide to academic writing that demystifies the process of argumentation by framing it as an act of entering a conversation. The book's central premise is that effective academic writing requires writers to not only present their own ideas ("I Say") but also to clearly articulate the ideas of others ("They Say") that their own arguments are responding to. It argues that all good writing involves a dialectical engagement with existing perspectives, making one's own contribution clear within a broader context.

The authors provide a series of practical templates and rhetorical moves designed to help students structure their arguments, integrate sources, and engage critically with different viewpoints. These templates cover various aspects of writing, from summarizing and quoting to agreeing, disagreeing, and qualifying arguments. The book emphasizes that these templates are not meant to stifle creativity but rather to provide a foundational structure, much like learning scales in music, enabling writers to focus on the substance of their ideas. "They Say / I Say" has become a staple in college writing courses, empowering students to overcome writer's block and develop more sophisticated, persuasive arguments by understanding writing as a dynamic, responsive process.

Key Takeaways

- Always begin your writing by summarizing the 'They Say' – the existing conversation or common view – before introducing your own 'I Say' to provide context for your argument.
- Utilize templates provided in the book as starting points to structure your arguments, integrate sources, and articulate complex ideas, adapting them to fit your specific needs.
- Ensure your 'I Say' clearly responds to or engages with the 'They Say,' making the relationship between your ideas and others' explicit.
- Practice the art of 'quotation sandwiching' by introducing, presenting, and explaining every quote you use to ensure its relevance and meaning are clear to your reader.
- Employ metacommentary to guide your readers, clarifying what you mean, why your argument matters, and how different parts of your text relate to each other.
- Understand that academic writing is a conversation, and your goal is to contribute meaningfully to that ongoing dialogue, not just to state isolated facts or opinions.

- Revise your writing to ensure a strong thesis, clear transitions, and a consistent voice that effectively balances summarizing others' views with presenting your own.

Chapter Summaries

Introduction: Entering the Conversation

This introductory chapter establishes the core concept of the book: that academic writing is fundamentally an act of entering a conversation. It argues that effective writers must not only express their own ideas but also clearly indicate what ideas they are responding to. The authors introduce the 'They Say / I Say' framework as a powerful tool for structuring arguments and making one's own contribution clear within a broader intellectual dialogue, providing initial templates to illustrate this principle.

Part 1: 'They Say'

This section focuses on the crucial skill of summarizing and integrating the views of others. It teaches readers how to effectively present the 'They Say' part of the argument, emphasizing fair and accurate representation of source material. Chapters within this part cover summarizing, quoting effectively, and avoiding common pitfalls like simply dropping quotes without proper introduction or explanation. The goal is to set up one's own argument by clearly articulating the existing conversation.

Part 2: 'I Say'

Part 2 shifts the focus to developing and presenting one's own argument, the 'I Say.' It provides strategies for responding to the 'They Say' by agreeing, disagreeing, or a combination of both. This section helps writers articulate their unique perspective, make claims, and support them with evidence. It also addresses the importance of qualifying one's argument and distinguishing one's own voice from that of the sources being discussed, offering templates for various argumentative moves.

Part 3: Connecting the Parts

This part addresses the crucial task of making an argument flow coherently and logically. It covers techniques for connecting the 'They Say' and 'I Say' components, ensuring smooth transitions between ideas and paragraphs. Chapters delve into the use of transition words, pointing words, and repetition with a difference to create unity and clarity. It also emphasizes the importance of introductions and conclusions that effectively frame the argument and leave a lasting impression on the reader.

Part 4: In Specific Academic Contexts

This section applies the 'They Say / I Say' framework to various academic disciplines and specific writing situations. It provides tailored advice for writing in the sciences, social sciences, and

literature, demonstrating how the core principles can be adapted. It also includes guidance on rhetorical analysis, research writing, and engaging with challenging texts, showing the versatility of the template-based approach across different academic fields and assignments.

Conclusion: 'But Don't Get Me Wrong'

The conclusion reinforces the book's main message, reminding readers that the templates are tools for thought and expression, not rigid formulas. It encourages writers to adapt and personalize the templates, emphasizing that the ultimate goal is to foster critical thinking and effective communication. The authors reiterate that good writing is about engaging in a meaningful dialogue and making a clear, well-supported contribution to an ongoing conversation.

Themes

- Academic writing
- Argumentation
- Rhetoric
- Critical thinking
- Source integration
- Intellectual conversation

Notable Quotes

- "The central piece of advice in this book is that you need to enter a conversation, using what others say (or might say) as a springboard for your own ideas." — From the Introduction, explaining the book's core philosophy of academic writing.
- "Good academic writing should offer some version of what we call the 'They Say / I Say' formula." — Highlighting the fundamental structure the authors advocate for effective argumentation.
- "To do justice to the people you cite, you need to represent their positions accurately and with enough detail for a reader to understand where they're coming from." — Discussing the importance of fair and thorough summarization in the 'They Say' section.
- "The best academic writing has one underlying feature: it is deeply engaged in some way with other people's ideas." — Emphasizing the conversational and responsive nature of strong academic discourse.
- "You need to do more than just summarize what 'they say.' You also need to present 'your say,' your own argument, as a response to what 'they' have said." — Explaining the two essential components of the book's framework.

- "In fact, the best writers do more than just make an argument. They also make an argument about their argument." — Introducing the concept of metacommentary and its role in clarifying and enhancing one's own claims.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is *They say I say* about?

They Say / I Say is a guide to academic writing that teaches students how to structure arguments by engaging with existing ideas. It provides templates and strategies for summarizing others' views ('They Say') and then presenting one's own response ('I Say'), framing writing as entering a conversation. The book aims to improve clarity, coherence, and persuasiveness in academic discourse.

Is *They say I say* worth reading?

Yes, *They Say / I Say* is highly recommended for anyone looking to improve their academic writing, particularly college students. Its practical, template-based approach simplifies complex rhetorical moves, making it easier to construct clear, well-supported arguments. It's widely used in universities for its effectiveness in teaching critical thinking and effective communication.

Who should read *They say I say*?

They Say / I Say is ideal for college students, high school students preparing for college, and anyone who writes academic papers, essays, or argumentative pieces. It's particularly useful for those struggling with organizing their thoughts, integrating sources, or understanding how to contribute to scholarly conversations.

How long does it take to read *They say I say*?

Reading *They Say / I Say* typically takes about 4 to 6 hours. The book is relatively concise, and while it's often used as a textbook, a focused reader can get through the core instructional chapters fairly quickly. The time may vary depending on how much one engages with the exercises and example readings.