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

Entering the Conversation

This foundational chapter introduces the book's central premise: that effective academic writing requires entering an ongoing conversation. It emphasizes the importance of starting with "what others are saying" (the "They Say") before presenting one's own argument (the "I Say"). The authors provide basic templates for introducing summaries and arguments, illustrating how writers can position their ideas in relation to existing discussions, rather than presenting them in a vacuum. It argues that understanding and engaging with previous arguments is crucial for making one's own contribution meaningful and relevant to the audience, establishing the conversational model for all subsequent writing tasks.

The Art of Summarizing

This chapter focuses on how to summarize effectively and fairly, even when one intends to disagree with the source. It introduces the "believing game" as a strategy to accurately represent an author's argument before critiquing it. The chapter provides templates for introducing summaries, explaining that a good summary requires balancing the original author's ideas with the summarizing writer's own focus. It warns against "list summaries" that merely itemize points and encourages summaries that are concise, accurate, and serve the writer's larger argument, often with a specific "twist" or angle that foreshadows the writer's response.

The Art of Quoting

This chapter explains how to integrate direct quotations smoothly and effectively into one's writing. It stresses the importance of framing quotations, meaning that every quote should be introduced with a signal phrase and followed by an explanation of its relevance to the writer's argument. The chapter provides templates for introducing quotes and for explaining them, emphasizing that quotes should never be left to "speak for themselves." It also discusses how to select relevant portions of text, avoid "hit-and-run" quoting, and ensure that quotations are seamlessly woven into the writer's own prose, supporting their claims rather than merely decorating the text.

Three Ways to Respond

Moving into the "I Say" section, this chapter outlines the three primary ways a writer can respond to the "They Say": agreeing, disagreeing, or a combination of both. It provides templates for each type of response, encouraging writers to be explicit about their stance. The authors argue that even when agreeing, writers should add their own "twist" or unique contribution, rather than simply reiterating what has already been said. Similarly, when disagreeing, writers are

encouraged to explain why they disagree. The chapter emphasizes that a strong argument requires a clear and nuanced position in relation to others' ideas.

Distinguishing What You Say from What They Say

This chapter focuses on the crucial skill of clearly indicating whose voice is speaking at any given moment in a text. It discusses the use of "voice markers" and signal phrases to avoid confusion between the writer's own ideas and those being summarized or quoted from others. The chapter provides templates for attributing ideas and for making clear transitions between different perspectives, ensuring that readers can easily follow the flow of argument and identify the source of each claim. It highlights that ambiguity in attribution can lead to misinterpretations or even accusations of plagiarism, stressing clarity for the reader.

Skeptics May Object: Planting a Naysayer in Your Text

This chapter teaches writers how to anticipate and address counterarguments or objections to their own claims. It argues that incorporating a "naysayer" strengthens an argument by demonstrating a writer's awareness of alternative perspectives and their ability to respond to them. The chapter provides templates for introducing and responding to objections, such as "Some might object..." or "Of course, many will disagree..." It emphasizes that engaging with potential critics makes one's own argument more robust, credible, and persuasive, showing that the writer has considered the complexities of the issue.

So What? Who Cares?: Explaining Why Your Argument Matters

This chapter addresses the importance of articulating the significance and implications of one's argument. It encourages writers to explicitly answer the "so what?" and "who cares?" questions for their readers, explaining why their claims are important and to whom. The chapter provides templates for explaining significance, such as "This matters because..." or "Ultimately, what is at stake here is..." It argues that a strong argument not only makes a clear claim but also demonstrates its broader relevance, impact, and the real-world consequences or intellectual stakes involved, ensuring the audience understands its value.

Connecting the Parts: Transitioning and Cohesion

This chapter focuses on strategies for creating smooth transitions and ensuring coherence throughout a piece of writing. It discusses the effective use of transition words and phrases (e.g., "however," "therefore," "in addition"), pointing words (e.g., "this," "that," "these"), and the strategic repetition of key terms and phrases. The chapter provides templates for various types of transitions, helping writers guide their readers through their arguments logically and clearly. It emphasizes that good writing flows seamlessly from one idea to the next, preventing abrupt shifts and maintaining a clear line of reasoning.

Metacommentary: Explaining What You Mean

This chapter introduces the concept of metacommentary, which is the act of commenting on one's own claims and telling readers how to interpret them. It explains that metacommentary helps writers clarify, elaborate, and qualify their arguments, ensuring that readers understand their intended meaning. The chapter provides templates for using metacommentary, such as "In other words..." or "What I mean by this is..." It argues that metacommentary is a powerful tool for preventing misunderstandings, anticipating objections, and strengthening one's argument by guiding the reader's interpretation of complex ideas or nuanced positions.

The Academic 'I': Does It Make You Sound Self-Absorbed?

This chapter explores the debate surrounding the use of the first-person pronoun "I" in academic writing. It challenges the traditional rule that "I" should be avoided, arguing that using "I" can often make writing clearer, more direct, and more engaging, especially when expressing one's own argument or stance. The chapter provides templates for using "I" effectively and discusses contexts where it is appropriate or less appropriate, encouraging writers to use it judiciously to clarify their position and avoid passive or overly convoluted phrasing, ultimately promoting a more confident and authoritative voice.

But Is It Plagiarism?

This chapter addresses the critical issue of academic integrity and how to avoid plagiarism. It clarifies what constitutes plagiarism, emphasizing that it's not just about copying words but also about failing to properly attribute ideas, even when paraphrasing. The chapter provides practical advice on how to cite sources correctly, paraphrase effectively, and integrate source material ethically. It reinforces the importance of distinguishing between one's own ideas and those of others, a core theme throughout the book, to ensure academic honesty and to properly engage in scholarly conversation without misrepresenting sources.

Analyzing Literature

This chapter applies the "They Say / I Say" framework specifically to the task of writing about literature. It demonstrates how literary analysis involves entering a conversation about a text, summarizing existing interpretations ("They Say"), and then offering one's own unique reading or argument ("I Say"). The chapter provides templates tailored for literary essays, such as introducing critical interpretations, analyzing textual evidence, and responding to different scholarly views on a work. It encourages students to move beyond simple plot summary to engage in sophisticated textual interpretation and contribute to ongoing literary debates.

Writing in the Social Sciences

This chapter extends the book's core principles to the context of social science writing, such as sociology, psychology, or political science. It shows how social scientists engage in conversations by reviewing existing research, presenting data, and interpreting findings in relation to previous studies. The chapter offers templates for summarizing research, introducing data, discussing methodologies, and interpreting implications within social science discourse. It emphasizes the

need to situate one's empirical work within a broader academic dialogue, explaining how one's findings confirm, challenge, or extend existing theories and research.

Writing in the Sciences

This chapter adapts the "They Say / I Say" framework for writing in the natural and physical sciences. It illustrates how scientific writing, despite its objective appearance, also involves entering a conversation by reviewing prior research, stating hypotheses, presenting methods and results, and discussing findings in the context of existing scientific knowledge. The chapter provides templates for summarizing scientific literature, introducing experiments, interpreting data, and explaining the significance of one's scientific contributions, helping scientists articulate their work within ongoing scientific debates and contribute to the collective body of knowledge.

Research Writing

This chapter focuses on the comprehensive process of conducting and writing a research paper, integrating all the "They Say / I Say" moves learned throughout the book. It guides students through identifying a research question, finding and evaluating sources, synthesizing information from multiple perspectives, and constructing an argument that responds to existing scholarship. The chapter provides templates for introducing research questions, summarizing multiple sources, and positioning one's own research within a larger body of work, emphasizing the iterative and conversational nature of research as a dialogue with existing knowledge.

Readings for Further Discussion

This section typically presents a collection of diverse essays, articles, and sometimes literary texts from various disciplines. The primary purpose of these readings is to provide students with concrete examples of the "They Say / I Say" moves in action, allowing them to analyze how professional writers engage in academic conversations. Students are encouraged to apply the templates and analytical strategies learned in previous chapters to these texts, identifying summaries, responses, counterarguments, metacommentary, and the overall conversational structure within the provided examples, thereby deepening their understanding of the book's core principles.

Themes

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

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.

Best Quotes

“The central piece of advice in this book is to always remember that you are entering a conversation.”

Introduction: Entering the Conversation

This line encapsulates the book's core philosophy: academic writing is not a solitary act but a dialogue. It emphasizes that writers must position their ideas in relation to what others have already said, making their contribution part of an ongoing discussion rather than an isolated statement.

“To write well, you need to do more than just state your own position. You also have to indicate what others are saying about your topic.”

This quote highlights the book's fundamental premise that effective argumentation requires context. It stresses that a writer's 'I Say' must be framed by a 'They Say,' demonstrating an understanding of the existing discourse and providing a clear rationale for the writer's own contribution.

“The best academic writing has a 'they say' and an 'I say' element.”

This statement summarizes the book's central structural recommendation for academic papers. It argues that successful writing integrates both a summary of existing views ('they say') and the writer's original argument or response ('I say'), creating a dynamic and responsive piece of work.

“Our templates are designed to show you how to make such moves in your own writing.”

This line clarifies the practical purpose of the book's extensive use of templates. It explains that these fill-in-the-blank structures are tools to help writers master common rhetorical moves in academic discourse, making complex writing tasks more accessible and systematic.

“Templates are not meant to be used mindlessly.”

This crucial caveat addresses a potential misinterpretation of the book's method. It warns against rote application of templates, emphasizing that they are flexible tools to aid critical thinking and argument construction, not substitutes for original thought or careful engagement with ideas.

“Ultimately, then, good writing means entering a conversation.”

This quote reinforces the book's overarching message about the social and dialogic nature of writing. It suggests that effective communication involves actively participating in a broader intellectual exchange, building upon and responding to the ideas of others rather than simply presenting isolated thoughts.

“Good academic writing begins not with a statement of your own ideas but with a summary of the views you are responding to.”

This line outlines the recommended starting point for academic essays. It prioritizes establishing context by first presenting the 'they say' – the existing conversation or opposing viewpoints – before introducing the writer's own 'I say,' ensuring the argument is well-situated.

“The 'they say' part of your argument is crucial because it establishes the issue or problem your own 'I say' part is going to respond to.”

They Say: Starting with What Others Are Saying

This quote explains the foundational role of summarizing others' ideas. It highlights that the 'they say' provides the necessary background and intellectual problem that the writer's own argument ('I say') will address, giving purpose and relevance to the writer's contribution.

Questions & Answers

What is the main argument of "They Say / I Say"?

The main argument is that effective academic writing requires writers to enter an ongoing conversation by first summarizing what "they say" (the existing views or arguments on a topic) before presenting their own "I say" (their unique response or argument). The book posits that this "they say / I say" structure is fundamental for making clear, persuasive, and contextually relevant arguments, and it provides templates to help writers achieve this.

What do Graff and Birkenstein mean by "They Say"?

"They Say" refers to the views, arguments, or common assumptions that already exist about a particular topic. It encompasses what others—scholars, critics, the general public, or even implied viewpoints—have said or might say. The authors emphasize that writers must accurately and fairly summarize these existing perspectives to provide context and a clear rationale for their own contribution to the conversation.

What do Graff and Birkenstein mean by "I Say"?

"I Say" represents the writer's own argument, response, or contribution to the ongoing conversation. It is the writer's unique perspective, analysis, or claim, which is always presented in relation to the "They Say." The book provides templates for expressing agreement, disagreement, or a combination of both, helping writers articulate their own ideas clearly and persuasively within the established context.

How do templates help writers according to the authors?

Templates serve as flexible frameworks that help writers structure their arguments and make common rhetorical moves in academic discourse. They are not meant for mindless copying but as tools to demystify complex writing tasks, allowing writers to focus on developing their ideas while providing a clear organizational structure. Templates help writers integrate sources,

introduce summaries, make counterarguments, and clarify their own positions effectively.

Why is summarizing others' views important in academic writing?

Summarizing others' views is crucial because it establishes the context and intellectual problem that the writer's own argument will address. It demonstrates that the writer understands the existing conversation, shows respect for other perspectives, and provides readers with the necessary background to understand the writer's "I Say." Without a clear "They Say," a writer's argument can seem isolated, irrelevant, or simply a statement of opinion.

What is the "believing game" and why is it important?

The "believing game" is a strategy for summarizing where writers try to inhabit the viewpoint of those they are summarizing, even if they disagree, to represent their ideas as fairly and accurately as possible. It's important because it helps writers avoid misrepresenting or caricaturing opposing views, which can undermine their own credibility. Playing the believing game ensures summaries are nuanced, respectful, and provide a solid foundation for the writer's response.

How can writers avoid the "hit-and-run" quotation?

Writers can avoid the "hit-and-run" quotation by always framing their quotes. This means introducing each quotation with a signal phrase that indicates who is speaking and providing an explanation or interpretation of the quote afterward. The book emphasizes that quotes should never stand alone; they must be integrated smoothly into the writer's own prose and clearly connected to the argument being made.

What is the purpose of the "voice markers" discussed in the book?

Voice markers, such as "according to X," "X argues that," or "my point is," help readers distinguish between the writer's own ideas and the ideas being summarized or quoted from others. They clarify whose voice is speaking at any given moment, preventing confusion and ensuring that the writer's argument is clearly differentiated from the "they say." These markers are essential for maintaining clarity and coherence in academic writing.

How does the book suggest writers engage with objections and counterarguments?

The book advises writers to anticipate and address objections or counterarguments to their own claims. Rather than ignoring potential critiques, writers should explicitly acknowledge them, often by using templates like "Of course, many will object that..." or "While some might argue...," and then respond to them. This strategy strengthens the writer's argument by demonstrating a thorough understanding of the topic and an ability to engage with complexity.

What is "metacommentary" and how is it used?

Metacommentary refers to the act of commenting on your own claims and telling readers how to interpret what you've said. It's "a way of commenting on your claims and telling others

how—and how not—to think about them." It helps writers clarify their meaning, elaborate on a point, or guide readers through their argument, ensuring their message is understood as intended. Examples include phrases like "What I mean to say is..." or "My point is not X but Y."

How does the book address the concern that templates stifle creativity?

The authors argue that templates do not stifle creativity but rather enhance it by providing a solid foundation for expression. They compare templates to musical scales or architectural blueprints, which provide structure within which endless variations and innovations can occur. By mastering these basic rhetorical moves, writers gain the confidence and clarity needed to develop their unique voice and complex ideas more effectively.

What is the role of "entering the conversation" in academic writing?

"Entering the conversation" is the core metaphor of the book, signifying that academic writing is not an isolated act but an active participation in an ongoing dialogue. It means positioning one's own ideas in relation to what others have already said, responding to existing arguments, and contributing to a broader intellectual exchange. This approach ensures that writing is relevant, purposeful, and engaging for its audience.

How can a writer effectively introduce a summary?

To effectively introduce a summary, a writer should use signal verbs that accurately reflect the stance of the author being summarized (e.g., "argues," "contends," "suggests," "claims," "acknowledges"). They should also provide enough context for readers to understand the summarized ideas without getting lost. The book provides various templates for introducing summaries, emphasizing the importance of choosing verbs that convey the tone and purpose of the original text.

What are some common mistakes writers make that the book tries to correct?

The book addresses several common mistakes, including failing to provide context for one's argument (the "I Say" without a "They Say"), dropping quotations without proper introduction or explanation ("hit-and-run" quotations), summarizing inaccurately or unfairly, and failing to distinguish between one's own voice and the voices of sources. It also tackles the "closest cliché syndrome" where writers simply repeat common ideas instead of developing original thought.

What is the main takeaway for students using this book?

The main takeaway for students is that effective academic writing is a conversational act. They should learn to frame their own arguments ("I Say") by first presenting and responding to the arguments of others ("They Say"). By using the book's templates and strategies, students can develop clearer, more persuasive, and contextually relevant arguments, improving their ability to engage critically with complex ideas and communicate effectively in academic settings.

How does the book help writers develop their own voice?

While providing templates, the book encourages writers to develop their own voice by showing them how to adapt and personalize these structures. It emphasizes that templates are starting points, not rigid formulas. By practicing how to integrate their ideas with those of others, respond critically, and use metacommentary, writers learn to articulate their unique perspectives clearly and confidently, ultimately finding their distinctive voice within academic discourse.

What is the significance of the title "They Say / I Say"?

The title "They Say / I Say" perfectly encapsulates the book's core methodology and argument. It signifies that all effective academic writing is a dialogue, requiring writers to first acknowledge and summarize existing conversations ("They Say") before presenting their own unique contribution or response ("I Say"). The slash emphasizes the essential connection and interaction between these two elements, which together form a coherent and persuasive argument.

How does the book suggest writers integrate sources effectively?

The book advocates for integrating sources by framing them with clear signal phrases and follow-up explanations. It advises against simply dropping quotes into the text. Instead, writers should introduce who is speaking, present the quotation, and then explain its relevance to their own argument, ensuring the source material is clearly connected to the writer's "I Say." This approach makes sources an integral part of the conversation, not just decorative additions.

What is the "closest cliché syndrome"?

The "closest cliché syndrome" refers to the tendency of writers to substitute their own original thoughts with the most obvious, readily available, or clichéd ideas related to a topic. Instead of developing a nuanced or complex argument, writers might fall back on simplistic, unoriginal statements. The book encourages writers to move beyond these superficial responses by engaging more deeply with the "They Say" and developing a more sophisticated "I Say."

How does the book encourage critical thinking?

The book encourages critical thinking by emphasizing that writing is a process of engaging with and responding to existing ideas. It teaches writers to analyze others' arguments, identify underlying assumptions, and formulate their own informed responses. By requiring writers to summarize fairly, consider counterarguments, and articulate their own position clearly, the book fosters a deeper, more analytical approach to both reading and writing.