

A Review: They Say / I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing

By John Edlund

When you assign research papers and other academic writing that uses sources, do you get papers in which it is hard to tell who is saying what? Does the literature review look like a list or a note card dump? Is it hard to tell what the student thinks? Do some students avoid using sources at all? Are there long passages that seem to be pasted in from somewhere else?

Students who turn in papers like these are having difficulty joining the academic conversation. Is it because they can't do the necessary critical thinking? Or is it simply that they don't have the language to express this kind of thinking? Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein argue in *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* that giving students some stock language or "templates" in which to express argumentative moves common in academic writing will significantly improve both their writing and the quality of their thought.

Graff and Birkenstein use the metaphor of academic writing as a conversation throughout their short and useful book. Their chapter subtitles include such topics as the following:

- Demystifying Academic Conversation
- Starting with What Others Are Saying
- The Art of Summarizing
- The Art of Quoting
- "Yes, No, Ok, But. . .": Three Ways to Respond
- Distinguishing What You Say from What They Say
- Planting a Naysayer in Your Text
- Saying Why It Matters
- Connecting the Parts

Each short chapter describes relevant argumentative moves, provides amusing and insightful examples, and includes a list of "templates," which are typical sentences with blanks that can be filled in with real content. In "Starting with What Others Are Saying" the authors describe a conference presentation in which the thesis appeared to be that a particular researcher had done very good work. The presenter went on and on about this, and many in the audience wondered what the point was. Finally, in response to a question at the end, the speaker discussed numerous critics of the scholar in question. The authors note that if the audience had known about these critics from the beginning, the whole presentation would have made more sense. The presenter had assumed that everyone already knew the "they say" part of the conversation and devoted himself to the "I say."

Student writers often make the same mistake. To help them, Graff and Birkenstein supply templates such as the following:

- 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 _____.

Graff and Birkenstein also offer templates in this chapter for “Introducing Standard Views,” “Making What ‘They Say’ Something *You* Say,” “Introducing Something Implied or Assumed,” and for “Introducing an Ongoing Debate.” The use of these templates will require the student not only to fill in the blanks but to change some of the other language as well, so using this approach does not turn research paper writing into a rote fill in the blanks exercise. Rather, the templates are designed to provoke an insight (Oh, so that’s how it’s done!) followed by a writing problem (But how do I make it say what I want to say?).

I tried a similar but more limited approach years ago when I designed a writing component for a summer bridge program. The students were largely special admits with numerous gaps in their preparation for the university. They had to write a formal research paper for a social science class. My handout included the following advice to students about how to put other people’s ideas in their papers:

You may want to begin your Literature Review with a statement such as “There are several different perspectives on the issue of _____,” or “Experts disagree on what to do about _____.” You can use phrases such as “John Q. Professor argues that . . .” or “states that,” or “believes,” to introduce quotes or paraphrases. Another useful phrase is “According to _____.” Words such as “however,” and phrases such as “on the other hand,” are useful to indicate contrasting points of view.

There were 300 students, and nearly every paper that was turned in contained these phrases, although not always correctly used. Supplying formulaic language to make these argumentative moves does allow students to try to do things they would not have thought of doing otherwise.

However, Graff and Birkenstein take this approach much farther. They provide templates for integrating the language, ideas, and arguments of others in various ways and then signaling almost every possible stance toward those ideas. In a project like this, the key is to find the right balance between simplicity and complexity. Although the “Index of Templates” Graff and Birkenstein provide at the end of the book is 13 pages long, the style and presentation are engaging and clear enough to avoid discouraging the writer. I think they have gotten the balance, although somewhat tilted toward complexity, just about right.

The other concern is whether the templates and the thinking behind them can be internalized. Do the training wheels drop off at some point? I think that because the writers need to significantly modify the templates to use them in their own writing, it is likely that they will grow out of them fairly quickly.

The user reviews of this book on Amazon.com indicate that a wide range of people find this book valuable. A graduate student said, “This really kicked up my academic writing skills. Previously I’d let quotes speak for themselves, or me.” High school and middle school teachers are reading it. On our own campus it has been used in freshman seminars and freshman composition courses, and recommended to upper division and graduate students whose writing required some “kicking up.” All in all, it is an excellent resource to have on a professor’s bookshelf for such students.

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