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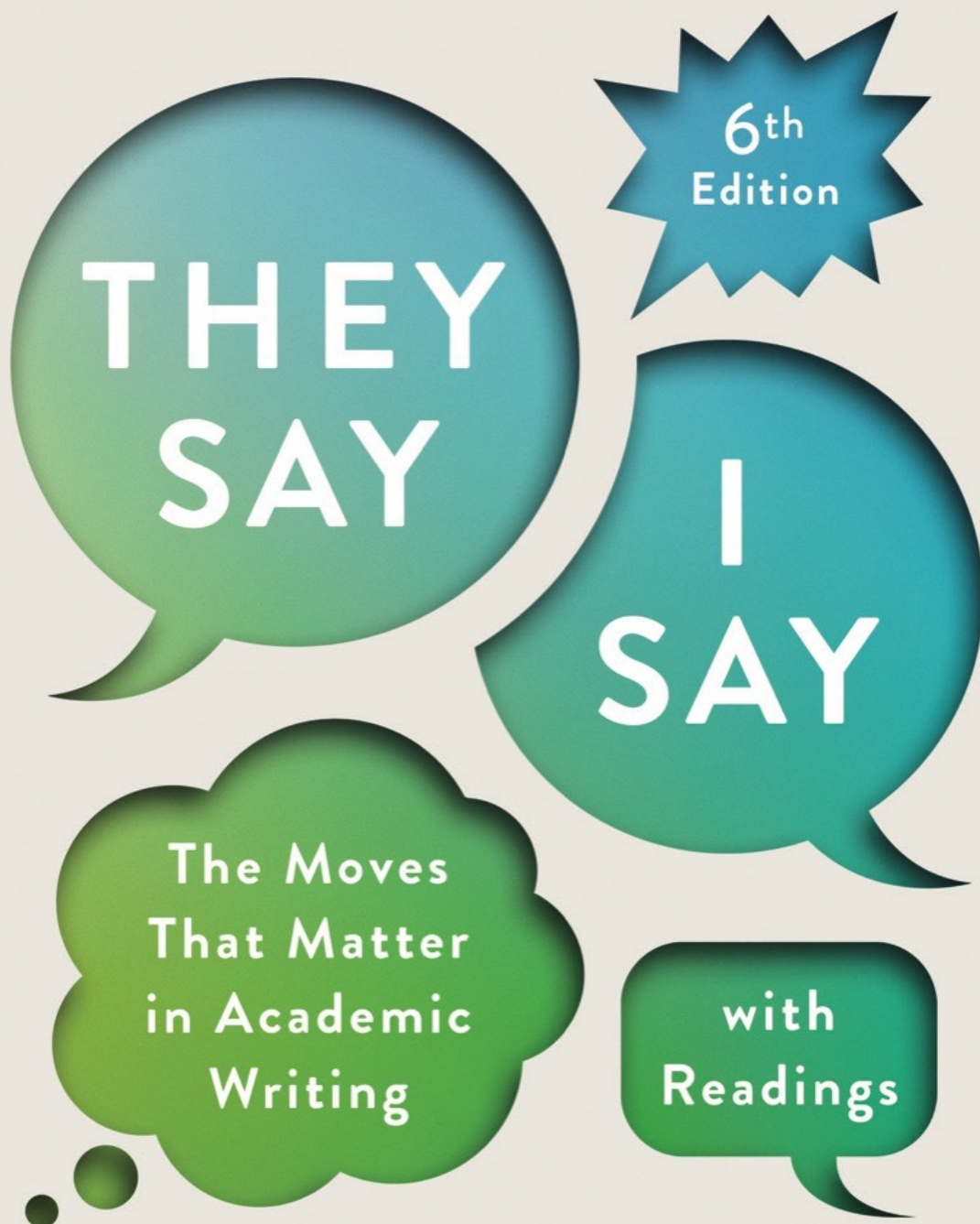
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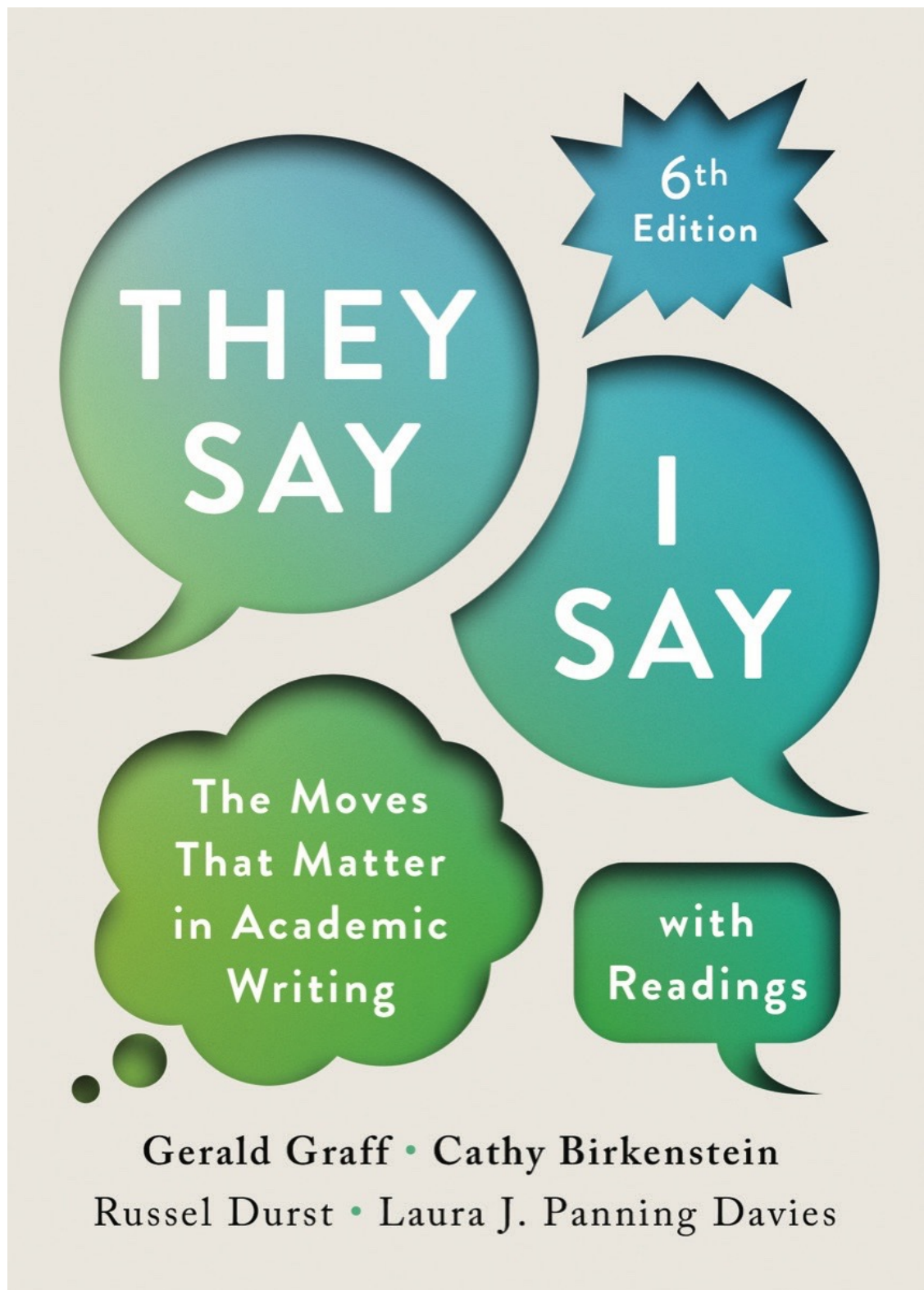
The Moves
That Matter
in Academic
Writing

with
Readings

Gerald Graff • Cathy Birkenstein
Russel Durst • Laura J. Panning Davies



Gerald Graff • Cathy Birkenstein
Russel Durst • Laura J. Panning Davies



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"The new chapter, 'In My Experience,' validates students' lived experiences and teaches them how to establish their ethos in their writing."

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"This chapter will be a great help in getting students to do what I'm already asking them to do, which is connect a controversy that we are reading and writing about with the world as they have seen, experienced, and read about it."

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SIXTH EDITION

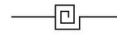
“THEY SAY/I SAY”

WITH READINGS

SIXTH EDITION

“THEY SAY / I SAY”

*The Moves That Matter
in Academic Writing*



GERALD GRAFF

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both of the University of Illinois at Chicago

WITH READINGS

edited by

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Composition: KnowledgeWorks Global Ltd

Cover design: Pete Garceau

Cover images: Panimoni/Getty Images

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2023949207

ISBN: 9781324046660

Ebook ISBN: 9781324070153

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY
10110

www.norton.com

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., 15 Carlisle Street, London W1D 3BS

Retailer ebook version 6.0

To the great rhetorician Wayne Booth, who cared deeply about the democratic art of listening closely to what others say.

CONTENTS

PREFACE TO THE SIXTH EDITION [xv](#)

PREFACE: *Demystifying Academic Conversation* [xxi](#)

INTRODUCTION: *Entering the Conversation* [1](#)

PART 1. “THEY SAY”

1 “THEY SAY”: *Starting with What Others Are Saying* [19](#)

2 “HER POINT IS”: *The Art of Summarizing* [32](#)

3 “AS HE HIMSELF PUTS IT”: *The Art of Quoting* [47](#)

PART 2. “I SAY”

4 “YES / NO / OK, BUT”: *Three Ways to Respond* [59](#)

5 “AND YET”: *Distinguishing What You Say from What They Say* [74](#)

6 “SKEPTICS MAY OBJECT”: *Planting a Naysayer in Your Text* [84](#)

[*](#) [7](#) “IN MY EXPERIENCE”: *Using Personal Stories to Energize Your Argument* [97](#)

8 “SO WHAT? WHO CARES?”: *Saying Why It Matters* [112](#)

PART 3. TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

- 9 “AS A RESULT”: *Connecting the Parts* [123](#)
- 10 “YOU MEAN I CAN JUST SAY IT THAT WAY?”: *Academic Writing Doesn’t Mean Setting Aside Your Own Voice* [139](#)
- 11 “BUT DON’T GET ME WRONG”: *The Art of Metacommentary* [154](#)
- 12 “WHAT I REALLY WANT TO SAY IS”: *Revising Substantially* [165](#)

PART 4. IN SPECIFIC ACADEMIC CONTEXTS

- 13 “I TAKE YOUR POINT”: *Entering Class Discussions* [188](#)
- 14 “WHAT’S MOTIVATING THIS WRITER?”: *Reading for the Conversation* [193](#)
- 15 “BUT AS SEVERAL SOURCES SUGGEST”: *Research as Conversation* [205](#)
- 16 “ON CLOSER EXAMINATION”: *Entering Conversations about Literature* [234](#)
- 17 “THE DATA SUGGEST”: *Writing in the Sciences* [252](#)
- 18 “ANALYZE THIS”: *Writing in the Social Sciences* [271](#)
- * [19](#) “HELP ME UNDERSTAND . . .”: *When Your “They Say” Is a Bot* [290](#)

READINGS 307

*** 20 WHO DECIDES WHAT FREEDOM IS? [309](#)**

*** NESRINE MALIK, *The Myth of the Free Speech Crisis* [313](#)**

*** KATHA POLLITT, *The Left Needs Free Speech* [322](#)**

*** ERIC HOLDER, *Our Unfinished March* [328](#)**

*** ARTHI SIVENDRA, *American Democracy: One Person, One Vote?* [340](#)**

MICHELLE ALEXANDER, *The New Jim Crow* [347](#)

*** JOHN PFAFF, *A Response to the “Standard Story” about US Incarceration Rates* [362](#)**

*** LUTICHA DOUCETTE, *If You’re in a Wheelchair, Segregation Lives* [373](#)**

*** CARISSA VÉLIZ, *If AI Is Predicting Your Future, Are You Still Free?* [380](#)**

*** MARTIN E. DEMPSEY, *90 Seconds Together* [388](#)**

21 HOW IS TECHNOLOGY CHANGING US? [397](#)

KENNETH GOLDSMITH, *Go Ahead: Waste Time on the Internet* [401](#)

*** CHRISTINE ROSEN, *Keep Them Offline* [406](#)**

NICHOLAS CARR, *How Smartphones Hijack Our Minds* [418](#)

JUSTIN VINH, *Social Media: The Screen, the Brain, and Human Nature* [428](#)

* JOE GARCIA, *Left Behind: Internet Access for People behind Bars* [435](#)

* ANNA ROMINA GUEVARRA, *Here Come the Robot Nurses* [439](#)

* LANA SWARTZ, *In Praise of the Dollar Bill* [449](#)

CAROLE CADWALLADR, *Google, Democracy, and the Truth about Internet Search* [454](#)

22 WHY CARE ABOUT THE PLANET? [475](#)

* EMMA BARNES, *The Fast and the Fashionable: How Your Closet Contributes to a Global Crisis* [479](#)

BEN ADLER, *Banning Plastic Bags Is Great for the World, Right? Not So Fast* [487](#)

* AYANA ELIZABETH JOHNSON, *What I Know about the Ocean* [495](#)

* DAVID WALLACE-WELLS, *The Uninhabitable Earth* [505](#)

ALICE CHEN AND VIVEK MURTHY, *Should We Be More Optimistic about Fighting Climate Change?* [514](#)

* MATT RIDLEY, *Going Nuclear* [525](#)

SANDIS EDWARD WAIALAE WIGHTMAN, *Mauna Kea: The Fight to Preserve Culture* [531](#)

* DINA GILIO-WHITAKER, *Environmental Justice Is Only the Beginning* [540](#)

23 WHAT'S COLLEGE FOR? [551](#)

[*](#) CARINE M. FEYTEN, *The Boys Are Doing Just Fine* [556](#)

[*](#) RICHARD V. REEVES, *No, the Boys Are Not Doing Just Fine*
[561](#)

[*](#) YAEL LENGA, *Disability in Higher Education: Building Access
and Building Futures* [566](#)

SYLVIA MATHEWS BURWELL, *Generation Stress: The Mental
Health Crisis on Campus* [578](#)

[*](#) MIKE ROSE, *Community College: The Great Equalizer?* [589](#)

ANNA CLARK, *Why We Need to Keep the “Community” in
Community Colleges* [599](#)

GERALD GRAFF, *Hidden Intellectualism* [606](#)

CHARLES FAIN LEHMAN, *The Student Loan Trap: When Debt
Delays Life* [614](#)

[*](#) ANNA GIFTY OPOKU-AGYEMAN AND FENABA ADDO,
*Student Loan Forgiveness Critics Are Wrong about Who Benefits
and Why* [625](#)

24 HOW CAN WE BRIDGE THE DIFFERENCES THAT DIVIDE US? [633](#)

SEAN BLANDA, *The “Other Side” Is Not Dumb* [637](#)

[*](#) YASCHA MOUNK, *The Everyday Patriotism of Diverse
Democracies* [644](#)

* DAVID BROOKS, *The Triumph of the Ukrainian Idea* [653](#)

SUKETU MEHTA, *Jobs, Crime, and Culture: The Threats That Aren't* [658](#)

DAVID FRUM, *How Much Immigration Is Too Much? The Wrong Debate* [674](#)

* ANDRE M. PERRY, *Addressing Poverty Can Heal an Increasingly Divided Country* [684](#)

KELLY CORYELL, *All Words Matter: The Manipulation behind "All Lives Matter"* [689](#)

* PAOLA RAMOS, *Finding Latinx* [700](#)

* BRYAN BETANCUR, *It's Time to Drop "Latinx"* [712](#)

CREDITS [719](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS [724](#)

* APPENDIX: CITING WHAT "THEY SAY" [738](#)

INDEX OF TEMPLATES [744](#)

INDEX OF AUTHORS AND TITLES [765](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS [770](#)

ENDNOTES

NOTE *: NEW TO THIS EDITION [RETURN TO REFERENCE *](#)

NOTE *: NEW TO THIS EDITION [RETURN TO REFERENCE *](#)

NOTE *: NEW TO THIS EDITION [RETURN TO REFERENCE *](#)

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PREFACE TO THE SIXTH EDITION

* * *

SINCE ITS INCEPTION , this book has been animated by several interlocking goals:

- To demystify academic argument by showing that it involves one central move: that of stating one's own view (what "I say") not in isolation, but in conversation or debate with the views of others (what "they say").
- To provide flexible, user-friendly templates—"Although it is often said that _____ , I argue _____ , " for instance—that help students put this "they say / I say" move into practice, showing that such formulas need not result in writing that is "formulaic."
- To show how important the "they say / I say" move is to a healthy democracy, which requires that we step outside our increasingly polarized comfort zones and listen carefully to those who see things differently.
- To show that, despite the many differences between the academic disciplines, the "they say / I say" move is central to them all, as well as high order workplace and public sphere communication.
- To refute the common perception that academic writing must be dry, lifeless, and devoid of personality, by showing that it can often accommodate different dialects, colloquial expressions, and personal voices.

WHAT'S NEW IN THIS EDITION

“In My Experience”: Using Personal Stories to Energize Your Argument—one of the two chapters new to this edition—advances this last goal by encouraging students to draw on their personal experiences. Written for students who feel, as an undergraduate once told us, that academic writing “just isn’t me,” the chapter shows how personal stories can be used in such writing to make virtually any of the moves we cover in this book, including summarizing and challenging what “they say,” revising what you “used to think,” planting a naysayer, and answering the “so what?” question. Personal stories, we show, can be a great way to connect the academic world to our lives outside the classroom. They can also help students demonstrate that the essay they have submitted was written by a real human being and not artificial intelligence.

“Help Me Understand . . .”: When Your “They Say” Is a Bot. Speaking of generative AI, the second new chapter addresses how today’s hyper-advanced chatbots can be used not as substitutes for students’ own writing skills but as tools for advancing them. When used responsibly, we show, these new chatbots can be deployed in the service of “they say / I say” argument, and we provide templates for prompting these technologies to help us understand our own positions and those of others, to identify naysayers, to address the ever-important “so what?” and “who cares?” questions, and to make a host of other moves that matter in academic writing.

New readings and visual texts. More than half of the readings are new, including an entirely new chapter, “Who Decides What Freedom Is?” ([Chapter 20](#)), featuring writers in conversation about what’s at stake in a democracy—from free speech and voting rights to freedom of movement. See, for example, Eric Holder’s proposal for automatic voter registration, with a response to it from college student Arthi Sivendra, “American Democracy: One Person, One Vote?,” and John Pfaff’s “A Response to the ‘Standard Story’ about US Incarceration Rates,” in direct conversation with the selection from Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*.

*Note: all new readings are indicated with an * in the Table of Contents.*

Every chapter features new readings in conversation on topics ranging from robot nurses to age requirements for social media, from the role of community college in society to the war in Ukraine. For example: a selection from Paola Ramos’s book, *Finding Latinx*, is in conversation with Professor Bryan Betancur’s piece, “It’s Time to Drop ‘Latinx’ ” ([Chapter 24](#)), and Carine M. Feyten’s “The Boys Are Doing Just Fine” appears alongside Richard V. Reeves’s piece in response, “No, the Boys Are Not Doing Just Fine” ([Chapter 23](#)).

New visual texts open every chapter of readings. From a historic photo of the Statue of Liberty under construction to a billboard advertising college to a *New Yorker* cartoon about echo chambers, each chapter now opens with a visual text accompanied by prompts for analysis, writing, and discussion.

New examples. In most of the core chapters (1–15) of the book, we have replaced the examples used to illustrate the rhetorical moves with more recent writing from a wide range of academic and popular sources and a range of authors, from established writers such as Michelle Alexander, Anne-Marie Slaughter, Suketu Mehta, Maya Phillips, and Kenneth Goldsmith to emerging voices such as Damond Williams and Joe Garcia, and students like Felicity Noahubi and Yael Lenga.

New appendix, “Citing What ‘They Say’.” This appendix offers a quick-start guide to documenting sources, including examples of how to cite generative AI, and points students to where they can find additional models and advice.

A reading experience that is more hands-on than ever with the new Norton Illumine Ebook. Students don’t just read “*They Say / I Say*” — they interact with it. Building on the book’s already popular templates, exercises, and tutorials, the new Norton Illumine Ebook gets students practicing the moves while they read, through interactive new features conceived and written by author Laura J. Panning Davies. Each chapter offers “Check Your Understanding” questions that are auto-graded with immediate feedback. And instructors can easily embed their own notes, videos, or links to share with their students, customizing each chapter as they see fit. In the readings part of the book, challenging words are glossed for students right on the page.

A collection of new videos. The Sixth Edition offers a new collection of animated videos on key concepts—from understanding academic argument to using signal phrases—that help students visualize and apply the book’s advice. Each video is two to three minutes long. Some videos are embedded directly in the ebook, and all are available for streaming online.

Tutorials give students hands-on practice using the rhetorical moves taught in the book. Each tutorial helps students analyze an essay with an eye to the “moves that matter” and then use the book’s templates to begin writing themselves. The Sixth Edition is updated with a new tutorial for [Chapter 7, “In My Experience,”](#) as well as new essay examples.

InQuizitive for Writers assignments allow students to practice new writing, editing, and research skills in a low-stakes, feedback-driven environment. Interactive questions are adaptive, so students receive additional practice in the areas where they need more help, and explanatory feedback offers advice precisely when it’s needed, along with direct links to *The Little Seagull Handbook* ebook, which is automatically included with all new copies of “*They Say / I Say*.” New activities cover rhetorical situations, elements of argument, thesis statements, critical reading strategies, and more.

Norton Teaching Tools is a new, searchable website that can be filtered by chapter or by resource type, making it easy to find exactly what you need, download, customize, and import it into your LMS course. Written by new co-author Laura J. Panning Davies, with special contributions from instructors across the country, all of the revised contents from the instructor’s guide for “*They Say / I Say*” can now be found here: summaries of the rhetoric chapters and each of the essays; in-class activities, discussion prompts, and assignment suggestions for each chapter; advice and assignment ideas for using theysayiblog.com; teaching notes, lists of related essays, and suggested responses to the “Joining the Conversation” questions; and sample syllabi. New to the Sixth Edition is a comprehensive guide to teaching first-year writing that covers everything from designing a course to assessing student writing to engaging difficult conversations in the classroom. You will also find tips and best practices for assigning Check Your Understanding questions in the Norton Illumine Ebook, InQuizitive for Writers, *The Little Seagull*

Handbook ebook, the new collection of animated videos, and other digital resources.

“They Say / I Blog” provides current readings that use the rhetorical moves covered in the book, along with questions that prompt students to join the conversation online. Updated monthly by author Laura J. Panning Davies, the blog offers a rich archive of additional readings on important issues. Visit theysayiblog.com.

Resources for your learning management system (LMS) files provide integrated links to all of Norton’s high-quality digital resources. All activities can be accessed from within your existing learning management system, and graded activities can be configured to report to the LMS course gradebook.

Even as we have updated *“They Say / I Say,”* our basic goals remain unchanged: to help students engage closely with others, particularly those who challenge what we say. Our additions, in other words, are meant to reinforce our longstanding goal of demystifying academic discourse by identifying its key moves in forms that students can put into practice. Given the deeply divided society we continue to live in, this practice of engaging in dialogue and entertaining counterarguments seems more urgent than ever.

PREFACE

Demystifying Academic Conversation

* * *

EXPERIENCED WRITING INSTRUCTORS have long recognized that writing well means entering into conversation with others. Academic writing in particular calls on writers not simply to express their own ideas but to do so as a response to what others have said. The first-year writing program at our own university, according to its mission statement, asks “students to participate in ongoing conversations about vitally important academic and public issues.” A similar statement by another program holds that “intellectual writing is almost always composed in response to others’ texts.” These statements echo the ideas of many recent rhetorical theorists, who argue that writing well means engaging the voices of others and letting them in turn engage us.

Yet despite this growing consensus that writing is a social, conversational act, helping student writers actually participate in these conversations remains a formidable challenge. This book aims to meet that challenge. Its goal is to demystify academic writing by isolating its basic moves, explaining them clearly, and representing them in the form of templates. In this way, we hope to help students become active participants in the important conversations of the academic world and the wider public sphere.

HIGHLIGHTS

- *Shows that writing well means entering a conversation*, summarizing others (“they say”) to set up one’s own argument (“I say”)
- *Demystifies academic writing*, showing students “the moves that matter” in language they can readily apply
- *Provides user-friendly templates* to help writers make those moves in their own writing
- *Includes a chapter on reading*, showing students how the authors they read are part of a conversation that they themselves can enter—and thus to see reading as a matter not of passively absorbing information but of understanding and actively entering dialogues and debates

HOW THIS BOOK CAME TO BE

The original idea for this book grew out of our shared interest in democratizing academic culture. First, it grew out of arguments that Gerald Graff has been making throughout his career that schools and colleges need to invite students into the conversations and debates that surround them. More specifically, it is a practical, hands-on companion to his book *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind*, in which he looks at academic conversations from the perspective of those who find them mysterious and proposes ways in which such mystification can be overcome. Second, this book grew out of writing templates that Cathy Birkenstein developed in the 1990s, for use in writing and literature courses she was teaching. Many students, she found, could readily grasp what it meant to support a thesis with evidence, to entertain a counterargument, to identify a textual contradiction, and ultimately to summarize and respond to challenging arguments, but they often had trouble putting these concepts into practice in their own writing. When Cathy sketched out templates on the board, however, giving her students some of the language and patterns that these sophisticated moves require, their writing—and even their quality of thought—significantly improved.

This book began, then, when we put our ideas together and realized that these templates might have the potential to open up and clarify academic conversation. We proceeded from the premise that all writers rely on certain stock formulas that they themselves didn't invent—and that many of these formulas are so commonly used that they can be represented in model templates that students can use to structure and even generate what they want to say.

As we developed a working draft of this book, we began using it in first-year writing courses that we teach at UIC. In classroom exercises and writing assignments, we found that students who otherwise struggled to organize their thoughts, or even to think of something to say, did much better when we provided them with templates like the following:

■ In discussions of _____, a controversial issue is whether _____. While some argue that _____, others contend that _____.

■ This is not to say that _____.

One virtue of such templates, we found, is that they focus writers' attention not just on what is being said but also on the *forms* that structure what is being said. In other words, they make students more conscious of the rhetorical patterns that are key to academic success but often pass under the classroom radar.

THE CENTRALITY OF “THEY SAY / I SAY”

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

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

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

STEVEN JOHNSON , “Watching TV Makes You Smarter”

In generating his own argument from something “they say,” Johnson suggests *why* he needs to say what he is saying: to correct a popular misconception.

Even when writers do not explicitly identify the views they are responding to, as Johnson does, an implicit “they say” can often be discerned, as in the following passage by Zora Neale Hurston:

I remember the day I became colored.

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

In order to grasp Hurston’s point here, we need to be able to reconstruct the implicit view she is responding to and questioning: that racial

identity is an innate quality we are simply born with. On the contrary, Hurston suggests, our race is imposed on us by society—something we “become” by virtue of how we are treated.

As these examples suggest, the “they say / I say” model can improve not just student writing but student reading comprehension as well. Since reading and writing are deeply reciprocal activities, students who learn to make the rhetorical moves represented by the templates in this book figure to become more adept at identifying these same moves in the texts they read. And if we are right that effective arguments are always in dialogue with other arguments, then it follows that in order to understand the types of challenging texts assigned in college, students need to identify the views to which those texts are responding.

Working with the “they say / I say” model can also help with invention, finding something to say. In our experience, students best discover what they want to say not by thinking about a subject in an isolation booth but by reading texts, listening closely to what other writers say, and looking for an opening through which they can enter the conversation. In other words, listening closely to others and summarizing what they have to say can help writers generate their own ideas.

THE USEFULNESS OF TEMPLATES

Our templates also have a generative quality, prompting students to make moves in their writing that they might not otherwise make or even know they should make. The templates in this book can be particularly helpful for students who are unsure about what to say or who have trouble finding enough to say, often because they consider their own beliefs so self-evident that they need not be argued for. Students like this are often helped, we've found, when we give them a simple template like the following one for entertaining a counterargument (or planting a naysayer, as we call it in [Chapter 6](#)):

■ Of course some might object that _____. Although I concede that _____, I still maintain that _____.

What this particular template helps students do is make the seemingly counterintuitive move of questioning their own beliefs, of looking at them from the perspective of those who disagree. In so doing, templates can bring out aspects of students' thoughts that, as they themselves sometimes remark, they didn't even realize were there.

Other templates in this book help students make a host of sophisticated moves that they might not otherwise make: summarizing what someone else says, framing a quotation in one's own words, indicating the view that the writer is responding to, marking the shift from a source's view to the writer's own view, offering evidence for that view, entertaining and answering counterarguments, and explaining what is at stake in the first place. In showing students how to make such moves, templates do more than organize students' ideas; they help bring those ideas into existence.

“OK—BUT TEMPLATES?”

We are aware, of course, that some instructors may have reservations about templates. Some, for instance, may object that such formulaic devices represent a return to prescriptive forms of instruction that encourage passive learning or lead students to put their writing on automatic pilot.

This is an understandable reaction, we think, to kinds of rote instruction that have indeed encouraged passivity and drained writing of its creativity and dynamic relation to the social world. The trouble is that many students will never learn on their own to make the key intellectual moves that our templates represent. While seasoned writers pick up these moves unconsciously through their reading, many students do not. Consequently, we believe, students need to see these moves represented in the explicit ways that the templates provide.

The aim of the templates, then, is not to stifle critical thinking but to be direct with students about the key rhetorical moves that it comprises. Since we encourage students to modify and adapt the templates to the particularities of the arguments they are making, using such prefabricated formulas as learning tools need not result in writing and thinking that are themselves formulaic. Admittedly, no teaching tool can guarantee that students will engage in hard, rigorous thought. Our templates do, however, provide concrete prompts that can stimulate and shape such thought: What do “they say” about my topic? How would a naysayer respond to my argument? What is my evidence? Do I need to qualify my point? Who cares?

In fact, templates have a long and rich history. Public orators from ancient Greece and Rome through the European Renaissance studied rhetorical *topoi* or “commonplaces,” model passages and formulas that represented the different strategies available to public speakers. In many respects, our templates echo this classical rhetorical tradition of imitating established models.

The journal *Nature* requires aspiring contributors to follow a guideline that is like a template on the opening page of their manuscript: “Two or three sentences explaining what the main result [of their study] reveals in direct comparison with what was thought to be the case previously, or how the main result adds to previous knowledge.” In the field of education, a form designed by the education theorist Howard Gardner asks postdoctoral fellowship applicants to complete the following template: “Most scholars in the field believe _____. As a result of my study, _____.” That these two examples are geared toward postdoctoral fellows and veteran researchers shows that it is not only struggling undergraduates who can use help making these key rhetorical moves but experienced academics as well.

Templates have even been used in the teaching of personal narrative. The literary and educational theorist Jane Tompkins devised the following template to help student writers make the often difficult move from telling a story to explaining what it means: “X tells a story about _____ to make the point that _____. My own experience with _____ yields a point that is similar / different / both similar and different. What I take away from my own experience with _____ is _____. As a result, I conclude _____. ” We especially like this template because it suggests that “they say / I say” argument need not be mechanical, impersonal, or dry and that telling a story and making an argument are more compatible activities than many think.

WHY IT'S OK TO USE "I"

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

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

Because of its centrality, we have allowed the “they say / I say” format to dictate the structure of this book. So while Part 1 addresses the art of listening to others, Part 2 addresses how to offer one’s own response. Part 1 opens with the chapter “Starting with What Others Are Saying,” which explains why it is generally advisable to begin a text by citing others rather than plunging directly into one’s own views. Subsequent chapters take up the arts of summarizing and quoting what these others have to say. Part 2 begins with a chapter on different ways of responding, followed by chapters on marking the shift between what “they say” and what “I say,” on introducing and answering objections, on using personal stories, and on answering the all-important questions “so what?” and “who cares?” Part 3, “Tying It All Together,” includes a chapter on connection and coherence; one on academic language, which encourages students to draw on their everyday voice as a tool for writing; and others on the art of metacommentary and using the templates to revise a text. Part 4 offers guidance for entering conversations in specific academic contexts, with chapters on entering class discussions, writing online, and reading and writing in the social sciences. It also includes a new chapter on how to use and cite chatbots in essays. Finally, we provide forty-three readings and an index of templates.

WHAT THIS BOOK DOESN'T DO

There are some things that this book does not try to do. We do not, for instance, cover logical principles of argument, such as syllogisms, warrants, logical fallacies, or the differences between inductive and deductive reasoning. Although such concepts can be useful, we believe most of us learn the ins and outs of argumentative writing not by studying logical principles in the abstract but by plunging into actual discussions and debates, trying out different patterns of response, and in this way getting a sense of what works to persuade different audiences and what doesn't. In our view, people learn more about arguing from hearing someone say, "You miss my point. What I'm saying is not _____ but _____ , " or "I agree with you that _____ and would even add that _____ , " than they do from studying the differences between inductive and deductive reasoning. Such formulas give students an immediate sense of what it feels like to enter a public conversation in a way that studying abstract warrants and logical fallacies does not.

ENGAGING WITH THE IDEAS OF OTHERS

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

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

Gerald Graff

Cathy Birkenstein

SIXTH EDITION

“THEY SAY/I SAY”

WITH READINGS

INTRODUCTION

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 also 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. Hence this book, which 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 writing. 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.

Instead of focusing solely on abstract principles of writing, then, this book offers model templates that help you put those principles directly into practice. Working with these templates will 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 _____. However, _____ .**

■ **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.

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 also 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 position. You need to enter a conversation, using what others say (or might say) as a launching pad or sounding board for your own views. 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. Instead, 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 see why you like football 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.

“WHY ARE YOU TELLING ME THIS?”

To make an impact as a writer, then, you need to do more than make statements that are logical, well supported, and consistent. You must also find a way of entering into conversation with the views of others, with something “they say.” The easiest and most common way writers do this is by *summarizing* what others say and then using it to set up what they want to say.

“But why,” as a student of ours once asked, “do I always need to summarize the views of others to set up my own view? Why can’t I just state my own view and be done with it?” Why indeed? After all, “they,” whoever they may be, will have already had their say, so why do you have to *repeat* it? Furthermore, if they had their say in print, can’t readers just go and read what was said themselves?

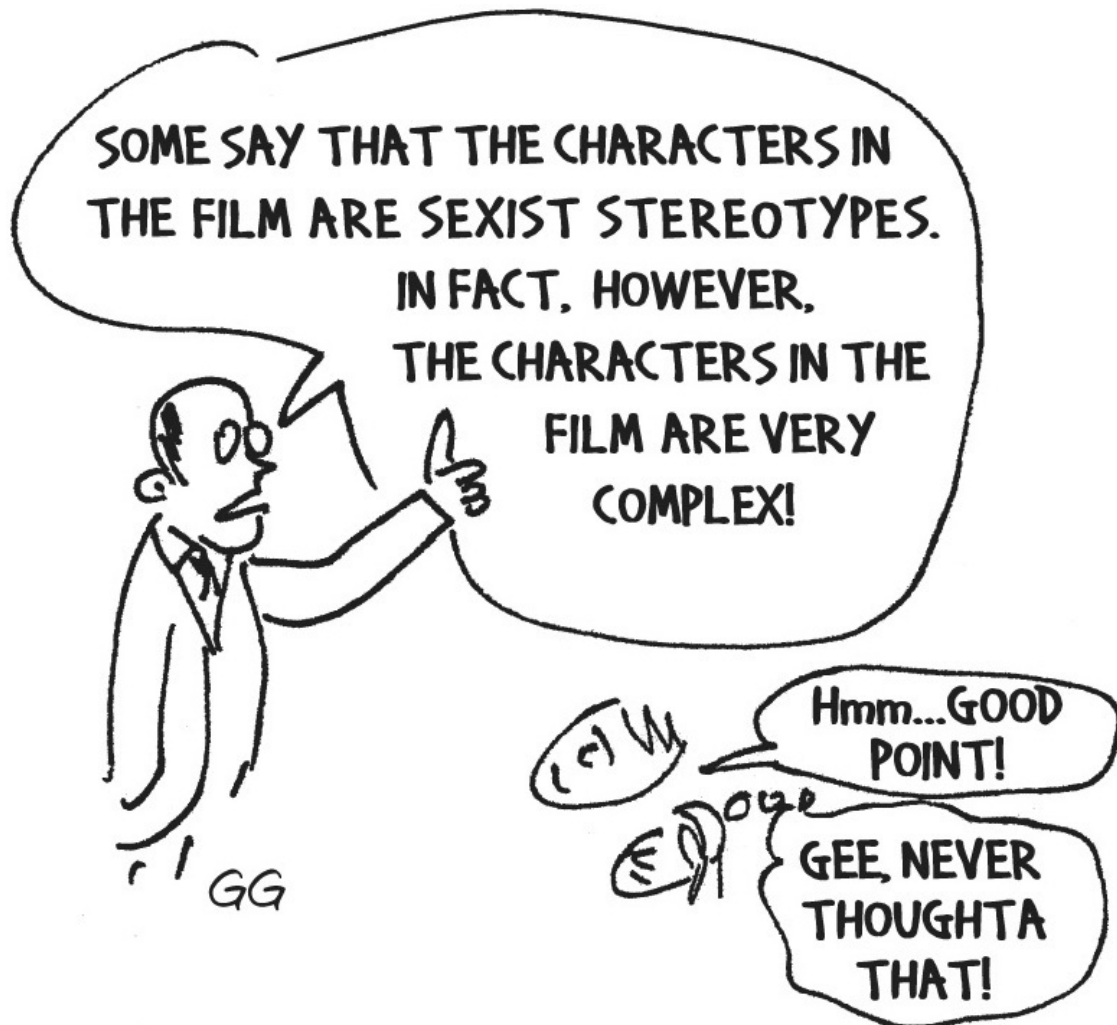
The answer is that if you don’t identify the “they say” you’re responding to, your own argument probably won’t have a point. Readers will wonder what prompted you to say what you’re saying and therefore motivated you to write. As the figure on the following page suggests, without a “they say,” *what* you are saying may be clear to your audience, but *why* you are saying it won’t be.

Even if we don’t know what film he’s referring to, it’s easy to grasp what the speaker means here when he says that its characters are very complex. But it’s hard to see why the speaker feels the need to say what he is saying. “Why,” as one member of his imagined audience wonders, “is he telling us this?” So the characters are complex—so what?



The speaker has a speech bubble, saying The characters in the film are very complex! The heads of the audience have thought and speech bubbles expressing confusion. They say, Yeah, so? and Why is he telling us this? One member of the audience is sleeping.

Now look at what happens to the same proposition when it is presented as a response to something “they say”:



The speaker has a speech bubble, saying, Some say that the characters in the film are sexist stereotypes. In fact, however, the characters in the film are very complex! The audience has thought and speech bubbles expressing comprehension. They say, Hmm... Good point! and Gee, never thoughta that!

We hope you agree that the same claim—"the characters in the film are very complex"—becomes much stronger when presented as a response to a contrary view: that the film's characters "are sexist stereotypes." Unlike the speaker in the first cartoon, the speaker in the second has a clear goal or mission: to correct what he sees as a mistaken characterization.

THE AS-OPPOSED-TO-WHAT FACTOR

To put our point another way, framing your “I say” as a response to something “they say” gives your writing an element of contrast without which it won’t make sense. It may be helpful to think of this crucial element as an “as-opposed-to-what factor” and, as you write, to continually ask yourself, “Who says otherwise?” and “Does anyone dispute it?” Behind the audience’s “Yeah, so?” and “Why is he telling us this?” in the first cartoon above lie precisely these types of “As opposed to what?” questions. The speaker in the second cartoon, we think, is more satisfying because he answers these questions, helping us see his point that the film presents complex characters *rather than* simple sexist stereotypes.

HOW IT'S DONE

Many accomplished writers make explicit “they say” moves to set up and motivate their own arguments. One famous example is Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter 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 against racial injustice 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 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.

The “they” you respond to in crafting an argument need not be a famous author or someone known to your audience. It can be a friend or family member, a classmate who has made a provocative claim, or something a group or individual might say. It can even be a side of yourself: something you partly believe but also doubt, or something you once believed but no longer do, as Michelle Alexander suggests in the introduction to her 2010 book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (included in this book):

I reached the conclusions presented in this book reluctantly. Ten years ago, I would have argued strenuously against the central claim made here—namely, that something akin to a racial caste system currently exists in the United States. Indeed, if Barack Obama had been elected president back then, I would have argued that his election marked the nation’s triumph over racial caste—the final nail in the coffin of Jim Crow. (349)

MICHELLE ALEXANDER , *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*

In this passage, Alexander identifies a view that she used to hold and that many to this day continue to hold: namely, that the United States is a caste-free, colorblind society that, as Barack Obama’s election illustrates, has finally left Jim Crow–style racism behind. In so doing, Alexander avoids two common temptations: to either bury challenges to her argument, or to acknowledge them but in mocking, dismissive ways. Instead, Alexander writes this counterview into her text—and in a way that does it justice. She then uses the remainder of her book to answer it, arguing that today’s penal system inflicts so much undeserved damage on the Black community that it can only be understood as an extension of Jim Crow–era repression.

See [Chapter 4](#) for more on agreeing, but with a difference.

While King and Alexander both identify the views they are responding to, some authors do not, instead allowing readers to infer what view they're responding to on their own. 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 the common belief that in order to be a good teacher of literature, one must have grown up liking and enjoying books.