

"Demystifies
academic
argumentation."

Patricia Bizzell

THEY SAY

I SAY

The Moves That Matter
in Academic Writing

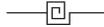
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Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein

THIRD EDITION

“THEY SAY / I SAY”

*The Moves That Matter
in Academic Writing*



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W · W · NORTON & COMPANY

NEW YORK | LONDON

For
Aaron David

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All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America
Third Edition

Composition: Cengage® Publisher Services
Book design: Jo Anne Metsch
Production manager: Andrew Ensor

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Graff, Gerald.

"They say / I say" : the Moves that Matter in Academic Writing / Gerald Graff,
Cathy Birkenstein, Both of the University of Illinois at Chicago.—Third Edition.
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-393-93584-4 (paperback)

1. English language—Rhetoric—Handbooks, manuals, etc. 2. Persuasion
(Rhetoric)—Handbooks, manuals, etc. 3. Report writing—Handbooks, manuals,
etc. I. Birkenstein, Cathy. II. Title.

PE1431.G73 2013

808'.042—dc23

2013039137

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110
www.wwnorton.com

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., Castle House, 75/76 Wells Street,
London W1T 3QT

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

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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 the speaker 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

The hypothetical audience in the figure on p. 4 reacts similarly.

vigorously questioned Dr. X’s ideas and convinced many sociologists that Dr. X’s work was unsound.

This 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 what his or her thesis is, 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 or blog entry, three or four pages in a longer work, or more than ten or so pages in a book 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 right away.

Starting with a summary of others’ views may seem to contradict the common advice that writers should 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 argument as part of some larger conversation, indicating 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: you let 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.

ONE “THEY SAY”

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 misconception about writing exemplified by the speaker. In the following opening, from an 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

Starting with What Others Are Saying

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 ways to introduce 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 _____.**
- ▶ **In their recent work, Y and Z have offered harsh critiques of _____ 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.

ONE “THEY SAY”

- ▶ Americans have always believed that individual effort can triumph over circumstances.
- ▶ 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. That is, the “they say” that you respond to need not be a view held by others; it can be one that you yourself once held or one that you are ambivalent about.

- ▶ I’ve always believed that museums are boring.
- ▶ When I was a child, I used to think that _____.

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- ▶ 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 education will open doors.
- ▶ 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 help you think analytically—to look beyond what others say explicitly and to consider their unstated assumptions, as well as the implications of their views.

**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

ONE “THEY SAY”

demonstrates your awareness that there are conflicting 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 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 commit to 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 Sleeped 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,**

Starting with What Others Are Saying

however, is on the question of _____. Whereas some are convinced that _____, others maintain that _____.

The political writer Thomas Frank uses a variation on this 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”

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 complications 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 beginning. At strategic moments throughout your text, we recommend that you include what we call “return sentences.” Here is an example.

ONE “THEY SAY”

- ▶ 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 questions—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 to start with what others are saying and continue keeping it in the reader’s view.

Exercises

1. The following is a list of arguments that lack a “they say”—any sense of who needs to hear these claims, who might think otherwise. Like the speaker in the cartoon on page 4 who declares that *The Sopranos* presents complex characters, these one-sided arguments fail to explain what view they are responding to—what view, in effect, they are trying to correct, add to, qualify, complicate, and so forth. Your job in this exercise is to provide each argument with such a counterview. Feel free to use any of the templates in this chapter that you find helpful.

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- a. Our experiments suggest that there are dangerous levels of chemical X in the Ohio groundwater.
 - b. Material forces drive history.
 - c. Proponents of Freudian psychology question standard notions of “rationality.”
 - d. Male students often dominate class discussions.
 - e. The film is 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 Zinzenko’s “Don’t Blame the Eater” (p. 241). 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 actually find laughable (or, as Zinzenko puts it, worthy of a Jay Leno monologue). You might write about one of the topics listed in the previous exercise (the environment, 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 _____.

TWO

“HER POINT IS”

The Art of Summarizing



IF IT IS TRUE, as we claim in this book, that to argue persuasively you need to be in dialogue with others, then summarizing others' arguments is central to your arsenal of basic moves. Because writers who make strong claims need to map their claims relative to those of other people, it is important to know how to summarize effectively what those other people say. (We're using the word "summarizing" here to refer to any information from others that you present in your own words, including that which you paraphrase.)

Many writers shy away from summarizing—perhaps because they don't want to take the trouble to go back to the text in question and wrestle with what it says, or because they fear that devoting too much time to other people's ideas will take away from their own. When assigned to write a response to an article, such writers might offer their own views on the article's *topic* while hardly mentioning what the article itself argues or says. At the opposite extreme are those who do nothing *but* summarize. Lacking confidence, perhaps, in their own ideas, these writers so overload their texts with summaries of others' ideas that their own voice gets lost. And since these summaries are not animated

The Art of Summarizing

by the writers' own interests, they often read like mere lists of things that X thinks or Y says—with no clear focus.

As a general rule, a good summary requires balancing what the original author is saying with the writer's own focus. Generally speaking, a summary must at once be true to what the original author says while also emphasizing those aspects of what the author says that interest you, the writer. Striking this delicate balance can be tricky, since it means facing two ways at once: both outward (toward the author being summarized) and inward (toward yourself). Ultimately, it means being respectful of others but simultaneously structuring how you summarize them in light of your own text's central argument.

ON THE ONE HAND, PUT YOURSELF IN *THEIR* SHOES

To write a really good summary, you must be able to suspend your own beliefs for a time and put yourself in the shoes of someone else. This means playing what the writing theorist Peter Elbow calls the “believing game,” in which you try to inhabit the worldview of those whose conversation you are joining—and whom you are perhaps even disagreeing with—and try to see their argument from their perspective. This ability to temporarily suspend one's own convictions is a hallmark of good actors, who must convincingly “become” characters whom in real life they may detest. As a writer, when you play the believing game well, readers should not be able to tell whether you agree or disagree with the ideas you are summarizing.

If, as a writer, you cannot or will not suspend your own beliefs in this way, you are likely to produce summaries that are

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so obviously biased that they undermine your credibility with readers. Consider the following summary.

David Zinczenko’s article, “Don’t Blame the Eater,” is nothing more than an angry rant in which he accuses the fast-food companies of an evil conspiracy to make people fat. I disagree because these companies have to make money. . . .

If you review what Zinczenko actually says (pp. 241–43), you should immediately see that this summary amounts to an unfair distortion. While Zinczenko does argue that the practices of the fast-food industry have the *effect* of making people fat, his tone is never “angry,” and he never goes so far as to suggest that the fast-food industry conspires to make people fat with deliberately evil intent.

Another tell-tale sign of this writer’s failure to give Zinczenko a fair hearing is the hasty way he abandons the summary after only one sentence and rushes on to his own response. So eager is this writer to disagree that he not only caricatures what Zinczenko says but also gives the article a hasty, superficial reading. Granted, there are many writing situations in which, because of matters of proportion, a one- or two-sentence summary is precisely what you want. Indeed, as writing professor Karen Lunsford (whose own research focuses on argument theory) points out, it is standard in the natural and social sciences to summarize the work of others quickly, in one pithy sentence or phrase, as in the following example.

Several studies (Crackle, 2012; Pop, 2007; Snap, 2006) suggest that these policies are harmless; moreover, other studies (Dick, 2011; Harry, 2007; Tom, 2005) argue that they even have benefits.

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But if your assignment is to respond in writing to a single author like Zinzchenko, you will need to tell your readers enough about his or her argument so they can assess its merits on their own, independent of you.

When a writer fails to provide enough summary or to engage in a rigorous or serious enough summary, he or she often falls prey to what we call “the closest cliché syndrome,” in which what gets summarized is not the view the author in question has actually expressed but a familiar cliché that the writer *mistakes* for the author’s view (sometimes because the writer believes it and mistakenly assumes the author must too). So, for example, Martin Luther King Jr.’s passionate defense of civil disobedience in “Letter from Birmingham Jail” might be summarized not as the defense of political protest that it actually is but as a plea for everyone to “just get along.” Similarly, Zinzchenko’s critique of the fast-food industry might be summarized as a call for overweight people to take responsibility for their weight.

Whenever you enter into a conversation with others in your writing, then, it is extremely important that you go back to what those others have said, that you study it very closely, and that you not confuse it with something you already believe. A writer who fails to do this ends up essentially conversing with imaginary others who are really only the products of his or her own biases and preconceptions.

ON THE OTHER HAND, KNOW WHERE YOU ARE GOING

Even as writing an effective summary requires you to temporarily adopt the worldview of another, it does not mean ignoring

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your own view altogether. Paradoxically, at the same time that summarizing another text requires you to represent fairly what it says, it also requires that your own response exert a quiet influence. A good summary, in other words, has a focus or spin that allows the summary to fit with your own agenda while still being true to the text you are summarizing.

Thus if you are writing in response to the essay by Zinzchenko, you should be able to see that an essay on the fast-food industry in general will call for a very different summary than will an essay on parenting, corporate regulation, or warning labels. If you want your essay to encompass all three topics, you'll need to subordinate these three issues to one of Zinzchenko's general claims and then make sure this general claim directly sets up your own argument.

For example, suppose you want to argue that it is parents, not fast-food companies, who are to blame for children's obesity. To set up this argument, you will probably want to compose a summary that highlights what Zinzchenko says about the fast-food industry *and* parents. Consider this sample.

In his article “Don't Blame the Eater,” David Zinzchenko blames the fast-food industry for fueling today's so-called obesity epidemic, not only by failing to provide adequate warning labels on its high-calorie foods but also by filling the nutritional void in children's lives left by their overtaxed working parents. With many parents working long hours and unable to supervise what their children eat, Zinzchenko claims, children today are easily victimized by the low-cost, calorie-laden foods that the fast-food chains are all too eager to supply. When he was a young boy, for instance, and his single mother was away at work, he ate at Taco Bell, McDonald's, and other chains on a regular basis, and ended up overweight. Zinzchenko's hope is that with the new spate of lawsuits against

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the food industry, other children with working parents will have healthier choices available to them, and that they will not, like him, become obese.

In my view, however, it is the parents, and not the food chains, who are responsible for their children's obesity. While it is true that many of today's parents work long hours, there are still several things that parents can do to guarantee that their children eat healthy foods. . . .

The summary in the first paragraph succeeds because it points in two directions at once—both toward Zinzenko's own text *and* toward the second paragraph, where the writer begins to establish her own argument. The opening sentence gives a sense of Zinzenko's general argument (that the fast-food chains are to blame for obesity), including his two main supporting claims (about warning labels and parents), but it ends with an emphasis on the writer's main concern: parental responsibility. In this way, the summary does justice to Zinzenko's arguments while also setting up the ensuing critique.

This advice—to summarize authors in light of your own arguments—may seem painfully obvious. But writers often summarize a given author on one issue even though their text actually focuses on another. To avoid this problem, you need to make sure that your “they say” and “I say” are well matched. In fact, aligning what they say with what you say is a good thing to work on when revising what you've written.

Often writers who summarize without regard to their own interests fall prey to what might be called “list summaries,” summaries that simply inventory the original author's various points but fail to focus those points around any larger overall claim. If you've ever heard a talk in which the points were connected only by words like “and then,” “also,” and “in addition,”

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THE EFFECT OF A TYPICAL LIST SUMMARY

you know how such lists can put listeners to sleep—as shown in the figure above. A typical list summary sounds like this.

The author says many different things about his subject. *First* he says. . . . *Then* he makes the point that. . . . *In addition* he says. . . . *And then* he writes. . . . *Also* he shows that. . . . *And then* he says. . . .

It may be boring list summaries like this that give summaries in general a bad name and even prompt some instructors to discourage their students from summarizing at all.

In conclusion, writing a good summary means not just representing an author’s view accurately, but doing so in a way that fits your own composition’s larger agenda. On the one hand, it means playing Peter Elbow’s believing game and doing justice to the source; if the summary ignores or misrepresents the

source, its bias and unfairness will show. On the other hand, even as it does justice to the source, a summary has to have a slant or spin that prepares the way for your own claims. Once a summary enters your text, you should think of it as joint property—reflecting both the source you are summarizing and your own views.

SUMMARIZING SATIRICALLY

Thus far in this chapter we have argued that, as a general rule, good summaries require a balance between what someone else has said and your own interests as a writer. Now, however, we want to address one exception to this rule: the satiric summary, in which a writer deliberately gives his or her own spin to someone else's argument in order to reveal a glaring shortcoming in it. Despite our previous comments that well-crafted summaries generally strike a balance between heeding what someone else has said and your own independent interests, the satiric mode can at times be a very effective form of critique because it lets the summarized argument condemn itself without overt editorializing by you, the writer. If you've ever watched *The Daily Show*, you'll recall that it often merely summarizes silly things political leaders have said or done, letting their words or actions undermine themselves.

Consider another example. In September 2001, then-President George W. Bush in a speech to Congress urged the nation's "continued participation and confidence in the American economy" as a means of recovering from the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The journalist Allan Sloan criticized this proposal simply by summarizing it, observing that the president

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had equated “patriotism with shopping. Maxing out your credit cards at the mall wasn’t self indulgence, it was a way to get back at Osama bin Laden.” Sloan’s summary leaves no doubt where he stands—he considers Bush’s proposal ridiculous, or at least too simple.

USE SIGNAL VERBS THAT FIT THE ACTION

In introducing summaries, try to avoid bland formulas like “she says,” or “they believe.” Though language like this is sometimes serviceable enough, it often fails to reflect accurately what’s been said. In some cases, “he says” may even drain the passion out of the ideas you’re summarizing.

We suspect that the habit of ignoring the action in what we summarize stems from the mistaken belief we mentioned earlier that writing is about playing it safe and not making waves, a matter of piling up truths and bits of knowledge rather than a dynamic process of doing things to and with other people. People who wouldn’t hesitate to *say* “X totally misrepresented,” “attacked,” or “loved” something when chatting with friends will in their writing often opt for far tamer and even less accurate phrases like “X said.”

But the authors you summarize at the college level seldom simply “say” or “discuss” things; they “urge,” “emphasize,” and “complain about” them. David Zinczenko, for example, doesn’t just *say* that fast-food companies contribute to obesity; he *complains* or *protests* that they do; he *challenges*, *chastises*, and *indicts* those companies. The Declaration of Independence doesn’t just *talk about* the treatment of the colonies by the British; it *protests against* it. To do justice to the authors you cite,

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we recommend that when summarizing—or when introducing a quotation—you use vivid and precise signal verbs as often as possible. Though “he says” or “she believes” will sometimes be the most appropriate language for the occasion, your text will often be more accurate and lively if you tailor your verbs to suit the precise actions you’re describing.

TEMPLATES FOR INTRODUCING SUMMARIES AND QUOTATIONS

- ▶ She advocates a radical revision of the juvenile justice system.
- ▶ They celebrate the fact that _____.
- ▶ _____, he admits.

VERBS FOR INTRODUCING SUMMARIES AND QUOTATIONS

VERBS FOR MAKING A CLAIM

argue	insist
assert	observe
believe	remind us
claim	report
emphasize	suggest

VERBS FOR EXPRESSING AGREEMENT

acknowledge	endorse
admire	extol
agree	praise

TWO “HER POINT IS”

VERBS FOR EXPRESSING AGREEMENT

celebrate the fact that	reaffirm
corroborate	support
do not deny	verify

VERBS FOR QUESTIONING OR DISAGREEING

complain	qualify
complicate	question
contend	refute
contradict	reject
deny	renounce
deplore the tendency to	repudiate

VERBS FOR MAKING RECOMMENDATIONS

advocate	implore
call for	plead
demand	recommend
encourage	urge
exhort	warn

Exercises

1. To get a feel for Peter Elbow’s “believing game,” write a summary of some belief that you strongly disagree with. Then write a summary of the position that you actually hold on this topic. Give both summaries to a classmate or two, and see if they can tell which position you endorse. If you’ve succeeded, they won’t be able to tell.

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2. Write two different summaries of David Zinczenko's "Don't Blame the Eater" (pp. 241–43). Write the first one for an essay arguing that, contrary to what Zinczenko claims, there *are* inexpensive and convenient alternatives to fast-food restaurants. Write the second for an essay that questions whether being overweight is a genuine medical problem rather than a problem of cultural stereotypes. Compare your two summaries: though they are about the same article, they should look very different.

THREE

“AS HE HIMSELF PUTS IT”

The Art of Quoting



A KEY PREMISE OF THIS BOOK is that to launch an effective argument you need to write the arguments of others into your text. One of the best ways to do so is by not only summarizing what “they say,” as suggested in Chapter 2, but by quoting their exact words. Quoting someone else’s words gives a tremendous amount of credibility to your summary and helps ensure that it is fair and accurate. In a sense, then, quotations function as a kind of proof of evidence, saying to readers: “Look, I’m not just making this up. She makes this claim and here it is in her exact words.”

Yet many writers make a host of mistakes when it comes to quoting, not the least of which is the failure to quote enough in the first place, if at all. Some writers quote too little—perhaps because they don’t want to bother going back to the original text and looking up the author’s exact words, or because they think they can reconstruct the author’s ideas from memory. At the opposite extreme are writers who so overquote that they end up with texts that are short on commentary of their own—maybe because they lack confidence in their ability to comment on the quotations, or because they don’t fully

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understand what they've quoted and therefore have trouble explaining what the quotations mean.

But the main problem with quoting arises when writers assume that quotations speak for themselves. Because the meaning of a quotation is obvious to *them*, many writers assume that this meaning will also be obvious to their readers, when often it is not. Writers who make this mistake think that their job is done when they've chosen a quotation and inserted it into their text. They draft an essay, slap in a few quotations, and whammo, they're done.

Such writers fail to see that quoting means more than simply enclosing what "they say" in quotation marks. In a way, quotations are orphans: words that have been taken from their original contexts and that need to be integrated into their new textual surroundings. This chapter offers two key ways to produce this sort of integration: (1) by choosing quotations wisely, with an eye to how well they support a particular part of your text, and (2) by surrounding every major quotation with a frame explaining whose words they are, what the quotation means, and how the quotation relates to your own text. The point we want to emphasize is that quoting what "they say" must always be connected with what *you* say.

QUOTE RELEVANT PASSAGES

Before you can select appropriate quotations, you need to have a sense of what you want to do with them—that is, how they will support your text at the particular point where you insert them. Be careful not to select quotations just for the sake of demonstrating that you've read the author's work; you need to make sure they support your own argument.

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However, finding relevant quotations is not always easy. In fact, sometimes quotations that were initially relevant to your argument, or to a key point in it, become less so as your text changes during the process of writing and revising. Given the evolving and messy nature of writing, you may sometimes think that you’ve found the perfect quotation to support your argument, only to discover later on, as your text develops, that your focus has changed and the quotation no longer works. It can be somewhat misleading, then, to speak of finding your thesis and finding relevant quotations as two separate steps, one coming after the other. When you’re deeply engaged in the writing and revising process, there is usually a great deal of back-and-forth between your argument and any quotations you select.

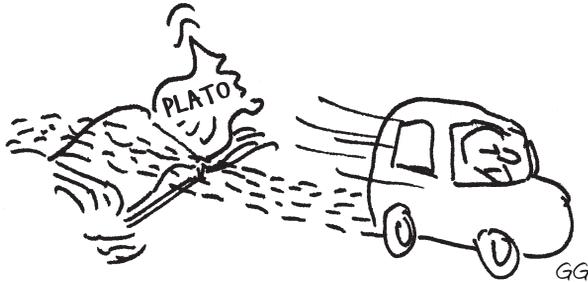
FRAME EVERY QUOTATION

Finding relevant quotations is only part of your job; you also need to present them in a way that makes their relevance and meaning clear to your readers. Since quotations do not speak for themselves, you need to build a frame around them in which you do that speaking for them.

Quotations that are inserted into a text without such a frame are sometimes called “dangling” quotations for the way they’re left dangling without any explanation. One teacher we’ve worked with, Steve Benton, calls these “hit-and-run” quotations, likening them to car accidents in which the driver speeds away and avoids taking responsibility for the dent in your fender or the smashed taillights, as in the figure that follows.

On the following page is a typical hit-and-run quotation by a writer responding to an essay by the feminist philosopher

DON'T BE A HIT-AND-RUN QUOTER.



Susan Bordo, who laments that media pressures on young women to diet are spreading to previously isolated regions of the world like the Fiji islands.

Susan Bordo writes about women and dieting. “Fiji is just one example. Until television was introduced in 1995, the islands had no reported cases of eating disorders. In 1998, three years after programs from the United States and Britain began broadcasting there, 62 percent of the girls surveyed reported dieting.”

I think Bordo is right. Another point Bordo makes is that. . . .

Since this writer fails to introduce the quotation adequately or explain why he finds it worth quoting, readers will have a hard time reconstructing what Bordo argued. Besides neglecting to say who Bordo is or even that the quoted words are hers, the writer does not explain how her words connect with anything he is saying or even what she says that he thinks is so “right.” He simply abandons the quotation in his haste to zoom on to another point.

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To adequately frame a quotation, you need to insert it into what we like to call a “quotation sandwich,” with the statement introducing it serving as the top slice of bread and the explanation following it serving as the bottom slice. The introductory or lead-in claims should explain who is speaking and set up what the quotation says; the follow-up statements should explain why you consider the quotation to be important and what you take it to say.

TEMPLATES FOR INTRODUCING QUOTATIONS

- ▶ X states, “not all steroids should be banned from sports.”
- ▶ As the prominent philosopher X puts it, “_____.”
- ▶ According to X, “_____.”
- ▶ X himself writes, “_____.”
- ▶ In her book, _____, X maintains that “_____.”
- ▶ Writing in the journal *Commentary*, X complains that “_____.”
- ▶ In X’s view, “_____.”
- ▶ X agrees when she writes, “_____.”
- ▶ X disagrees when he writes, “_____.”
- ▶ X complicates matters further when she writes, “_____.”

TEMPLATES FOR EXPLAINING QUOTATIONS

The one piece of advice about quoting that our students say they find most helpful is to get in the habit of following every

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major quotation by explaining what it means, using a template like one of the ones below.

- ▶ **Basically, X is warning that the proposed solution will only make the problem worse.**
- ▶ In other words, X believes _____.
- ▶ In making this comment, X urges us to _____.
- ▶ X is corroborating the age-old adage that _____.
- ▶ X's point is that _____.
- ▶ The essence of X's argument is that _____.

When offering such explanations, it is important to use language that accurately reflects the spirit of the quoted passage. It is quite serviceable to write “Bordo states” or “asserts” in introducing the quotation about Fiji. But given the fact that Bordo is clearly alarmed by the extension of the media’s reach to Fiji, it is far more accurate to use language that reflects her alarm: “Bordo is alarmed that” or “is disturbed by” or “complains.”

See pp. 39–40 for a list of action verbs for summarizing what others say.

Consider, for example, how the earlier passage on Bordo might be revised using some of these moves.

The feminist philosopher Susan Bordo deplores Western media’s obsession with female thinness and dieting. Her basic complaint is that increasing numbers of women across the globe are being led to see themselves as fat and in need of a diet. Citing the islands of Fiji as a case in point, Bordo notes that “until television was introduced in 1995, the islands had no reported cases of eating disorders. In 1998, three years after programs from the United States and Britain

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began broadcasting there, 62 percent of the girls surveyed reported dieting” (149–50). Bordo’s point is that the Western cult of dieting is spreading even to remote places across the globe. Ultimately, Bordo complains, the culture of dieting will find you, regardless of where you live.

Bordo’s observations ring true to me because, now that I think about it, many women I know, regardless of where they are from, worry about their weight. . . .

This framing of the quotation not only better integrates Bordo’s words into the writer’s text, but also serves to demonstrate the writer’s interpretation of what Bordo is saying. While “the feminist philosopher” and “Bordo notes” provide information that readers need to know, the sentences that follow the quotation build a bridge between Bordo’s words and those of the writer. The reference to 62 percent of Fijian girls dieting is no longer an inert statistic (as it was in the flawed passage presented earlier) but a quantitative example of how “the Western cult of dieting is spreading . . . across the globe.” Just as important, these sentences explain what Bordo is saying in the writer’s own words—and thereby make clear that the quotation is being used purposefully to set up the writer’s own argument and has not been stuck in just for padding the essay or the works-cited list.

BLEND THE AUTHOR’S WORDS WITH YOUR OWN

The above framing material also works well because it accurately represents Bordo’s words while giving those words the writer’s own spin. Notice how the passage refers several times

to the key concept of dieting, and how it echoes Bordo's references to "television" and to U.S. and British "broadcasting" by referring to "culture," which is further specified as "Western." Instead of simply repeating Bordo word for word, the follow-up sentences echo just enough of her language while still moving the discussion in the writer's own direction. In effect, the framing creates a kind of hybrid mix of Bordo's words and those of the writer.

CAN YOU OVERANALYZE A QUOTATION?

But is it possible to overexplain a quotation? And how do you know when you've explained a quotation thoroughly enough? After all, not all quotations require the same amount of explanatory framing, and there are no hard-and-fast rules for knowing how much explanation any quotation needs. As a general rule, the most explanatory framing is needed for quotations that may be hard for readers to process: quotations that are long and complex, that are filled with details or jargon, or that contain hidden complexities.

And yet, though the particular situation usually dictates when and how much to explain a quotation, we will still offer one piece of advice: when in doubt, go for it. It is better to risk being overly explicit about what you take a quotation to mean than to leave the quotation dangling and your readers in doubt. Indeed, we encourage you to provide such explanatory framing even when writing to an audience that you know to be familiar with the author being quoted and able to interpret your quotations on their own. Even in such cases, readers need to see how *you* interpret the quotation, since words—especially those of controversial figures—can be interpreted in various ways and used to support

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different, sometimes opposing, agendas. Your readers need to see what you make of the material you’ve quoted, if only to be sure that your reading of the material and theirs is on the same page.

HOW NOT TO INTRODUCE QUOTATIONS

We want to conclude this chapter by surveying some ways *not* to introduce quotations. Although some writers do so, you should not introduce quotations by saying something like “Orwell asserts an idea that” or “A quote by Shakespeare says.” Introductory phrases like these are both redundant and misleading. In the first example, you could write either “Orwell asserts that” or “Orwell’s assertion is that,” rather than redundantly combining the two. The second example misleads readers, since it is the writer who is doing the quoting, not Shakespeare (as “a quote by Shakespeare” implies).

The templates in this book will help you avoid such mistakes. Once you have mastered templates like “as X puts it,” or “in X’s own words,” you probably won’t even have to think about them—and will be free to focus on the challenging ideas that templates help you frame.

Exercises

1. Find a published piece of writing that quotes something that “they say.” How has the writer integrated the quotation into his or her own text? How has he or she introduced the quotation, and what, if anything, has the writer said to explain it and tie it to his or her own text? Based on what you’ve read in this chapter, are there any changes you would suggest?

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2. Look at something you have written for one of your classes. Have you quoted any sources? If so, how have you integrated the quotation into your own text? How have you introduced it? Explained what it means? Indicated how it relates to *your* text? If you haven't done all these things, revise your text to do so, perhaps using the Templates for Introducing Quotations (p. 46) and Explaining Quotations (pp. 46–47). If you've not written anything with quotations, try revising some academic text you've written to do so.

FOUR

“YES / NO / OKAY, BUT”

Three Ways to Respond



THE FIRST THREE CHAPTERS of this book 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.

Moving to the “I say” stage can be daunting in academia, where it often may seem that you need to be an expert in a field to have an argument at all. Many students have told us that they have trouble entering some of the high-powered conversations that take place in college or graduate school because they do not know enough about the topic at hand, or because, they say, they simply are not “smart enough.” Yet often these same students, when given a chance to study in depth the contribution that some scholar has made in a given field, will turn around and say things like “I can see where she is coming from, how she makes her case by building on what other scholars have said. Perhaps had I studied the situation longer *I* could have come up with a similar argument.” What these students came to realize is that good arguments are based not on knowledge that only a special class of experts has access to, but on everyday habits

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of mind that can be isolated, identified, and used by almost anyone. Though there’s certainly no substitute for expertise and for knowing as much as possible about one’s topic, the arguments that finally win the day are built, as the title of this chapter suggests, on some very basic rhetorical patterns that most of us use on a daily basis.

There are a great many ways to respond to others’ ideas, 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 to learn fairly quickly where the writer stands, and they do this by placing the writer on a mental map consisting of a few 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 need not only to find the position the writer is responding to—the “they say”—but also to determine whether the writer is agreeing with it, challenging it, or some mixture of the two.

ONLY THREE WAYS TO RESPOND?

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. This is

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certainly a serious concern for academics who are rightly skeptical of writing that is simplistic and reductive. We would argue, however, that 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 formula 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 the complications you go on to offer as your response unfolds.

See p. 21 for suggestions on previewing where you stand.

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.

FOUR “YES / NO / OKAY, BUT”

We would argue, however, that the most interesting interpretations in fact tend to be those that 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 not only to 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, and it is often the first thing people associate with critical thinking. Disagreeing can also be the easiest way to generate an essay: find something you can disagree with in what has been said or might be said about your topic, summarize it, and argue with it. But disagreement in fact 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,

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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 turn it into an argument, you need to give reasons to support what you say: 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 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 an 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.”

FOUR “YES / NO / OKAY, BUT”

TEMPLATES FOR DISAGREEING, WITH REASONS

- ▶ X is mistaken because she overlooks recent fossil discoveries in the South.
- ▶ 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 _____. On the other hand, she also says _____.
- ▶ By focusing on _____, X overlooks the deeper problem of _____.

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, contrary 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 writer agrees with X’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.

Three Ways to Respond

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 described 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 such fears of conflict and have experienced them 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, disagreements do not 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 such an approach, as we will see later in this chapter, leads to the somewhat more complicated terrain of both agreeing and disagreeing at the same time.

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.

FOUR “YES / NO / OKAY, BUT”

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 or contrast between your position and the one you’re agreeing with rather than simply parroting what it says.

TEMPLATES FOR AGREEING

- ▶ I agree that diversity in the student body is educationally valuable because my experience at Central University 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 light on the difficult problem of _____.
- ▶ 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

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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 likely disagreeing with someone else's. It is hard to align yourself with one position without at least implicitly positioning yourself against others. The 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"

FOUR “YES / NO / OKAY, BUT”

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 still 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

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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 in this chapter 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 overriding assumption that religion is no longer a major force today.**

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.**

FOUR “YES / NO / OKAY, BUT”

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.

IS BEING UNDECIDED OKAY?

Nevertheless, writers often have as many concerns about expressing ambivalence as they do about expressing disagreement or agreement. Some worry that by expressing ambivalence they will come across as evasive, wishy-washy, or unsure of themselves. Others worry that their ambivalence will end up confusing readers who require decisive clear-cut conclusions.

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The truth is that in some cases these worries are legitimate. At times ambivalence can frustrate readers, leaving them with the feeling that you failed in your obligation to offer the guidance they expect from writers. At other times, however, acknowledging that a clear-cut resolution of an issue is impossible can demonstrate your sophistication as a writer. In an academic culture that values complex thought, forthrightly declaring that you have mixed feelings can be impressive, especially after having ruled out the one-dimensional positions on your issue taken by others in the conversation. Ultimately, then, how ambivalent you end up being comes down to a judgment call based on different readers' responses to your drafts, on your knowledge of your audience, and on the challenges of your particular argument and situation.

Exercises

1. Read one of the essays in the back of this book or on **theysayiblog.com**, identifying those places where the author agrees with others, disagrees, or both.
2. Write an essay responding in some way to the essay that you worked with in the preceding exercise. 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.

FIVE

“AND YET”

Distinguishing What You Say from What They Say



IF GOOD ACADEMIC WRITING involves putting yourself into dialogue with others, it is extremely important that readers be able to tell at every point when you are expressing your own view and when you are stating someone else's. This chapter takes up the problem of moving from what *they* say to what *you* say without confusing readers about who is saying what.

DETERMINE WHO IS SAYING WHAT IN THE TEXTS YOU READ

Before examining how to signal who is saying what in your own writing, let's look at how to recognize such signals when they appear in the texts you read—an especially important skill when it comes to the challenging works assigned in school. Frequently, when students have trouble understanding difficult texts, it is not just because the texts contain unfamiliar ideas or words, but because the texts rely on subtle clues to let

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readers know when a particular view should be attributed to the writer or to someone else. Especially with texts that present a true dialogue of perspectives, readers need to be alert to the often subtle markers that indicate whose voice the writer is speaking in.

Consider how the social critic and educator Gregory Mantsios uses these “voice markers,” as they might be called, to distinguish the different perspectives in his essay on America’s class inequalities.

“We are all middle-class,” or so it would seem. Our national consciousness, as shaped in large part by the media and our political leadership, provides us with a picture of ourselves as a nation of prosperity and opportunity with an ever expanding middle-class life-style. As a result, our class differences are muted and our collective character is homogenized.

Yet class divisions are real and arguably the most significant factor in determining both our very being in the world and the nature of the society we live in.

GREGORY MANTSIOS, “Rewards and Opportunities:
The Politics and Economics of Class in the U.S.”

Although Mantsios makes it look easy, he is actually making several sophisticated rhetorical moves here that help him distinguish the common view he opposes from his own position.

In the opening sentence, for instance, the phrase “or so it would seem” shows that Mantsios does not necessarily agree with the view he is describing, since writers normally don’t present views they themselves hold as ones that only “seem” to be true. Mantsios also places this opening view in quotation marks to signal that it is not his own. He then further distances

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himself from the belief being summarized in the opening paragraph by attributing it to “our national consciousness, as shaped in large part by the media and our political leadership,” and then further attributing to this “consciousness” a negative, undesirable “result”: one in which “our class differences” get “muted” and “our collective character” gets “homogenized,” stripped of its diversity and distinctness. Hence, even before Mantsios has declared his own position in the second paragraph, readers can get a pretty solid sense of where he probably stands.

Furthermore, the second paragraph opens with the word “yet,” indicating that Mantsios is now shifting to his own view (as opposed to the common view he has thus far been describing). Even the parallelism he sets up between the first and second paragraphs—between the first paragraph’s claim that class differences do not exist and the second paragraph’s claim that they do—helps throw into sharp relief the differences between the two voices. Finally, Mantsios’s use of a direct, authoritative, declarative tone in the second paragraph also suggests a switch in voice. Although he does not use the words “I say” or “I argue,” he clearly identifies the view he holds by presenting it not as one that merely *seems* to be true or that *others tell us* is true, but as a view that *is* true or, as Mantsios puts it, “real.”

Paying attention to these voice markers is an important aspect of reading comprehension. Readers who fail to notice these markers often take an author’s summaries of what someone else believes to be an expression of what the author himself or herself believes. Thus when we teach Mantsios’s essay, some students invariably come away thinking that the statement “we are all middle-class” is Mantsios’s own position rather than the perspective he is opposing, failing to see that in writing these

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words Mantsios acts as a kind of ventriloquist, mimicking what others say rather than directly expressing what he himself is thinking.

To see how important such voice markers are, consider what the Mantsios passage looks like if we remove them.

We are all middle-class. . . . We are a nation of prosperity and opportunity with an ever expanding middle-class life-style. . . .

Class divisions are real and arguably the most significant factor in determining both our very being in the world and the nature of the society we live in.

In contrast to the careful delineation between voices in Mantsios's original text, this unmarked version leaves it hard to tell where his voice begins and the voices of others end. With the markers removed, readers cannot tell that "We are all middle-class" represents a view the author opposes, and that "Class divisions are real" represents what the author himself believes. Indeed, without the markers, especially the "Yet," readers might well miss the fact that the second paragraph's claim that "Class divisions are real" contradicts the first paragraph's claim that "We are all middle-class."

**TEMPLATES FOR SIGNALING WHO IS SAYING WHAT
IN YOUR OWN WRITING**

To avoid confusion in your own writing, make sure that at every point your readers can clearly tell who is saying what. To do so, you can use as voice-identifying devices many of the templates presented in previous chapters.

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- ▶ Although X makes the best possible case for universal, government-funded health care, I am not persuaded.
- ▶ My view, however, contrary to what X has argued, is that _____.
- ▶ Adding to X’s argument, I would point out that _____.
- ▶ According to both X and Y, _____.
- ▶ Politicians, X argues, should _____.
- ▶ Most athletes will tell you that _____.

BUT I’VE BEEN TOLD NOT TO USE “I”

Notice that the first three templates above use the first-person “I” or “we,” as do many of the templates in this book, thereby contradicting the common advice about avoiding the first person in academic writing. Although you may have been told that the “I” word encourages subjective, self-indulgent opinions rather than well-grounded arguments, we believe that texts using “I” can be just as well supported—or just as self-indulgent—as those that don’t. For us, well-supported arguments are grounded in persuasive reasons and evidence, not in the use or nonuse of any particular pronouns.

Furthermore, if you consistently avoid the first person in your writing, you will probably have trouble making the key move addressed in this chapter: differentiating your views from those of others, or even offering your own views in the first place. But don’t just take our word for it. See for yourself how freely the first person is used by the writers quoted in this book, and by the writers assigned in your courses.

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Nevertheless, certain occasions may warrant avoiding the first person and writing, for example, that “she is correct” instead of “I think that she is correct.” Since it can be monotonous to read an unvarying series of “I” statements (“I believe . . . I think . . . I argue”), it is a good idea to mix first-person assertions with ones like the following.

- ▶ X is right that certain common patterns can be found in the communities.
- ▶ The evidence shows that _____.
- ▶ X’s assertion that _____ does not fit the facts.
- ▶ Anyone familiar with _____ should agree that _____.

One might even follow Mantsios’s lead, as in the following template.

- ▶ But _____ are real, and are arguably the most significant factor in _____.

On the whole, however, academic writing today, even in the sciences and social sciences, makes use of the first person fairly liberally.

See pp. 252–59 for an example of the way a physicist uses the first person.

ANOTHER TRICK FOR IDENTIFYING WHO IS SPEAKING

To alert readers about whose perspective you are describing at any given moment, you don’t always have to use overt voice markers like “X argues” followed by a summary of the argument. Instead, you can alert readers about whose voice you’re

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speaking in by *embedding* a reference to X’s argument in your own sentences. Hence, instead of writing:

Liberals believe that cultural differences need to be respected. I have a problem with this view, however.

you might write:

I have a problem with *what liberals call cultural differences*.

There is a major problem with the liberal doctrine of *so-called cultural differences*.

You can also embed references to something you yourself have previously said. So instead of writing two cumbersome sentences like:

Earlier in this chapter we coined the term “voice markers.” We would argue that such markers are extremely important for reading comprehension.

you might write:

We would argue that “voice markers,” as we identified them earlier, are extremely important for reading comprehension.

Embedded references like these allow you to economize your train of thought and refer to other perspectives without any major interruption.

TEMPLATES FOR EMBEDDING VOICE MARKERS

- ▶ X overlooks what I consider an important point about cultural differences.
- ▶ My own view is that what X insists is a _____ is in fact a _____.
- ▶ I wholeheartedly endorse what X calls _____.
- ▶ These conclusions, which X discusses in _____, add weight to the argument that _____.

When writers fail to use voice-marking devices like the ones discussed in this chapter, their summaries of others' views tend to become confused with their own ideas—and vice versa. When readers cannot tell if you are summarizing your own views or endorsing a certain phrase or label, they have to stop and think: “Wait. I thought the author disagreed with this claim. Has she actually been asserting this view all along?” or “Hmmm, I thought she would have objected to this kind of phrase. Is she actually endorsing it?” Getting in the habit of using voice markers will keep you from confusing your readers and help alert you to similar markers in the challenging texts you read.

Exercises

1. To see how one writer signals when she is asserting her own views and when she is summarizing those of someone else, read the following passage by the social historian Julie Charlip. As you do so, identify those spots where Charlip refers to the views of others and the signal phrases she uses to distinguish her views from theirs.

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Marx and Engels wrote: "Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other—the bourgeoisie and the proletariat" (10). If only that were true, things might be more simple. But in late twentieth-century America, it seems that society is splitting more and more into a plethora of class factions—the working class, the working poor, lower-middle class, upper-middle class, lower uppers, and upper uppers. I find myself not knowing what class I'm from.

In my days as a newspaper reporter, I once asked a sociology professor what he thought about the reported shrinking of the middle class. Oh, it's not the middle class that's disappearing, he said, but the working class. His definition: if you earn thirty thousand dollars a year working in an assembly plant, come home from work, open a beer and watch the game, you are working class; if you earn twenty thousand dollars a year as a school teacher, come home from work to a glass of white wine and PBS, you are middle class.

How do we define class? Is it an issue of values, lifestyle, taste? Is it the kind of work you do, your relationship to the means of production? Is it a matter of how much money you earn? Are we allowed to choose? In this land of supposed classlessness, where we don't have the tradition of English society to keep us in our places, how do we know where we really belong? The average American will tell you he or she is "middle class." I'm sure that's what my father would tell you. But I always felt that we were in some no man's land, suspended between classes, sharing similarities with some and recognizing sharp, exclusionary differences from others. What class do I come from? What class am I in now? As an historian, I seek the answers to these questions in the specificity of my past.

JULIE CHARLIP, "A Real Class Act: Searching
for Identity in the Classless Society"

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2. Study a piece of your own writing to see how many perspectives you account for and how well you distinguish your own voice from those you are summarizing. Consider the following questions:
 - a. How many perspectives do you engage?
 - b. What other perspectives might you include?
 - c. How do you distinguish your views from the other views you summarize?
 - d. Do you use clear voice-signaling phrases?
 - e. What options are available to you for clarifying who is saying what?
 - f. Which of these options are best suited for this particular text?

If you find that you do *not* include multiple views or clearly distinguish between others' views and your own, revise your text to do so.