

graff and birkenstein they say i say

Graff and Birkenstein: Deconstructing "They Say, I Say" in Academic and Everyday Discourse

The influential work "They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing" by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein has profoundly shaped how students approach argumentation and academic writing. This essential guide unpacks the fundamental rhetorical moves that enable writers to engage with existing ideas, present their own perspectives, and effectively participate in ongoing conversations. Understanding the core principles of "They Say, I Say" is crucial for anyone looking to articulate their thoughts clearly, respond to established viewpoints, and contribute meaningfully to discourse, whether in a university seminar or a public forum. This article will delve into the key concepts presented by Graff and Birkenstein, exploring their application in academic writing, everyday communication, and the broader implications of mastering this rhetorical framework. We will examine how the book's emphasis on summarizing, quoting, and responding to others provides a roadmap for developing strong analytical and persuasive skills.

Table of Contents

- Understanding the Core of "They Say, I Say"
- The Importance of "They Say" in Academic Writing
- Mastering the "I Say" Component
- The Art of Introducing and Summarizing "They Say"
- Integrating Quotes Effectively: The "Quoting" Move
- Responding to "They Say": Agreeing, Disagreeing, and Combining
- The Power of Transition Words and Phrases
- "They Say, I Say" Beyond the Classroom
- Common Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them
- Conclusion: The Enduring Relevance of "They Say, I Say"

Understanding the Core of "Graff and Birkenstein: They Say, I Say"

At its heart, "They Say, I Say" by Graff and Birkenstein presents a deceptively simple yet powerful framework for engaging in discourse. The

central premise revolves around the idea that effective academic and persuasive writing involves not just stating one's own opinions, but also actively engaging with the ideas of others. This engagement is categorized into two fundamental components: "They Say" and "I Say." The "They Say" component refers to the existing opinions, arguments, and claims that a writer encounters and needs to acknowledge. The "I Say" component is the writer's own response, their unique perspective or argument that arises from engaging with "They Say." This dynamic interplay forms the backbone of critical thinking and effective communication, enabling writers to situate their own ideas within a broader intellectual landscape.

Graff and Birkenstein argue that many students struggle with academic writing because they fail to recognize the importance of this dialectical process. Instead of entering into a conversation, they often present their ideas in isolation, leading to arguments that lack context and persuasive power. The book provides practical templates and strategies to help writers overcome this hurdle, demonstrating how to clearly represent the views of others before articulating their own. This foundational understanding of the "They Say, I Say" dynamic is crucial for developing sophisticated arguments and fostering intellectual engagement.

The Importance of "They Say" in Academic Writing

In the realm of academic writing, acknowledging and responding to "They Say" is not merely a courtesy; it is a fundamental requirement for demonstrating intellectual engagement and building a credible argument. When a writer fails to address existing scholarship or prevailing viewpoints, their own ideas can appear uninformed, disconnected, or even arrogant. By summarizing and representing the "They Say" accurately, writers show that they have done their research, understood the existing conversation, and are prepared to contribute to it meaningfully.

Academic discourse is built upon a foundation of dialogue. Every academic paper, essay, or research project is, in essence, a contribution to an ongoing conversation within a particular field. Therefore, understanding what "they say" - the current research, the established theories, the common assumptions, and even the counterarguments - is paramount. This allows a writer to identify gaps in existing knowledge, challenge prevailing orthodoxies, or offer new interpretations. Without this crucial first step, the writer's "I Say" risks being irrelevant or overlooked.

The ability to accurately summarize and represent the views of others, even those the writer disagrees with, is a hallmark of intellectual maturity. Graff and Birkenstein emphasize that effective summarization requires empathy and a genuine attempt to understand the other's perspective before offering a critique or endorsement. This not only strengthens the writer's own argument but also fosters a more collegial and productive academic environment.

Mastering the "I Say" Component

While acknowledging "They Say" is vital, the ultimate goal of persuasive

writing is to articulate a clear and compelling "I Say." This is where the writer presents their own thesis, their unique contribution to the conversation. The "I Say" is not simply a statement of opinion; it is an argument that is supported by evidence, logical reasoning, and a clear connection to the "They Say" it responds to. Graff and Birkenstein stress that the "I Say" should be explicit and clearly signal the writer's stance.

Developing a strong "I Say" requires more than just stating a belief. It involves a process of critical thinking, analysis, and synthesis. Writers must move beyond merely reporting what others have said to actively engaging with those ideas, identifying their implications, and formulating their own position. This often involves developing a thesis statement that is not only original but also takes a clear stand in relation to the "They Say" it addresses.

Moreover, the "I Say" should be nuanced and avoid overly simplistic or absolute pronouncements. Academic arguments often benefit from acknowledging complexities, limitations, and potential counterarguments to the writer's own position. This demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the topic and enhances the credibility of the writer's perspective. The key is to make the writer's own voice and contribution unmistakable, while still demonstrating a deep understanding of the existing discourse.

The Art of Introducing and Summarizing "They Say"

Graff and Birkenstein dedicate significant attention to the crucial skill of introducing and summarizing "They Say." This involves more than just dropping a name or a quote; it requires presenting the original argument in a way that is fair, accurate, and accessible to the reader. The book provides practical templates that writers can adapt to introduce the ideas of others, such as "As the prominent sociologist Charles Murray claims, . . .," or "Many sociologists have argued that the rise in inequality is due to..."

Effective summarization is a skill that can be learned and honed. It involves identifying the main points of an argument, distilling them into one's own words, and presenting them concisely. The goal is to accurately represent the "They Say" without distorting or misrepresenting the original meaning. This requires careful reading, active listening, and the ability to synthesize complex ideas.

One of the challenges students face is the temptation to misrepresent "They Say" in order to make their own argument appear stronger. Graff and Birkenstein caution against this, emphasizing that intellectual honesty and accuracy are paramount. By summarizing "They Say" faithfully, writers establish a foundation of trust with their readers, making their own subsequent arguments more persuasive. This involves understanding the nuances of the original argument and presenting it in a way that is both faithful and relevant to the writer's own purpose.

Templates for Introducing and Summarizing

Graff and Birkenstein offer a wealth of practical templates to help writers introduce and summarize the ideas of others. These templates serve as scaffolding, providing a starting point for writers to construct their own sentences and paragraphs. For instance, to introduce a specific viewpoint, a writer might use phrases like:

- "While many scholars believe X, [Author's Name] argues that..."
- "It is often assumed that Y, but [Author's Name] contends that..."
- "In recent years, there has been a growing consensus that Z. However,..."

When summarizing, the book suggests using phrases that indicate a faithful representation of another's ideas, such as:

- "In essence, [Author's Name]'s argument is that..."
- "To put it simply, [Author's Name] suggests that..."
- "[Author's Name] maintains that the primary issue is..."

These templates are designed to be flexible and adaptable, allowing writers to tailor them to their specific context and the complexity of the ideas they are representing.

Integrating Quotes Effectively: The "Quoting" Move

Quoting directly from sources is an essential component of academic writing, but it is often done poorly. Graff and Birkenstein's "They Say, I Say" addresses this by emphasizing the importance of the "quoting" move not as an end in itself, but as a means to support the writer's own "I Say." A quote, they argue, should never be dropped into a text without proper context or explanation. Instead, it should be introduced, explained, and connected to the writer's argument.

The book highlights that simply inserting a quote and assuming the reader will understand its relevance is insufficient. Writers must provide the necessary background information for the quote to make sense and then explain how the quote supports or illustrates their own point. This process is often referred to as "framing" the quote. Without this framing, quotes can appear as disconnected fragments that do not contribute to the overall coherence of the argument.

Graff and Birkenstein advocate for a "signal phrase" to introduce a quote, which attributes the quote to its source and provides context. Following the quote, a "explanation" or "interpretation" paragraph is crucial to connect the quote back to the writer's own thesis or argument. This ensures that the quote serves a clear purpose within the larger essay.

The Signal Phrase and Explanation

The "signal phrase" is the introductory element that sets up a quotation. It typically includes the author's name and a verb that indicates the nature of their statement (e.g., argues, claims, suggests, maintains). Examples include:

- "As educational theorist Howard Gardner argues,..."
- "The historical accounts suggest that..."
- "In his influential study, [Researcher's Name] found that..."

Following the quote, the writer must provide an explanation that clarifies its significance. This explanation should answer the implicit question: "So what?" It might elaborate on the quote's meaning, connect it to other ideas in the essay, or explain how it supports the writer's thesis. For instance, after quoting a statistic, a writer might explain how that statistic illustrates a broader trend they are discussing.

Responding to "They Say": Agreeing, Disagreeing, and Combining

The most critical part of the "They Say, I Say" model is the writer's response. Graff and Birkenstein outline three primary ways to respond: agreeing, disagreeing, or a combination of both. Each of these response types requires careful articulation and justification to be effective. Simply stating "I agree" or "I disagree" is not enough; the writer must explain why and how their position relates to the "They Say" they are addressing.

Agreeing with "They Say" involves building upon or supporting an existing argument. This can be done by providing further evidence, elaborating on the original point, or connecting it to new insights. Disagreeing, on the other hand, requires a direct challenge to the original argument, often by pointing out flaws, offering counterevidence, or proposing an alternative interpretation. A combination of agreeing and disagreeing allows for a more nuanced response, acknowledging some aspects of an argument while refuting others.

Regardless of the chosen response, it must be clearly signaled to the reader. Graff and Birkenstein provide templates for each type of response, ensuring that the writer's stance is unmistakable. This clarity is essential for guiding the reader through the argument and making the writer's contribution to the conversation evident.

Agreeing with "They Say"

When agreeing, writers reinforce the validity of the "They Say." This can be achieved by:

- Providing supporting evidence that further validates the original claim.
- Elaborating on the original argument, offering more detailed explanations or insights.
- Connecting the "They Say" to other ideas or theories, demonstrating its broader applicability.
- Highlighting the significance or impact of the "They Say."

Phrases to signal agreement include: "I agree with [Author's Name] that...", "My own research supports the argument that...", or "Indeed, [Author's Name]'s conclusion resonates with..."

Disagreeing with "They Say"

Disagreement requires a direct challenge to the "They Say." Effective disagreement involves:

- Clearly stating the point of contention.
- Providing evidence or reasoning to support the disagreement.
- Acknowledging the complexity of the issue, avoiding absolute pronouncements.
- Offering an alternative perspective or interpretation.

Signal phrases for disagreement include: "I disagree with [Author's Name]'s claim that...", "While [Author's Name] is correct that X, they overlook...", or "The evidence does not support [Author's Name]'s conclusion that..."

Combining Agreement and Disagreement

A nuanced approach often involves both agreement and disagreement. This allows for a more sophisticated engagement with the "They Say." Writers can:

- Acknowledge the validity of certain points while refuting others.
- Agree with the premise but disagree with the conclusion.
- Concede a point to the opposing side while still maintaining one's overall argument.

Phrases for this approach include: "Although I agree with [Author's Name] that X, I cannot accept their conclusion that Y," or "While [Author's Name]'s analysis of A is compelling, their understanding of B is flawed."

The Power of Transition Words and Phrases

Graff and Birkenstein also emphasize the crucial role of transition words and phrases in creating a coherent and flowing argument. These linguistic devices act as signposts for the reader, guiding them through the writer's thought process and clarifying the relationships between different ideas. Without effective transitions, even well-developed arguments can become disjointed and difficult to follow.

Transitions help to connect sentences, paragraphs, and even larger sections of an essay. They signal to the reader whether the writer is introducing a new idea, elaborating on a previous one, providing an example, contrasting viewpoints, or drawing a conclusion. This clarity is essential for ensuring that the writer's "I Say" is effectively understood in relation to the "They Say" it engages with.

The book provides categorized lists of transition words and phrases, offering practical tools for writers to enhance the flow and coherence of their work. Mastering the strategic use of these transitions is key to demonstrating a command of academic discourse and producing polished, persuasive writing.

Categories of Transition Words

Graff and Birkenstein suggest that transition words can be broadly categorized based on the function they serve in the discourse. Common categories include:

- **To Add Information:** furthermore, moreover, in addition, also, not only...but also
- **To Contrast:** however, on the other hand, conversely, but, yet, while
- **To Illustrate:** for example, for instance, to illustrate, such as
- **To Conclude:** therefore, consequently, thus, in conclusion, to sum up
- **To Indicate Sequence:** first, second, third, next, then, finally
- **To Show Cause and Effect:** because, since, as a result, due to

By consciously employing these transitions, writers can effectively guide their readers through the complexities of their arguments, ensuring that the connections between their own ideas and the ideas of others are clear and logical.

"They Say, I Say" Beyond the Classroom

While "They Say, I Say" is primarily lauded for its impact on academic writing, its principles are remarkably applicable to a wide range of everyday communication. In personal conversations, professional meetings, and public debates, the ability to listen to, understand, and respond to others'

viewpoints is fundamental to effective interaction. Whether engaging in a discussion with colleagues, negotiating a disagreement with friends, or participating in a community forum, the "They Say, I Say" framework provides valuable tools.

In professional settings, understanding market trends, competitor analyses, and client feedback (the "They Say") is crucial before formulating business strategies or product development plans (the "I Say"). In public discourse, analyzing political arguments, media narratives, and societal concerns (the "They Say") is essential for informed civic participation and the articulation of one's own stance (the "I Say"). The ability to summarize diverse perspectives accurately before presenting one's own is a mark of maturity and credibility.

Moreover, the book's emphasis on clear and direct expression helps individuals articulate their needs, opinions, and arguments persuasively in various social contexts. By learning to identify and engage with the prevailing ideas, concerns, and criticisms of others, individuals can become more effective communicators and more influential participants in any discourse.

Common Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them

Despite the clarity and utility of the "They Say, I Say" model, writers can still fall into common traps that undermine their arguments. Recognizing these pitfalls is the first step toward avoiding them and ensuring the effective application of the book's principles.

One prevalent issue is the "quagmire of subjectivity," where writers make claims without grounding them in any recognizable "They Say." This leads to unsupported assertions that lack credibility. Another pitfall is the "verbally impoverished" summary, where writers offer vague or inaccurate representations of others' ideas, often due to a lack of careful reading or a desire to misrepresent. Additionally, simply paraphrasing without analysis, or presenting quotes without proper framing and explanation, are common mistakes that dilute the impact of the writer's own "I Say."

Another frequent error is the "so what?" problem, where the significance or relevance of the "They Say" and the writer's response to it is unclear. Writers must ensure that their argument has a discernible purpose and that the connection between "They Say" and "I Say" is explicit. Finally, failing to transition smoothly between different ideas or between the "They Say" and the "I Say" can lead to a disjointed and confusing essay. Understanding and consciously working to avoid these common errors will significantly improve the quality and persuasiveness of any written or spoken argument.

Conclusion: The Enduring Relevance of "Graff and Birkenstein: They Say, I Say"

The principles outlined in Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's "They Say, I Say" offer a foundational framework for effective communication and critical

thinking in both academic and everyday contexts. By demystifying the art of academic argumentation, the book empowers writers to engage with existing ideas, articulate their own perspectives, and contribute meaningfully to intellectual conversations. The emphasis on accurately representing "They Say," integrating quotes effectively, and clearly stating one's "I Say" provides a roadmap for developing persuasive and well-supported arguments. The enduring relevance of "They Say, I Say" lies in its ability to equip individuals with the essential rhetorical skills needed to navigate complex discussions, foster understanding, and make their voices heard effectively in an increasingly interconnected world. Mastering this approach is not just about academic success; it's about becoming a more confident, articulate, and engaged participant in society.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the primary goal of Graff and Birkenstein's 'They Say / I Say' approach?

The primary goal of 'They Say / I Say' is to help students understand and participate in academic discourse by framing their own arguments in relation to the existing conversations and claims made by others.

What does Graff and Birkenstein mean by 'naysayers' in their book?

Naysayers, in the context of 'They Say / I Say,' refers to the opposing viewpoints or counterarguments that a writer needs to acknowledge and respond to in order to strengthen their own position and demonstrate critical engagement with the topic.

Can you explain the concept of 'template sentences' as described by Graff and Birkenstein?

Template sentences are prefabricated phrases and sentence structures that help writers introduce, summarize, and respond to the ideas of others. They provide a framework for articulating one's own position within a larger academic conversation.

How does the 'They Say / I Say' method encourage active listening and critical thinking?

The method emphasizes the importance of understanding what others are saying ('They Say') before articulating one's own perspective ('I Say'). This process requires active listening to identify the core arguments and then critical thinking to evaluate, agree with, disagree with, or complicate those arguments.

What is the significance of the 'so what?' and 'who cares?' questions in 'They Say / I Say'?

These questions prompt writers to explain the broader relevance and significance of their arguments. 'So what?' asks about the implications of

the argument, while 'Who cares?' asks about the audience who would find the argument important and why, thereby connecting the writer's ideas to a larger context.

Additional Resources

Here is a numbered list of 9 book titles related to the concepts presented in *They Say, I Say* by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, with short descriptions:

1. *They Say, I Say: Exercises for Academic Writers.*

This companion workbook offers practical drills and assignments designed to reinforce the core principles of *They Say, I Say*. It focuses on helping students engage with the academic conversation by teaching them how to accurately represent others' views and effectively present their own responses. The exercises guide readers through summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting, as well as developing their own thesis statements and supporting arguments.

2. *The Craft of Research* (4th Edition).

While broader than just the "they say, I say" concept, this influential text provides foundational knowledge for constructing persuasive arguments in academic settings. It guides researchers through the entire process, from identifying a researchable problem to constructing a compelling narrative. The emphasis on understanding existing scholarship, a key component of "they say," makes it an excellent resource for developing well-supported claims.

3. *They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* (with readings).

This version of the original text includes a curated selection of readings that exemplify the techniques discussed. It provides students with concrete examples of how experienced writers engage with existing arguments and make their own contributions. The added readings serve as models, making the abstract concepts of summarizing, quoting, and responding more tangible and easier to emulate.

4. *Writing Arguments: A Rhetoric with Readings.*

This comprehensive guide explores the principles of argumentation, equipping students with the tools to construct logical and persuasive essays. It delves into various rhetorical strategies, including how to acknowledge and address opposing viewpoints, which directly aligns with the "they say" aspect of Graff and Birkenstein's work. The book emphasizes the importance of context and audience in shaping an effective argument.

5. *They Say, I Say: Strategies for Academic Writing.*

This title suggests a focus on actionable techniques for academic writing, likely building upon the foundational ideas of *They Say, I Say*. It would likely offer explicit strategies for entering academic conversations, attributing sources, and developing a strong authorial voice. Readers can expect practical advice for navigating the expectations of scholarly discourse.

6. *How to Make an Argument: A Student's Guide.*

This book aims to demystify the process of academic argumentation for students. It would likely break down complex concepts into understandable steps, focusing on building a coherent and convincing case. The principles of understanding and responding to existing arguments, central to *They Say, I Say*, would be a core element of its instruction.

7. The Norton Field Guide to Writing.

This widely used writing handbook covers a broad range of writing skills, with significant emphasis on academic writing and argumentation. It would likely include sections on research, critical reading, and developing well-supported claims, all of which necessitate engaging with existing ideas. The guide's focus on clarity and structure makes it valuable for anyone looking to improve their academic prose.

8. They Say, I Say: Mastering the Art of Academic Discourse.

This title implies a deeper dive into the nuances of academic conversations. It would likely explore how to effectively interpret and synthesize diverse perspectives before presenting one's own. The book would aim to help students develop sophisticated skills in intellectual engagement and contribution within their chosen fields.

9. They Say, I Say: Essential Skills for College Writing.

This book positions the core concepts of They Say, I Say as fundamental for success in college-level writing. It would likely focus on developing the ability to understand and respond to academic texts as a prerequisite for forming and articulating one's own ideas. The emphasis would be on equipping students with the foundational skills needed to navigate the academic environment.

Graff And Birkenstein They Say I Say

Graff And Birkenstein They Say I Say

Related Articles

- [graphing quadratic inequalities worksheet](#)
- [grateful dead songs alphabetical list](#)
- [grammar worksheets high school](#)

[Back to Home](#)