"THEY SAY/I SAY"

The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing

Second Edition

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arguing from hearing someone say, "You miss my point. What I'm saying is not _____, but _____," or "I agree with you that _____, and would even add that _____," than they do from studying the differences between inductive and deductive reasoning. Such formulas give students an immediate sense of what it feels like to enter a public conversation in a way that studying abstract warrants and logical fallacies does not.

ENGAGING WITH THE IDEAS OF OTHERS

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

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

Gerald Graff
Cathy Birkenstein
writing. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of this book is its presentation of many such templates, designed to help you successfully enter not only the world of academic thinking and writing, but also the wider worlds of civic discourse and work.

Instead of focusing solely on abstract principles of writing, then, this book offers model templates that help you put those principles directly into practice. Working with these templates can give you an immediate sense of how to engage in the kinds of critical thinking you are required to do at the college level and in the vocational and public spheres beyond.

Some of these templates represent simple but crucial moves like those used to summarize some widely held belief:

- Many Americans assume that

Others are more complicated:

- On the one hand, . On the other hand, 

- Author X contradicts herself. At the same time that she argues , she also implies .

- I agree that .

- This is not to say that .

It is true, of course, that critical thinking and writing go deeper than any set of linguistic formulas, requiring that you question assumptions, develop strong claims, offer supporting reasons and evidence, consider opposing arguments, and so on. But these deeper habits of thought cannot be put into practice unless you have a language for expressing them in clear, organized ways.

The single most important template that we focus on in this book is the “they say _______; I say _______” formula that gives our book its title. If there is any one point that we hope you will take away from this book, it is the importance not only of expressing your ideas (“I say”) but of presenting those ideas as a response to some other person or group (“they say”). For us, the underlying structure of effective academic writing—and of responsible public discourse—resides not just in stating our own ideas but in listening closely to others around us, summarizing their views in a way that they will recognize, and responding with our own ideas in kind. Broadly speaking, academic writing is argumentative writing, and we believe that to argue well you need to do more than assert your own position. You need to enter a conversation, using what others say (or might say) as a launching pad or sounding board for your own views. For this reason, one of the main pieces of advice in this book is to write the voices of others into your text.

In our view, then, the best academic writing has one underlying feature: it is deeply engaged in some way with other people’s views. Too often, however, academic writing is taught as a process of saying “true” or “smart” things in a vacuum, as if it were possible to argue effectively without being in conversation with someone else. If you have been taught to write a traditional five-paragraph essay, for example, you have learned how to develop a thesis and support it with evidence. This is good advice as far as it goes, but it leaves out the important fact that in the real world we don’t make arguments without being provoked. Instead, we make arguments because someone has said or done something (or perhaps not said or done something) and we need to respond: “I
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can't see why you like the Lakers so much"; "I agree: it was a great film"; "That argument is contradictory." If it weren't for other people and our need to challenge, agree with, or otherwise respond to them, there would be no reason to argue at all.

To make an impact as a writer, you need to do more than make statements that are logical, well supported, and consistent. You must also find a way of entering a conversation with others' views— with something "they say." If your own argument doesn't identify the "they say" that you're responding to, it probably won't make sense. As Figure 1 suggests, what you are saying may be clear to your audience, but why you are saying it won't be. For it is what others are saying and thinking that motivates our writing and gives it a reason for being. It follows, then, as Figure 2 suggests, that your own argument—the thesis or "I say" moment of your text—should always be a response to the arguments of others.

Many writers make explicit "they say / I say" moves in their writing. One famous example is Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail," which consists almost entirely of King's eloquent responses to a public statement by eight clergymen deplored the civil rights protests he was leading. The letter—which was written in 1963, while King was in prison for leading a demonstration against racial injustice in Birmingham—is structured almost entirely around a framework of summary and response, in which King summarizes and then answers their criticisms. In one typical passage, King writes as follows.

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations.

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

King goes on to agree with his critics that "It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham," yet he
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hastens to add that “it is even more unfortunate that the city’s white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative.” King’s letter is so thoroughly conversational, in fact, that it could be rewritten in the form of a dialogue or play.

King’s critics:
King’s response:
Critics:
Response:

Clearly, King would not have written his famous letter were it not for his critics, whose views he treats not as objections to his already-formed arguments but as the motivating source of those arguments, their central reason for being. He quotes not only what his critics have said (“Some have asked: ‘Why didn’t you give the new city administration time to act?’”), but also things they might have said (“One may well ask: ‘How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?’”)—all to set the stage for what he himself wants to say.

A similar “they say / I say” exchange opens an essay about American patriotism by the social critic Katha Pollitt, who uses her own daughter’s comment to represent the national fervor of post-9/11 patriotism.

My daughter, who goes to Stuyvesant High School only blocks from the former World Trade Center, thinks we should fly the American flag out our window. Definitely not, I say: The flag stands for jingoism and vengeance and war. She tells me I’m wrong—the flag means standing together and honoring the dead and saying no to terrorism. In a way we’re both right . . .

KATHA POLLiTT, “Put Out No Flags”

As Pollit’s example shows, the “they” you respond to in crafting an argument need not be a famous author or someone known to your audience. It can be a family member like Pollitt’s daughter, or a friend or classmate who has made a provocative claim. It can even be something an individual or a group might say—or a side of yourself, something you once believed but no longer do, or something you partly believe but also doubt. The important thing is that the “they” (or “you” or “she”) represent some wider group with which readers might identify—in Pollitt’s case, those who patriotically believe in flying the flag. Pollitt’s example also shows that responding to the views of others need not always involve unqualified opposition. By agreeing and disagreeing with her daughter, Pollitt enacts what we call the “yes and no” response, reconciling apparently incompatible views.

While King and Pollitt both identify the views they are responding to, some authors do not explicitly state their views but instead allow the reader to infer them. See, for instance, if you can identify the implied or unnamed “they say” that the following claim is responding to.

I like to think I have a certain advantage as a teacher of literature because when I was growing up I disliked and feared books.

GERALD GRAFF, “Disliking Books at an Early Age”

In case you haven’t figured it out already, the phantom “they say” here is the common belief that in order to be a good teacher of literature, one must have grown up liking and enjoying books.

As you can see from these examples, many writers use the
“they say / I say” format to agree or disagree with others, to challenge standard ways of thinking, and thus to stir up controversy. This point may come as a shock to you if you have always had the impression that in order to succeed academically you need to play it safe and avoid controversy in your writing, making statements that nobody can possibly disagree with. Though this view of writing may appear logical, it is actually a recipe for flat, lifeless writing and for writing that fails to answer what we call the “so what?” and “who cares?” questions. “William Shakespeare wrote many famous plays and sonnets” may be a perfectly true statement, but precisely because nobody is likely to disagree with it, it goes without saying and thus would seem pointless if said.

WAYS OF RESPONDING

Just because much argumentative writing is driven by disagreement, it does not follow that agreement is ruled out. Although argumentation is often associated with conflict and opposition, the type of conversational “they say / I say” argument that we focus on in this book can be just as useful when you agree as when you disagree.

- She argues———, and I agree because———.
- Her argument that——— is supported by new research showing that———.

Nor do you always have to choose between either simply agreeing or disagreeing, since the “they say / I say” format also works to both agree and disagree at the same time, as Politt illustrates above.

This last option—agreeing and disagreeing simultaneously—is one we especially recommend, since it allows you to avoid a simple yes or no response and present a more complicated argument, while containing that complication within a clear “on the one hand / on the other hand” framework.

While the templates we offer in this book can be used to structure your writing at the sentence level, they can also be expanded as needed to almost any length, as the following elaborated “they say / I say” template demonstrates.

In recent discussions of———, a controversial issue has been whether———. On the one hand, some argue that———. From this perspective,———. On the other hand, however, others argue that———. In the words of———, one of this view’s main proponents, “———.” According to this view,———. In sum, then, the issue is whether——— or———.

My own view is that———. Though I concede that———, I still maintain that———. For example,———. Although some might object that———, I would reply that———. The issue is important because———.

If you go back over this template, you will see that it helps you make a host of challenging moves (each of which is taken up in forthcoming chapters in this book). First, the template helps you open your text by identifying an issue in some ongoing conversation or debate (“In recent discussions of———, a con-
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troversial issue has been ___________)), and then to map some of the voices in this controversy, (by using the "on the one hand / on the other hand" structure). The template also helps you introduce a quotation ("In the words of"), to explain the quotation in your own words ("According to this view"), and—in a new paragraph—to state your own argument ("My own view is that"), to qualify your argument ("Though I concede that"), and then to support your argument with evidence ("For example"). In addition, the template helps you make one of the most crucial moves in argumentative writing, what we call "planting a naysayer in your text," in which you summarize and then answer a likely objection to your own central claim ("Although it might be objected that ________, I reply ________"). Finally, this template helps you shift between general, overarching claims ("In sum, then") and smaller-scale, supporting claims ("For example").

Again, none of us is born knowing these moves, especially when it comes to academic writing. Hence the need for this book.

DO TEMPLATES STIFLE CREATIVITY?

If you are like some of our students, your initial response to templates may be skepticism. At first, many of our students complain that using templates will take away their originality and creativity and make them all sound the same. "They'll turn us into writing robots," one of our students insisted. Another agreed, adding, "Hey, I'm a jazz musician. And we don't play by set forms. We create our own." "I'm in college now," another student asserted; "this is third-grade-level stuff."

In our view, however, the templates in this book, far from being "third-grade-level stuff," represent the stock in trade of sophisticated thinking and writing, and they often require a great deal of practice and instruction to use successfully. As for the belief that pre-established forms undermine creativity, we think it rests on a very limited vision of what creativity is all about. In our view, the above template and the others in this book will actually help your writing become more original and creative, not less. After all, even the most creative forms of expression depend on established patterns and structures. Most songwriters, for instance, rely on a time-honored verse-chorus-verse pattern, and few people would call Shakespeare uncreative because he didn't invent the sonnet or the dramatic forms that he used to such dazzling effect. Even the most avant-garde, cutting-edge artists (like improvisational jazz musicians) need to master the basic forms that their work improvers on, departs from, and goes beyond, or else their work will come across as uneducated child's play. Ultimately, then, creativity and originality lie not in the avoidance of established forms but in the imaginative use of them.

Furthermore, these templates do not dictate the content of what you say, which can be as original as you can make it, but only suggest a way of formatting how you say it. In addition, once you begin to feel comfortable with the templates in this book, you will be able to improvise creatively on them to fit new situations and purposes and find others in your reading. In other words, the templates offered here are learning tools to get you started, not structures set in stone. Once you get used to using them, you can even dispense with them altogether, for the rhetorical moves they model will be at your fingertips in an unconscious, instinctive way.

But if you still need proof that writing templates do not stifle creativity, consider the following opening to an essay on the fast-food industry that we've included at the back of this book.
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If ever there were a newspaper headline custom-made for Jay Leno's monologue, this was it. Kids taking on McDonald's this week, suing the company for making them fat. Isn't that like middle-aged men suing Porsche for making them get speeding tickets? Whatever happened to personal responsibility?

I tend to sympathize with these portly fast-food patrons, though. Maybe that's because I used to be one of them.

DAVID ZINZENKO, "Don't Blame the Eater"

Although Zinczenko relies on a version of the "they say / I say" formula, his writing is anything but dry, robotic, or uncreative. While Zinczenko does not explicitly use the words "they say" and "I say," the template still gives the passage its underlying structure: "They say that kids suing fast-food companies for making them fat is a joke; but I say such lawsuits are justified."

But Isn't This Plagiarism?

"But isn't this plagiarism?" at least one student each year will usually ask. "Well, is it?" we respond, turning the question around into one the entire class can profit from. "We are, after all, asking you to use language in your writing that isn't your own—language that you 'borrow' or, to put it less delicately, steal from other writers."

Often, a lively discussion ensues that raises important questions about authorial ownership and helps everyone better understand the frequently confusing line between plagiarism and the legitimate use of what others say and how they say it. Students are quick to see that no one person owns a conventional formula like "on the one hand ... on the other hand ..." Phrases like "a controversial issue" are so commonly used and recycled that they are generic—community property that can be freely used without fear of committing plagiarism. It is plagiarism, however, if the words used to fill in the blanks of such formulas are borrowed from others without proper acknowledgment. In sum, then, while it is not plagiarism to recycle conventionally used formulas, it is a serious academic offense to take the substantive content from others' texts without citing the author and giving him or her proper credit.

PUTTING IN YOUR OAR

Though the immediate goal of this book is to help you become a better writer, at a deeper level it invites you to become a certain type of person: a critical, intellectual thinker who, instead of sitting passively on the sidelines, can participate in the debates and conversations of your world in an active and empowered way. Ultimately, this book invites you to become a critical thinker who can enter the types of conversations described eloquently by the philosopher Kenneth Burke in the following widely cited passage. Likening the world of intellectual exchange to a never-ending conversation at a party, Burke writes:

You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. . . . You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your ear. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you. . . . The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

KENNETH BURKE, The Philosophy of Literary Form
What we like about this passage is its suggestion that stating an argument and “putting in your ear” can only be done in conversation with others; that we all enter the dynamic world of ideas not as isolated individuals but as social beings deeply connected to others who have a stake in what we say.

This ability to enter complex, many-sided conversations has taken on a special urgency in today’s diverse, post-9/11 world, where the future for all of us may depend on our ability to put ourselves in the shoes of those who think very differently from us. The central piece of advice in this book—that we listen carefully to others, including those who disagree with us, and then engage with them thoughtfully and respectfully—can help us see beyond our own pet beliefs, which may not be shared by everyone. The mere act of crafting a sentence that begins “Of course, someone might object that” may not seem like a way to change the world; but it does have the potential to jog us out of our comfort zones, to get us thinking critically about our own beliefs, and perhaps even to change our minds.

Exercises

1. Read the following paragraph from an essay by Emily Poe, a student at Furman University. Disregarding for the moment what Poe says, focus your attention on the phrases Poe uses to structure what she says (italicized here). Then write a new paragraph using Poe’s as a model but replacing her topic, vegetarianism, with one of your own.

The term “vegetarian” tends to be synonymous with “tree-hugger” in many people’s minds. They see vegetarianism as a cult that brainwashes its followers into eliminating an essential part of their daily diets for an abstract goal of “animal welfare.” However, few vegetarians choose their lifestyle just to follow the crowd. On the contrary, many of these supposedly brainwashed people are actually independent thinkers, concerned citizens, and compassionate human beings. For the truth is that there are many very good reasons for giving up meat. Perhaps the best reasons are to improve the environment, to encourage humane treatment of livestock, or to enhance one’s own health. In this essay, then, closely examining a vegetarian diet as compared to a meat-eater’s diet will show that vegetarianism is clearly the better option for sustaining the Earth and all its inhabitants.

2. Write a short essay in which you first summarize our rationale for the templates in this book and then articulate your own position in response. If you want, you can use the template below to organize your paragraphs, expanding and modifying it as necessary to fit what you want to say.

In the Introduction to “They Say / I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing”, Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein provide templates designed to . Specifically, Graff and Birkenstein argue that the types of writing templates they offer . As the authors themselves put it, “... Although some people believe _____, Graff and Birkenstein insist that ____. In sum, then, their view is that ____. I [agree/disagree/have mixed feelings]. In my view, the types of templates that the authors recommend ____. For instance, ______. In addition, ______. Some might object, of course, on the grounds that ______. Yet I would argue that ______. Overall, then, I believe ______ an important point to make given ______.
1

“THEY SAY”
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 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, three or four pages in a longer one, or more than ten or so pages in a book-length text 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.
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 a 2004 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 strolling my town's Festival of Books. "I'll bet you're a reader," he volunteered, as though we were 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 .

**Templates for Introducing the Standard View**

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.
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- 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 ________.

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 I should know better by now, I cannot help thinking that ________.
- At the same time that I believe ________, I also believe ________.

One implication of X's treatment of ________ is that ________.

X 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
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 Slept 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, 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.
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.

   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 Zinczenko's "Don't Blame the Eater" (p. 195). 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 Zinczenko puts it, worthy of a Jay Leno monologue). You might write about one of the topics listed in the previous exercise (the environment, sports, 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 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 claim.

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 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 com-
panies 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. 139-41), 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 sum-
mary 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, super-
ficial 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 profes-
sor Karen Lunsford (whose own research focuses on argument
theory) points out, it is standard in the natural and social sci-
ences to summarize the work of others quickly, in one pithy
sentence or phrase, as in the following example.

Several studies (Crackle, 1992; Pop, 2001; Snap, 1987) suggest that
these policies are harmless; moreover, other studies (Dick, 2002;
Harry, 2003; Tom, 1987) argue that they even have benefits.

The Art of Summarizing

But if your assignment is to respond in writing to a single author
like Zinczenko, 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, Zinczenko’s critique
of the fast-food industry might be summarized as a call for over-
weight 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 tem-
porarily adopt the worldview of another, it does not mean ignor-
ing 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 Zinczenko, 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 Zinczenko'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 Zinczenko says about the fast-food industry and parents. Consider this sample.

In his article “Don't Blame the Eater,” David Zinczenko 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, Zinczenko 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. Zinczenko's hope is that with the new spate of lawsuits against 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 Zinczenko's own text and toward the second paragraph, where the writer begins to establish her own argument. The opening sentence gives a sense of Zinczenko'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 Zinczenko'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,” you
The Art of Summarizing

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 late September 2001, former 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...
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 ear­
er 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 complaints 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, we recommend that when summarizing—or when intro­
ducing a quotation—you use vivid and precise signal verbs as
often as possible. Though "he says" or "she believes" will somet­
times 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 MAKING A CLAIM

argue
assert
believe
claim
emphasize
insist
observe
remind us
report
suggest

VERBS FOR EXPRESSING AGREEMENT

acknowledge
admire
agree
endorse
exalt
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.

2. Write two different summaries of David Zinczenko’s “Don’t Blame the Eater” (pp. 195-97). 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 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.
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 former graduate teaching assistant we 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 Figure 4.

On the following page is a typical hit-and-run quotation by a writer responding to an essay by the feminist philosopher 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.
"As He Himself Puts It"

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 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."

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 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, most women I know, regardless of where they are from, are seriously unhappy with 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 dif-
ferent, 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?

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.
"I Say"
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 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 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.

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.

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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 also 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, _______”.

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 a 2003 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.
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 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”**
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 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.
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.

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 at the back of this book, 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.
SEVEN

"So What? Who Cares?"
Saying Why It Matters

BASEBALL is the national pastime. Bernini was the best sculptor of the baroque period. All writing is conversational. So what? Who cares? Why does any of this matter?

How many times have you had reason to ask these questions? Regardless of how interesting a topic may be to you as a writer, readers always need to know what is at stake in a text and why they should care. All too often, however, these questions are left unanswered—mainly because writers and speakers assume that audiences will know the answers already or will figure them out on their own. As a result, students come away from lectures feeling like outsiders to what they've just heard, just as many of us feel left hanging after talks we've attended. The problem is not necessarily that the speakers lack a clear, well-focused thesis or that the thesis is inadequately supported with evidence. Instead, the problem is that the speakers don't address the crucial question of why their arguments matter.

That this question is so often left unaddressed is unfortunate since the speakers generally could offer interesting, engaging answers. When pressed, for instance, most academics will tell you that their lectures and articles matter because they address some belief that needs to be corrected or updated—and because their arguments have important, real-world consequences. Yet many academics fail to identify these reasons and consequences explicitly in what they say and write. Rather than assume that audiences will know why their claims matter, all writers need to answer the “so what?” and “who cares?” questions up front. Not everyone can claim to have a cure for cancer or a solution to end poverty. But writers who fail to show that others should care or already do care about their claims will ultimately lose their audiences' interest.

This chapter focuses on various moves that you can make to answer the “who cares?” and “so what?” questions in your own writing. In one sense, the two questions get at the same thing: the relevance or importance of what you are saying. Yet they get at this significance in different ways. Whereas “who cares?” literally asks you to identify a person or group who cares about your claims, “so what?” asks about the real-world applications and consequences of those claims—what difference it would make if they were accepted. We'll look first at ways of making clear who cares.

"Who Cares?"

To see how one writer answers the “who cares?” question, consider the following passage from the science writer Denise Grady. Writing in the New York Times, she explains some of the latest research into fat cells.

Scientists used to think body fat and the cells it was made of were pretty much inert, just an oily storage compartment. But within the past decade research has shown that fat cells act like chemical factories and that body fat is potent stuff: a highly active...
tissue that secretes hormones and other substances with profound and sometimes harmful effects.

In recent years, biologists have begun calling fat an "endocrine organ," comparing it to glands like the thyroid and pituitary, which also release hormones straight into the bloodstream.

Denise Grady, "The Secret Life of a Potent Cell"

Notice how Grady's writing reflects the central advice we give in this book, offering a clear claim and also framing that claim as a response to what someone else has said. In so doing, Grady immediately identifies at least one group with a stake in the new research that sees fat as "active," "potent stuff": namely, the scientific community, which formerly believed that body fat is inert. By referring to these scientists, Grady implicitly acknowledges that her text is part of a larger conversation and shows who besides herself has an interest in what she says.

Consider, however, how the passage would read had Grady left out what "scientists used to think" and simply explained the new findings in isolation.

Within the past few decades research has shown that fat cells act like chemical factories and that body fat is potent stuff: a highly active tissue that secretes hormones and other substances. In recent years, biologists have begun calling fat an "endocrine organ," comparing it to glands like the thyroid and pituitary, which also release hormones straight into the bloodstream.

Though this statement is clear and easy to follow, it lacks any indication that anyone needs to hear it. Okay, one nods while reading this passage, fat is an active, potent thing. Sounds plausible enough; no reason to think it's not true. But does anyone really care? Who, if anyone, is interested?
"So What? Who Cares?"

(2006). Ultimately, when it came to the nature of fat, the basic assumption was that _______.

But a new body of research shows that fat cells are far more complex and that _______.

In other cases, you might refer to certain people or groups who should care about your claims.

- If sports enthusiasts stopped to think about it, many of them might simply assume that the most successful athletes _______. However, new research shows _______.

- These findings challenge neoliberals' common assumption that _______.

- At first glance, teenagers might say _______. But on closer inspection _______.

As these templates suggest, answering the "who cares?" question involves establishing the type of contrast between what others say and what you say that is central to this book. Ultimately, such templates help you create a dramatic tension or clash of views in your writing that readers will feel invested in and want to see resolved.

"So What?"

Although answering the "who cares?" question is crucial, in many cases it is not enough, especially if you are writing for general readers who don't necessarily have a strong investment in the particular clash of views you are setting up. In the case of Grady's argument about fat cells, such readers may still wonder why it matters that some researchers think fat cells are active, while others think they're inert. Or, to move to a different field of study, American literature, so what if some scholars disagree about Huck Finn's relationship with the runaway slave Jim in Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn? Why should anyone besides a few specialists in the field care about such disputes? What, if anything, hinges on them?

The best way to answer such questions about the larger consequences of your claims is to appeal to something that your audience already figures to care about. Whereas the "who cares?" question asks you to identify an interested person or group, the "so what?" question asks you to link your argument to some larger matter that readers already deem important. Thus in analyzing Huckleberry Finn, a writer could argue that seemingly narrow disputes about the hero's relationship with Jim actually shed light on whether Twain's canonical, widely read novel is a critique of racism in America or is itself marrred by it.

Let's see how Grady invokes such broad, general concerns in her article on fat cells. Her first move is to link researchers' interest in fat cells to a general concern with obesity and health.

Researchers trying to decipher the biology of fat cells hope to find new ways to help people get rid of excess fat or, at least, prevent obesity from destroying their health. In an increasingly obese world, their efforts have taken on added importance.

Further showing why readers should care, Grady's next move is to demonstrate the even broader relevance and urgency of her subject matter.

Internationally, more than a billion people are overweight. Obesity and two illnesses linked to it, heart disease and high blood pressure, are on the World Health Organization's list of the top 10 global health risks. In the United States, 65 percent of adults weigh too much,
compared with about 56 percent a decade ago, and government researchers blame obesity for at least 300,000 deaths a year.

What Grady implicitly says here is “Look, dear reader, you may think that these questions about the nature of fat cells I’ve been pursuing have little to do with everyday life. In fact, however, these questions are extremely important—particularly in our ‘increasingly obese world’ in which we need to prevent obesity from destroying our health.”

Notice that Grady’s phrase “in an increasingly world” can be adapted as a strategic move to address the “so what?” question in other fields as well. For example, a sociologist analyzing back-to-nature movements of the past thirty years might make the following statement.

In a world increasingly dominated by cellphones and sophisticated computer technologies, these attempts to return to nature appear futile.

This type of move can be readily applied to other disciplines because no matter how much disciplines may differ from one another, the need to justify the importance of one’s concerns is common to them all.

**TEMPLATES FOR ESTABLISHING WHY YOUR CLAIMS MATTER**

- *Huckleberry Finn* matters/is important because it is one of the most widely taught novels in the American school system.
- Although X may seem trivial, it is in fact crucial in terms of today’s concern over ________.

**Saying Why It Matters**

- Ultimately, what is at stake here is ________.
- These findings have important implications for the broader domain of ________.
- If we are right about ________, then major consequences follow for ________.
- These conclusions/This discovery will have significant applications in ________ as well as in ________.

Finally, you can also treat the “so what?” question as a related aspect of the “who cares?” question.

- Although X may seem of concern to only a small group of ________, it should in fact concern anyone who cares about ________.

All these templates help you hook your readers. By suggesting the real-world applications of your claims, the templates not only demonstrate that others care about your claims but also tell your readers why they should care. Again, it bears repeating that simply stating and proving your thesis isn’t enough. You also need to frame it in a way that helps readers care about it.

**WHAT ABOUT READERS WHO ALREADY KNOW WHY IT MATTERS?**

At this point, you might wonder if you need to answer the “who cares?” and “so what?” questions in everything you write. Is it really necessary to address these questions if you’re proposing something so obviously consequential as, say, a treatment for autism or a program to eliminate illiteracy? Isn’t it obvious that
everyone cares about such problems? Does it really need to be spelled out? And what about when you're writing for audiences who you know are already interested in your claims and who understand perfectly well why they're important? In other words, do you always need to address the “so what?” and “who cares?” questions?

As a rule, yes—although it's true that you can’t keep answering them forever and at a certain point must say enough is enough. Although a determined skeptic can infinitely ask why something matters—“Why should I care about earning a salary? And why should I care about supporting a family?”—you have to stop answering at some point in your text. Nevertheless, we urge you to go as far as possible in answering such questions. If you take it for granted that readers will somehow intuit the answers to “so what?” and “who cares?” on their own, you may make your work seem less interesting than it actually is, and you run the risk that readers will dismiss your text as irrelevant and unimportant. By contrast, when you are careful to explain who cares and why, it's a little like bringing a cheerleading squad into your text. And though some expert readers might already know why your claims matter, even they need to be reminded. Thus the safest move is to be as explicit as possible in answering the “so what?” question, even for those already in the know. When you step back from the text and explain why it matters, you are urging your audience to keep reading, pay attention, and care.

Exercises

1. Find several texts (scholarly pieces, newspaper articles, emails, memos, etc.) and see whether they answer the “so what?” and “who cares?” questions. Probably some do, some don’t. What difference does it make whether they do or do not? How do the authors who answer these questions do so? Do they use any strategies or techniques that you could borrow for your own writing? Are there any strategies or techniques recommended in this chapter, or that you've found or developed on your own, that you'd recommend to these authors?

2. Look over something you've written yourself. Do you indicate “so what?” and “who cares”? If not, revise your text to do so. You might use the following template to get started.

My point here (that ) should interest those who . Beyond this limited audience, however, my point should speak to anyone who cares about the larger issue of