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They Say I Say By Gerald Graff And Cathy Birkenstein

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Unlocking Academic Writing: A Deep Dive into They Say I Say by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein

For many students, the leap from high school essays to college-level academic writing feels like trying to speak a foreign language. The expectations are higher, the arguments are more nuanced, and the dread of the blank page is ever present. Then comes a slim, unassuming book that has quietly revolutionised the way writing is taught in universities across the globe: **They Say I Say by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein**. First published in 2006 and now in its fifth edition, this book doesn't just offer writing advice; it provides a practical, almost architectural, blueprint for entering academic conversations. With its simple but powerful premise, the book has become a cornerstone for composition courses and a secret weapon for countless writers. This article explores the core ideas behind **They Say I Say by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein**, why its methodology works, and how you can apply its strategies to become a more confident and persuasive writer.

The Core Premise: Entering the Conversation

At its heart, **They Say I Say by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein** argues that good writing isn't a solitary act of self-expression; it is a responsive act of dialogue. The authors famously suggest that every piece of persuasive writing begins not with a writer's own idea, but with what "they" are already saying—the existing arguments, debates, and discussions surrounding a topic. Before you can state your own position, you must first listen, summarise, and engage with what others have said. This simple shift in perspective moves writing from a monologue (I state my opinion) to a dialogue (I respond to other opinions). The book provides a wealth of **They Say I Say templates**that help writers frame their arguments using phrases like "They say that...", "A common view is that...", "I argue, however, that...", or "My own view is that...". These sentence starters demystify the process of academic argumentation, giving students a safe, structured way to join even the most intimidating scholarly discussions.

Demystifying Argument Through Templates

One of the most controversial and simultaneously celebrated aspects of **They Say I Say by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein**is its heavy reliance on templates. Critics sometimes argue that templates stifle creativity or encourage formulaic writing. However, the authors counter this by comparing templates to training wheels on a bicycle: they provide crucial support until the writer internalises the underlying moves of argumentation. The book offers dozens of templates for specific rhetorical moves:

- Summarising what others say: "Many people believe that…", "In recent discussions of X, a controversial issue has been whether…", "Some observers have argued that…".
- Introducing your own point: "My own view, however, is that…", "While I agree that…, I nonetheless maintain that…", "I want to challenge the assumption that…".

- Entering a broader conversation: “This argument is important because it challenges the widespread belief that…”, “At this point, it is necessary to consider the question of…”.
- Connecting ideas and signalling transitions: “If this is true, then it follows that…”, “What’s more, …”, “In sum, then, …”.

By repeatedly using these structures, writers learn to anticipate the reader’s expectations and to navigate the back-and-forth of academic discourse with clarity. The templates in **They Say I Say by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein**are not meant to be copied verbatim forever; they are meant to be internalised and eventually adapted into the writer’s own voice.

The "They Say / I Say" Dynamic in Practice

The genius of the book lies in its emphasis on the “they say” component. Many student writers leap directly into their own opinion without adequately representing the opposing or existing views. This often results in arguments that feel isolated, naive, or lacking intellectual depth. Graff and Birkenstein insist that you cannot have a meaningful “I say” without a robust “they say.” Consider the following progression of a thesis statement:

Weak thesis (no "they say"): "Gun control laws should be stricter in the United States."

Strong thesis (with "they say"):"While supporters of the Second Amendment argue that stricter gun control laws infringe on individual liberties, a closer look at international data shows that such laws significantly reduce gun violence. My own view is that carefully crafted regulations can preserve rights while enhancing public safety."

The second version immediately establishes the conversation: “they” (Second Amendment supporters) say one thing, and “I” say another. The argument is framed as a response, making it instantly more sophisticated and engaging. **They Say I Say by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein**teaches writers to never make a point in isolation but always in relation to what has been said before. This is the essence of critical thinking applied to writing.

Key Sections of the Book: A Structural Overview

The book is divided into several parts, each building on the core dialogue model. The first part, "They Say," teaches readers how to summarise and quote effectively. Often, students either over-quote (letting sources speak for them) or under-quote (making vague references). Graff and Birkenstein offer concrete strategies for integrating quotations using signal phrases like “According to X…” or “X herself writes that…”. They also stress the importance of “playing the believing game” – briefly and fairly summarising an opposing view before refuting it.

The second part, "I Say," shifts focus to the writer’s own argument. It covers three main moves: agreeing, disagreeing, or a combination of both. The book introduces the crucial “yes, no, but” structure, where the writer can agree with part of a source while disagreeing with another part. This nuanced approach avoids simplistic binary thinking and allows for more complex, persuasive arguments.

Later sections address "Tying It All Together" (writing introductions and conclusions) and "Entering the Conversation in Specific Genres" (such as literary analysis, scientific writing, and public discussions). The final chapters address the underappreciated art of “metacommentary” – the act of explaining your own argument to your readers using phrases like “In other words…”, “What I mean to say is…”, or “My point is not that… but rather…”. This self-reflexive move ensures that readers never misunderstand your intent.

Why They Say I Say Has Endured

Since its debut, **They Say I Say by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein**has been adopted by thousands of colleges and high schools. Its longevity can be attributed to its practicality. It is not a theoretical treatise on rhetoric; it is a hands-on manual with exercises and examples. Students see immediate improvement in their

writing because they have a concrete set of tools to deploy. Moreover, the book is surprisingly accessible. The authors write in a conversational, often humorous tone, avoiding jargon and pretension. They frequently use student essays as examples, showing both flawed and improved versions. This transparency helps demystify the grading process and gives readers a clear sense of what professors are looking for.

Another reason for its success is its adaptability. While primarily designed for first-year composition courses, the principles of **They Say I Say by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein**apply equally to persuasive essays in political science, lab reports in biology, or even opinion pieces in a newspaper. Any genre that requires a writer to take a stance in response to others can benefit from the “they say / I say” framework. In fact, the authors have published subsequent editions that include chapters on writing in the sciences and on digital communication, proving that the model scales across disciplines.

Criticisms and Limitations

No book is without its critics. Some educators argue that the heavy template approach can lead to robotic, overly cautious writing. Students might become so focused on fitting their argument into a “however, therefore” structure that they lose their authentic voice. Others contend that the book’s model assumes a very Western, confrontational style of argumentation, where the goal is to defeat an opponent through logical refutation. In more collectivist or harmony-oriented cultures, the direct “I disagree” stance might feel inappropriate. Graff and Birkenstein have acknowledged these critiques in later editions by including templates for “agreeing but with a difference” and for entering conversations more subtly. Nevertheless, critics maintain that the book’s underlying ethos is inherently adversarial.

Additionally, some advanced writers may find the book too basic. If you are already comfortable with framing arguments and incorporating counterpoints, the templates can feel condescending. However, even seasoned writers have found value in the metacommentary chapter, as self-explanation is a skill many professionals neglect. The book is best viewed as a scaffold: a temporary support system meant to be dismantled as the writer gains confidence and fluency.

How to Use They Say I Say in Your Own Writing

If you are new to the book, the best way to start is by choosing one or two templates and deliberately inserting them into your next essay. For example, if you are writing a literature paper, begin your introduction with a “they say” statement: “Many critics have interpreted the ending of The Great Gatsby as a celebration of the American Dream. However, I will argue that Fitzgerald actually subverts this dream by showing its ultimate emptiness.” Then, as you write each body paragraph, ensure that every point you make is tied back to a “they say” you introduced earlier. This will prevent your essay from becoming a list of unrelated observations.

Another practical tip is to read your own drafts and highlight every sentence that states an opinion. Underneath each opinion, ask yourself: “Who says the opposite? What assumption am I challenging?” If you cannot answer those questions, your argument might be floating without an anchor. Go back to the book and use a template to explicitly identify the “they say” your “I say” is responding to.

Finally, use the book as a revision tool. After writing a draft, open a copy of **They Say I Say by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein**and compare your transitions, quotations, and conclusions to the templates provided. You will often discover that your essay lacks “voice markers” (phrases that indicate your stance) or that your quotations are “hit-and-run” (inserted without explanation). The book provides straightforward remedies for these common pitfalls.

Conclusion

They Say I Say by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkensteinhas earned its place as a modern classic in writing instruction because it solves a fundamental problem: students often know what they want to say, but they do not

know how to say it in a way that feels scholarly and engaged. By turning writing into a conversation, the book reduces anxiety and provides a clear path to better arguments. Whether you are a struggling freshman or a professional looking to refine your persuasive skills, the “they say / I say” model offers a reliable framework that respects the intelligence of both the writer and the reader. It teaches us that good writing is not about being right; it is about being in dialogue. And that is a lesson worth learning.

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