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They Say I Say Template

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Mastering the Art of Persuasion: A Deep Dive into the They Say I Say Template

Have you ever stared at a blank page, wondering how to start your academic essay or persuasive article? Or perhaps you have written a piece that seemed solid, only to receive feedback that it lacked a clear argument or failed to engage with opposing views. If so, you are not alone. One of the most common challenges in writing is moving beyond simply stating your own opinion and instead entering an ongoing conversation with other thinkers. This is precisely where the **They Say I Say template**comes into play. Developed by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein in their influential book, this framework provides a powerful, structured method for constructing arguments that are both responsive and persuasive. It is not about filling in blanks robotically; it is about internalizing the fundamental moves of critical thinking and academic dialogue.

At its core, the **They Say I Say template**rests on a simple yet profound insight: good argumentative writing is a response to what others have said. Before you can assert your own view, you must first listen to, summarize, and engage with the existing conversation. This approach transforms writing from a monologue into a dialogue. In this article, we will explore what this template is, why it works so effectively, how to apply it across different writing contexts, and how to avoid common pitfalls. Whether you are a student, a professional writer, or someone looking to sharpen your persuasive skills, mastering this technique will elevate your writing and help you enter any intellectual discussion with confidence.

What Exactly Is the They Say I Say Template?

The **They Say I Say template**is a collection of rhetorical moves and sentence starters designed to help writers structure their arguments. The central move is to first present a summary or acknowledgment of what "they say"—the existing viewpoints, claims, or assumptions in a debate—and then to follow with what "I say"—your own response, correction, or extension of those ideas. This creates a clear "dialectical" structure that shows readers you are not writing in a vacuum but are actively participating in a conversation.

Graz and Birkenstein break down this process into several key components:

- They Say: Summarizing the argument of an opponent, a common belief, or a prevailing perspective. This shows you understand the context.
- I Say: Stating your own argument in response. This could be agreeing, disagreeing, or a combination of both.
- Connecting the Parts: Using transition words and phrases (e.g., "however," "therefore," "in contrast") to link your ideas smoothly.
- Entering the Conversation: Explaining why your argument matters and who cares about it.

The book provides dozens of templates for specific moves: templates for introducing what "they say" ("A common assumption is that...", "Many experts argue that..."), templates for disagreeing ("I disagree with the

view that..."), for agreeing ("I agree that... but I would add that..."), and for synthesizing views ("While I agree with X on this point, I cannot accept their conclusion that..."). The beauty is that these templates are not rigid formulas but flexible starting points that encourage critical thinking.

Why the They Say I Say Template Is So Effective

Many writers, especially beginners, tend to jump straight into their own opinions without laying any groundwork. This approach often leaves readers confused or unconvinced because they do not understand the context or why the writer's opinion matters. The **They Say I Say template**solves this by forcing the writer to engage with opposing perspectives first. Here are some of the key reasons this template works so well:

- Clarifies the Stakes: By summarizing what "they say," you immediately establish why your topic is worth discussing. The reader understands the debate and the tension that your argument will address.
- Demonstrates Fairness: When you accurately represent opposing views, you build credibility. You show that you are not ignoring counterarguments but are willing to engage with them honestly.
- Strengthens Your Argument: Anticipating objections and addressing them head-on makes your own position more robust. The "I say" part becomes more persuasive because it is a direct response to a real or assumed challenge.
- Improves Structure: The template provides a natural flow: context (they say) !’ response (I say) !’ elaboration (because...). This makes your essay easy to follow and logically sound.
- Boosts Confidence: Many writers suffer from "blank page syndrome." Having a template to start with reduces anxiety and helps you organize your thoughts quickly.

How to Use the They Say I Say Template: Step-by-Step

To apply this template effectively, follow these practical steps. Let's imagine you are writing an essay arguing that social media has a net positive effect on mental health, despite common criticism.

Before you write your own argument, research what the prevailing or opposing views are. Ask yourself: What do most people believe about social media and mental health? What do critics say? What is the conventional wisdom? In this example, "they say" might be: "Social media is harmful to mental health, causing anxiety, depression, and isolation." You need to summarize this view fairly and accurately. Use template phrases like:

- "Many psychologists argue that..."
- "It is commonly believed that..."
- "A growing body of research suggests that..."

Now, formulate your own position. You don't have to completely disagree. You might agree partially, disagree entirely, or offer a new perspective. For our example, you might say: "While I acknowledge the valid concerns about social media, I argue that when used mindfully, it can actually foster connections and reduce loneliness." Use templates like:

- "However, I disagree with this view because..."
- "I want to suggest a different perspective..."
- "Although I agree that... I would add that..."

Don't just jump from "they say" to "I say" without a logical bridge. Words like "yet," "but," "nevertheless," "in response," or "on the other hand" signal to the reader that you are making a move. For example: "Despite the widespread belief that social media is detrimental, I contend that its effects depend largely on usage patterns."

After presenting your argument, explain the implications. Why should the reader care? For instance, "Understanding that social media can have both positive and negative effects is crucial for developing balanced public health guidelines."

Throughout your essay, you can circle back to other "they say" points. Each new objection you address builds your case. The template is recursive—you can use it multiple times within one paper.

Real-World Examples of the Template in Action

To see how versatile this template is, consider a few different scenarios beyond academic essays:

- Business Proposal: "Many executives believe that remote work reduces productivity. I argue, however, that remote work can increase efficiency when paired with the right collaboration tools. Here's why..."
- Op-Ed: "Critics claim that raising the minimum wage kills jobs. But studies from Seattle and other cities show that moderate increases have minimal impact on employment while lifting workers out of poverty."
- Scientific Paper: "Previous research has focused on the role of genetics in obesity. While genetics are important, I propose that environmental factors, particularly food deserts, play a larger role than previously assumed."

In each case, the writer first acknowledges the existing view before presenting a new analysis. This makes the argument more engaging and credible.

Common Pitfalls to Avoid with the They Say I Say Template

Like any powerful tool, the **They Say I Say template** can be misused. Here are some mistakes to watch out for:

- Straw Man Summaries: If you misrepresent or oversimplify what "they say," your argument will appear weak or dishonest. Always summarize opposing views accurately and charitably.
- Too Much "They Say," Not Enough "I Say": The template is a balance. Some writers spend paragraphs summarizing others and then only briefly state their own position. Your own voice should be prominent.
- Overreliance on Canned Phrases: While templates are helpful, don't use them mechanically. Adapt the language to your own voice and context. Readers can spot robotic writing.
- Ignoring the "So What?": Even if you structure your essay as "they say / I say," you still need to explain why your argument matters. The template is a means to an end, not the end itself.
- Forgetting to Plant Your "Naysayer": A powerful technique is to anticipate objections within your own essay. Use the template to imagine a skeptic ("But someone might argue that...") and then respond to them. This strengthens your argument further.

Adapting the Template for Different Writing Forms

The **They Say I Say template**is not limited to the standard five-paragraph essay. It can be adapted to almost any form of persuasive writing:

- Research Papers: Use the template in the introduction to frame your research question against existing literature. Each section can also follow a mini "they say / I say" pattern.
- Blog Posts: Start by summarizing common misconceptions in your field, then offer your corrective insight. For example, "Many people think that SEO is dead. Actually, it's more important than ever—but it requires a new approach."
- Speeches and Presentations: Open with a statement of what the audience likely believes, then pivot to your new perspective. This creates immediate engagement.
- Proposals and Reports: State the standard solution or status quo ("They say we should cut costs"), then propose your alternative ("I say we should invest in innovation to increase revenue").

Mastering the Art of the "I Say"

While summarizing "they say" is relatively straightforward, crafting a compelling "I say" requires skill. Your response should not just be a personal opinion; it should be a reasoned claim supported by evidence or logic. The templates can help you frame your response effectively:

- To disagree and explain why: "I disagree with this conclusion because the data does not account for..."
- To agree but add a new point: "I agree that the economy is a key factor, but we must also consider cultural attitudes."
- To agree and disagree simultaneously: "While I agree that access to healthcare is critical, I disagree that the current proposal is the best solution."

- To offer a completely new angle: "This debate overlooks a crucial dimension: the role of community organizations."

Remember, the goal is not to win a debate at all costs, but to advance understanding. Your "I say" should be a genuine contribution to the conversation.

The Deeper Philosophy Behind the Template

Beyond being a writing tool, the **They Say I Say template**embodies a philosophy of intellectual humility and engagement. It teaches us that knowledge is not built in isolation but through dialogue with others. By requiring us to listen before we speak, it fosters critical thinking and respect for opposing views. In an age of echo chambers and polarized discourse, learning how to accurately represent and respond to what "they say" is more important than ever. This template is not just about writing better essays; it is about becoming a better thinker and a more constructive participant in discussions—academic, professional, and

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