

## Entering the Conversation: They Say / I Say\*

**Invention:** finding something to say.

In the invention stage the writer is looking for a starting point—how to come up with what he or she wants to write; the art of finding arguments in any situation and developing material.

Students best discover what they want to say not by think about a subject in a isolation booth, but by reading texts, listening closely to what other writers say, and looking for an opening in which they can enter the conversation. In other words, listening closely to others and summarizing what they have to say can help writers generate their own ideas.

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 deploring the civil rights protests he was leading. The letter—which was written in 1963, while King was in prison for leading a demonstration 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’m 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 hastens to add that “it is even more unfortunate that the city’s white power structure left the Negro community with not other alternative.” 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 (the exigence).

While King identifies the views he is responding to, in some cases those views, rather than being explicitly named, are left to the reader to infer. 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 anyone who thinks that in order to be a good teacher of literature, one must have a grown up liking books.

As you can see from these examples, many writers use the “they say/ I say” format to disagree with others, to challenge standard ways of thinking, and thus to stir up controversy.

### Introduction: The Hook

You can start with what others are saying. Of course, there are many powerful ways to begin. Instead of opening with someone else's views, you can start with an illustrative quote, a revealing statistic or fact, or a relevant anecdote. If you choose one of these formats, however, be sure that it in some way illustrates the view you are addressing or leads you to that view directly, with a minimum of steps.

For example, Christina Nehring, author of a 2004 opinion piece in the *New York Times Book Review*, moves quickly from an anecdote illustrating something she dislikes to her own claim—that book lovers think too highly of themselves.

“I’m a reader!” announced the yellow button. “How about you?” I looked at its bearer, a strapping young guy stalking my town’s Festival of Books. “I bet you’re a reader,” he volunteered, as though we 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 a 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 “Standard Views”

- Americans today tend to believe that\_\_\_\_\_.
- Conventional wisdom has it that \_\_\_\_\_.
- Common sense seems to dictate that\_\_\_\_\_.
- The standard way of thinking about a 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 effective way to perform one of the more common moves that writers make: challenging widely accepted beliefs, placing them on an examining table and analyzing their strengths and weaknesses.

\*From, Graff, Gerald and Cathy Birkenstein. *They Say / I Say.* W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006.

### 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.

- I’ve always believed that \_\_\_\_\_.
- When I was a child, I used to think that \_\_\_\_\_.
- Although I should know better by now, I cannot help thinking that \_\_\_\_\_.
- At the same time that I believe \_\_\_\_\_, I also believe \_\_\_\_\_.

### Templates for Introducing Something Implied or Assumed

Another sophisticated move a writer can make is to summarize a point that is not directly stated in what “they say” but is implied or assumed.

- Although none of them have ever said so directly, my teachers have often given me the impression that \_\_\_\_\_.
- One implication of X’s treatment of \_\_\_\_\_ is that \_\_\_\_\_.
- Although X does not say so directly, she apparently assumes that \_\_\_\_\_.
- While they rarely admit as much, \_\_\_\_\_ often take for granted that \_\_\_\_\_.

These are templates that can really help you to think critically—to look beyond what others say explicitly and to consider their unstated assumptions, as well as the implications of what they say or assume.

### The Art of Quoting

In a way quotes are orphans: words that have been taken from their original contexts and that need to be integrated into their new textual surroundings.

#### 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 are relevant to your work.

#### 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. To adequately frame a quotation, you need to insert it into what is called 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 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, “\_\_\_\_\_.”
- 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 complicated matters further when she writes, “\_\_\_\_\_.”

### Templates for Explaining Quotations

- Basically, X is saying \_\_\_\_\_.
- In other words, X believes \_\_\_\_\_.
- In making this comment, X argues that \_\_\_\_\_.
- X is insisting that \_\_\_\_\_.
- X’s point is that \_\_\_\_\_.
- The essence of X’s argument is that \_\_\_\_\_.