

MIDWESTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

“THEY SAY / I SAY”: THE MOVES THAT MATTER IN ACADEMIC WRITING

A BOOK REVIEW

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE COURSE
DR 30020 DOCTORAL COLLOQUIUM

BY

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Graff, Gerald, Cathy Birkenstien. *They say / I say : the moves that matter in academic writing*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010. 245 pp. \$22.00.

Biographical Information

Gerald Graff is a native of Chicago, IL. He attended the University of Chicago earning a Bachelor of Arts in English. Following that he earned a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) from Stanford University in English and American Literature. Graff later taught at several universities and chaired the English Department for Northwestern University. He served as the Distinguished Service Professor of English and Education at the University of Chicago. Throughout an illustrious career, Graff has written numerous books and served as a program reviewer for many universities.

Cathy Birkenstein, the co-writer of *They say / I say*, is a lecturer at the University of Illinois who has published several essays on writing. Birkenstein is married to Graff, and they have co-authored several works. Together they lecture on the topic of writing to high schools and colleges. As co-writers Graff and Birkenstein possess the academic training, professional skills, and practical experience to appropriately teach about academic writing. This book addresses academic writing as a type of conversation, and two writers working together amplify this concept.

Synopsis

The premise of the book is built on the concept that good writing entails a “conversation” between writer, reader, and other participants, which can be simplified by the use of templates that provide helpful navigation tools for “conversation.” There are three key “highlights” identified that establish the structure of the book (xvii). These highlights mark the importance of “entering a conversation,” “showing students the moves that matter,” and providing “user-

friendly templates to help writers make those moves in their own writing” (xvii). The authors indicated that the final goal for the book is to be a concise and useful academic writing guide for students at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Critical Evaluation

In *They say / I say*, Graff and Birkenstein accomplish their goal. They convincingly establish the point that academic writing is a “conversation” that ought to be “demystified” as writers learn skills and apply templates to develop their material (xxvi). The authors stated, “In our view, then, the best academic writing has one underlying feature: it is deeply engaged in some way with other people’s views” (3). This statement made in the introduction sets a tone for the remainder of the book.

The authors intended to develop a methodical approach to the process of writing in a manner that engages conversationally. Thus, the structure of the book is framed around basic parts of a conversation. The parts of the book are as follows: “Part 1. ‘They Say’, Part 2. ‘I Say’, Part 3. Tying it All Together, Part 4. In Specific Academic Settings” (vii). Though the book consists of four parts, the first three offer a broader explanation for all areas of academic work. In Part 4 the authors explored more specific academic settings. The structure helps the reader grasp the proposed concepts and, therefore, understand the meaning, intent, and importance of writing as “conversation.”

The first chapter emphasizes the importance of recognizing the thesis of the book: writing is about “entering conversation” (20). Therefore, the reader could surmise that no written work occurs in a vacuum of isolated thought. It was suggested that the beginning point for any writing starts as the writer recognizes “what others are saying” (20). When a writer engages conversationally, he is able to take further steps in the writing process. The chapter certainly

establishes a strong premise for the book, while identifying a format for the structure and development of the next chapters.

The logical development of the chapters is excellent. For instance, in “Part 1. ‘They Say’” is supported by three chapters: “They Say, Starting with What Others are Saying,” Her Point Is, The Art of Summarizing,” and “As He Himself Puts it, The Art of Quoting” (ix). The entirety of the book is based on the development of a “conversation” and the elements that enhance that “conversation.” For instance, when “The Art of Summarizing” is considered, the reader learns that a strong summary becomes both a device to hook the reader as well as a means to identify “what larger “conversation” that thesis is responding to” (20). This kind of relationship between “Part” and chapter is maintained in an effectively.

It naturally follows in the structure that “The Art of Quoting” is addressed (42). Graff and Birkenstein asserted that many writers assume that “quotations speak for themselves,” and therefore a two-fold remedy is described: “(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” (43). In other words, the method introduced guides writers to insure meaningful, contextual, and relatable material that flows well in the course of the “conversation” and is likened to a “quotation sandwich.” There is a slice that introduces the thought, the quotation in the middle, and then the slice that closes the thought (46). This chapter on “The Art of Quoting” explained a number of valuable benefits for employing quotations.

The next chapter, “I Say,” identified how every writer has the ability to advance the “conversation” further with his own ideas. Helpful concepts are identified to encourage confidence as writers respond to thoughts in the “conversation.” Specifically, three potential

responses are mentioned. The authors explained, “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 ____’” (57). Such advice is clear and encouraging, and still the authors expanded on each of these responses through the remainder of the chapter. These expansions included both explanations and templates to illustrate and empower the reader.

Two tips were presented to potentially assist every writer in this conversational approach. The first tip identified the importance of considering any objections that might be brought up by a reader. Writers must be honest enough with themselves to identify the alternative views, the “naysayers,” and perspectives that might challenge their ideas (80). Graff and Birkenstein said, “to tell readers what others might say against” them, because doing so will increase “credibility” (79). Every writer is encouraged by advice like this to approach his ideas with self-awareness, transparency, and integrity so he can effectively address his subject and preemptively respond to critics. Insights like this are what make the concepts taught in this book valuable for writers.

In the chapter titled, “Saying Why It Matters” the second tip is addressed to assist writers (92). Graff and Birkenstein claimed, “all writers need to answer the ‘so what?’ and ‘who cares?’ questions up front” (93). They emphasized that answering these questions “hook your readers” and “suggest real-world applications to your claims” (99). This type of information is sound advice for the prospective writer.

At the end of the book there was a practical tool that writers are likely to access frequently: the “Index of Templates,” found on page 221. This index contains all of the “templates” presented throughout the book. The “Index of Templates” is organized according to

the chapter development. Therefore, it is easily accessed and reasonably organized to what was read.

There were several instances that the writers employed examples that illustrated their concepts or points with material from other writers. This reviewer thought that the illustrations were often unsuccessful. The limited context of the illustrations usually prevented a concise, straightforward, and coherent means to communicate the concepts. This required extra time to return and reconsider the illustrations. It would be more effective for them to be placed in more context and in a format that is easily contrasted, such as side by side columns.

Conclusion

It is the opinion of this reviewer that “*They say / I say*” is a book that should be required reading for every college freshman and graduate student. It offered good techniques, taught excellent principles, and encouraged a strong process that can be employed by any writer. The overall thesis is easily understood. The book is developed well structurally, and it provided practical steps for successful writing. It is a valuable tool for writers and, likewise, a useful device to guide classroom discussions. In certain instances, it could be applied to fictional writing. There is little doubt why the use of “*They say / I say*” “continues to set records for adoption by high schools and colleges.”¹

¹ Graff, Gerald. <http://geraldgraff.com>