



#### **Book of the Month 04: *They Say, I Say***

**Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010).**

Reviewed by Cheryldee Huddleston

Writing guides attempt to distinguish themselves by presenting new takes on how to conquer the challenges of academia. The authors of these books, however, sometimes break an essential rule of scholarship: have something original to say. No matter how unique the titles of these books—*Write Your Thesis and Drop Ten Pounds: The Atkins Diet for the Critical Thinker*; or *Productive Scholarship While Waiting to Turn: Thesis Writing for the Walking Dead*—you, the graduate student, may find yourself knee-deep in guides, but still struggling to write your research paper, thesis, or dissertation.

*They Say/I Say* is a happy exception to the chorus of selfsame voices. It presents a fresh and genuinely interesting analogy for the writing of a scholarly argument. The authors keep the gaze of the reader squarely focused on the oral and conversational history of scholarship by framing the writers' goal as "looking for an opening through which they can enter the conversation." This opening epitomizes the book's title: it is what "they" have said about a topic that provokes what the "I" will say about that same topic.

According to Graff and Birkenstein, what helps the writer is to see academic writing as a debate. Academic writing is a series of arguments and counterarguments, essentially one major conflict after another, so that the writer states his or her idea as a response to preceding opinions. The authors assert that every piece of writing is in answer to a "challenge," even if that challenge is only implied. For example, they reference Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream," speech, in which King rebuts a century of racial hatred. One job of the writer is to keep the reader aware of what has provoked the writer. When the writer fully acknowledges and encounters the "argument," what "they say," the writer responds with his or her strongest argument, and best persuades the reader. Academic writing is then approached actively, an exercise through which the writer, according to the authors, attains a further goal, to become an intellectually "cantankerous" thinker: for example, I dispute the idea that it is logically possible to drop ten pounds while sitting at the computer, writing a thesis and devouring a gallon of bacon ice-cream.

In *They Say/I Say*, this concept of "writing as discussion" is accompanied by templates which provide "training wheels" for the writer to develop a variety of approaches to an academic argument: agree—but with a difference; agree and disagree simultaneously; name your naysayers; introduce objections informally; make concessions while standing your ground. The authors, following their own advice, acknowledge those writing instructors who voice concern that templates straitjacket the writer's

voice and creativity. They emphasize a “training wheels” analogy, that templates create a kind of “writing muscle memory” which experienced writers possess, and which will be abandoned once the writer masters their own voice.

Templates for introducing quotations and employing “metacommentary” (telling the reader how to interpret what they’re reading) are included in separate chapters. *They Say/I Say* features chapters on “Formal and Informal Language,” “The Art of Summarizing,” and provides lists of verbs categorized by use (“questioning,” “expressing argument,” “agreement”), which can prove particularly helpful to ESL students.

*They Say/I Say* is conversational in tone, a short, fast read, and will provide you, the graduate student, with a series of “aha!” moments about the way academic writing may be crafted. These moments may be of more lasting help than the templates themselves; however, as every graduate student knows, when writing a research essay at three in the morning, finding an alternative phrase to “The author states:” can be worth its weight in bacon ice-cream.