

# Comp Quickreads

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## Using *They Say/I Say*

### From the "Introduction" to *They Say/I Say*

Burke writes:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.  
— Kenneth Burke,  
*Philosophy of Literary Form*

What we like about this passage is its suggestion that stating an argument and "putting in your oar" can only be done in conversation with others; that we all enter the dynamic world of ideas not as isolated individuals, but as social beings deeply connected to others who have a stake in what we say.

Graff and Birkenstein, *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*

The most recent Composition Conversation focused on using *They Say/I Say* in writing classes. Now in its second edition, *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, is one of the texts recommended by the CSULA Composition Committee for ENGL 101 and ENGL 102.

Graff and Birkenstein use Kenneth Burke's famous metaphor of the "unending conversation" to illustrate the importance of convention in academic discourse. According to the authors of *They Say/I Say*, students have difficulty joining the academic conversation because they lack the language to make the expected argumentative and rhetorical moves. These moves are so common that the language used to express them has become stock language in academic discourse and can literally and productively be represented as fill-in the blank templates. Their book provides over a hundred such templates covering everything from introducing a quote ("According to X, '\_\_\_'") to explaining the consequences of one's ideas ("These conclusions will have significant applications in \_\_\_ as well as in \_\_\_"). Participants generally praised the utility of *They Say/I Say* and offered some suggestions for using the text in a composition class. Concerns, though, were also raised about the use of such "crutches." After all, the five-paragraph essay began as a temporary expedient to help students get started.

Some instructors using *They Say/I Say* assign group presentations on each chapter. One instructor allows students to design their presentation in whatever form they prefer. "Teach the way you would like to be taught," was the advice given to students preparing their presentations. Another instructor requires groups to summarize the

chapter, give examples of the templates from their own writing (or from their reading), and if they are unable to find examples to work with the class to develop examples of the templates in action. One instructor noted that during election season students found many examples of the templates in the public discourse surrounding political campaigns. Finally, to follow-up on the chapter(s) presented, one instructor included questions on subsequent peer reviews that required reviewers to identify templates in the writing of classmates.

Two primary concerns, however, were raised about *They Say/I Say*. First, one participant liked the quasi-meta-rhetorical quality of the text. In making explicit common rhetorical moves, the authors had "succeeded" in reducing rhetoric to a series of formal gestures. The result, however, is a rhetoric text that rarely appeals to rhetoric. Curiously the authors don't always refer to the rhetorical purpose of a rhetorical move, or do so only implicitly. The absence (or implicitness) of rhetoric in *They Say/I Say* could result in the second concern: that students would take these templates as not temporary aids to future development but as the endpoint of development. Instead of mastering rhetoric students might believe they only need to master the templates. And without the rhetorical training needed to understand how the templates work and to recognize the historic and cultural contingency of these particular templates, how could a student ever progress beyond the mere repetition of these mechanical forms? As is often the case, the answer is education. The templates in *They Say/I Say* might free us of the mechanical details of rhetorical moves but not of the need to teach why some moves are more effective and appropriate than others.