



“They Say/I Say:” A Model for Developing Arguments and Thesis Statements

One of the things students often don’t know is that academic writing values a model of communication where one considers alternative voices and viewpoints. In fact, academic writing is usually a reaction to other points of view and it presents those points of view even as it responds to them. Here, for example, are early and improved drafts of a thesis that incorporates the perspectives of both the writer and of those to whom the writer is responding:

Rough Draft:

They say, “Wal-Mart is the root of all corporate evil.” **I say** that Wal-Mart provides good products cheaply to enhance the lives of American consumers.

Improved Version:

Wal-Mart critics argue that the company is a greedy mega-corporation, but a fairer view recognizes that Wal-Mart is an essential and helpful leader in the American consumer marketplace.

In the improved version, the “they say” has become more specific, “Wal-Mart critics,” while the “I say” has been replaced with the phrase “a fairer view recognizes.”

*Notice that what **they** say comes before what **I** say since what I am saying is in response to them. Also, you can see that this **they say/I say** model gives a clear sense of what the body of the essay will be about. Clearly, the essay will need to spend some time summarizing the position of Wal-Mart critics before going into its main argument which refutes them.*

This “**They Say/I say**” approach is most helpful for persuasive papers and argumentative research papers (papers where you are asked to take a position rather than just summarize what experts say about something).

As you construct different arguments, the basic template of “**They say/I say**” can be modified literally hundreds of ways. Any formulation is fair game so long as it maintains the model of presenting different voices in a written discussion and making clear the distinction between these voices and yours:

Author X contradicts herself. At the same time that she argues _____, she also implies _____.

Author Y argues _____, and I agree because _____.

Author Z’s argument that _____ is supported by new research showing that _____.

He claims that _____, but I have mixed feelings about it. On the one hand, I agree that _____. On the other hand, I still insist that _____.

So long as your template presents two or more voices, you can feel free to experiment with some of your own. Notice in the last example how you can use the template to both agree and disagree with another while still being clear and taking a firm stand. The next time you are writing a persuasive paper (or an academic research paper), try to use one of these templates to help you organize and clarify your position. You will find it can take a lot of the guesswork out of writing your paper. A Writing Center tutor can also help you adopt your particular assignment to an appropriate template.

What about "I"?

Many students wonder whether they should use the pronoun "I" (that is, the first person) or not. This can vary from instructor to instructor and your best bet is to check with the professor. However, you will want to know that there are many ways to state your own opinion without actually using the pronoun "I." Here are some examples:

X is right that the US economy is transferring more and more of its wealth to the upper class.

The evidence shows that _____.

Y's assertion that the new health care plan is a "government take over of health care" is at odds with the key provisions of the new legislation.

Anyone familiar with the traffic problems of LA should agree that _____.

All of these templates—and many more—allow you to make a clear statement of your point of view without using "I." Even if your professor allows the use of the first person, it's a good idea to use a mix of these templates and the first person to avoid the monotony of repeating over and over "I think," "I believe," etc.

The information in this handout was borrowed, adapted and greatly condensed from *They Say, I Say: the Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, W. W. Norton, 2010. This is an excellent textbook for anyone writing at the college level in any course and the Writing Center heartily recommends it.