REVIEWS

Graff, Gerald, Cathy Birkenstein, and Russel Durst. *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2009.

Reviewed by Jennie Nelson

I first encountered *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* in its earlier, shorter version. It was in a pile of books on my office floor, the kind of pile that I imagine most (often annoyed) WPA's (Writing Program Administrators) have as they unpack and stack all the sample textbooks sent by hopeful publishers. Once I finally worked my way through this stack, I was drawn to *They Say/I Say* because of its small size and brevity. As I skimmed it, I was surprised to find that it was comprised largely of sentences with a multitude of X's and fill-in-the-blank lines. For example, here is one template that caught my attention: "Whereas X provides ample evidence that _____, Y and Z's research on _____ and _____ convinces me that _____ instead" (60). Whew! I could not imagine myself using such a complex sentence to situate my response to another author's ideas. I paged through the preface to get a quick sense of the authors' goals, which entailed, as far as I could discern, giving students templates to help them make the same kinds of rhetorical moves commonly found in writing in the academy. I must admit that I was skeptical about their enterprise, not because I did not believe that students need to learn how to write themselves into the academy, as David Bartholomae has claimed, but because the templates appeared to me (in my cursory review) to be limiting and possibly reductive. I agreed with the comment a colleague shared with me after he reviewed the book: "[I] worry a little about the sustained emphasis on the writing templates in *They Say/I Say*. How little would it take for students–and some instructors–to focus on form at the expense of the content–to treat the templates like a Mad Lib that just has to be completed?" Realistically, I could see the value of

giving students generative phrases that would help them to see that college writing is fundamentally a response to other people's texts or ideas. I was reminded of the advice in "Inventing the University," where Bartholomae discusses how one of his professors "told us that whenever we were stuck for something to say, we should use the following as a 'machine' for producing a paper: 'While most readers of_____have said_____, a close and careful reading shows that _____'" (153). This rhetorical 'machine' has always struck me as useful, and I make a point to draw graduate students' attention to it when we read Bartholomae's much-anthologized essay.

When I sat down and carefully read the longer 2009 edition of *They Say/I Say*, much of my skepticism disappeared. Though I still value my colleague's concerns, I am convinced that the text is valuable and useful; in fact, I wish that I had had this book when I was a freshman English major and even when I was a beginning graduate student. The authors do indeed present "the moves that matter in academic writing" as their subtitle claims. What this textbook offers that others don't are concrete strategies or templates for developing and presenting students' ideas using the techniques that academic insiders use. The authors' key claim, that academic (and civic) writing is fundamentally a response to other people's texts or ideas, is compelling and carefully laid out in their book.

In what follows, I present a summary of the authors' claims about the value of their approach and then provide an overview of the book's sections and related chapters. I also point out the concepts that, as a teacher of first-year writing for over twenty-five years, I find especially useful. In their preface, the authors claim that the They Say/I Say template "represents the deep, underlying structure, the internal DNA as it were, of all effective argument" (xiv). Most practitioners and scholars in the field of composition studies would agree with this claim. Given the social-epistemic turn in our field, the notion that effective arguments are always situated in response to other people's ideas has become a commonplace. What this book offers is a way to bring this

commonplace to life, to help students to successfully add their ideas to the ongoing discussion in a variety of situations. The authors explain that their templates "help students focus on the rhetorical patterns that are key to academic success but often pass under the classroom radar" (xiii). As a WPA who trains and mentors approximately twenty-five new TA's a year, I can attest that they are right; these key rhetorical moves most often do pass under the classroom radar because so many of us who teach first-year writing have internalized them, and thus this knowledge has become tacit and unavailable to us as teachers. The true value of *They Say/I Say* is that it makes this tacit knowledge visible for students and allows them to try out the tricks of the trade while at the same time helping them to understand how and why these rhetorical moves can be empowering.

In their preface, aimed at teachers, the authors describe three kinds of learning encouraged by the They Say/I Say templates. First, the model demystifies academic writing by showing students that all writing is situated, part of an ongoing conversation, and that they need to learn how to summarize what others say and then to locate their own ideas in response. Second, they argue that the templates are generative, that they can be a tool for invention because they invite students to listen closely to what other writers claim and, in doing so, discover what they believe as a result of placing their own views next to the views of other writers. Third, they believe that the They Say/I Say rubric can improve students' critical reading skills because they learn to identify many of the key rhetorical moves that other writers make to frame and develop their arguments. The second half of the textbook contains a range of readings that invite this kind of analysis, including research-based arguments and essays focusing on issues in popular culture.

Their Introduction for students, "Entering the Conversation," extends some of the points raised in the preface; for example, they claim that their goal goes beyond helping students to become better writers. It involves allowing them to take on the role of a critical thinker "who . . . can participate in the debates and

conversations of [their] world in an active and empowered way" (12). Most importantly, they also anticipate and address their readers' possible objection that templates will stifle creativity, arguing instead that "creativity and originality lie not in the avoidance of established forms, but in the imaginative use of them" (11). Students are also reminded that templates do not limit the content of their writing; rather they offer concrete, sophisticated ways to present their own ideas in relation to those of others. One of the strengths of this book is its tone; the authors speak informally to students, sharing humorous stories about teachers they have known and the struggles of students they have worked with. They use "you" and "we" in welcoming ways that invite students to join them in discovering how to become card-holding members of the academic community.

Once the authors establish the benefits of the template approach, they organize their book into four sections: 1) They Say/I Say, 2) I Say, 3) Tying it All Together, and 4) Entering the Conversation. Each section contains chapters with templates for achieving particular rhetorical goals.

I particularly like their discussion of the need to frame every quotation, not only because their advice is accessible, but also because it illustrates the welcoming tone of the book. They repeat the point that most writing teachers find themselves repeating over and over: "quotations do not speak for themselves" (41). Then they share a humorous metaphor that a graduate teaching assistant uses for describing dangling quotations: he "calls these 'hit-and-run' quotations, likening them to car accidents in which the driver speeds away and avoids taking responsibility for the dent in your fender or the smashed taillights" (41). To help students avoid being hit-and-run quoters, they advise them to put a quote into a "quotation sandwich," another accessible metaphor. The top slice of bread introduces the quote; here they provide templates such as "According to X _____"; "In her book X maintains that _____" (43). The bottom slice explains the quote: possible templates for this move include "In other words, X believes _____; "The essence of X's argument is that

_____" (44). I especially like the sense of authority that this last template gives the writer; that use of the word "essence" implies careful reading and analysis.

I believe that section two, "I Say," covers rhetorical moves that are essential to developing complex, original writing. This section contains four chapters: 1) Three Ways to Respond, 2) Distinguishing What You Say from What They Say, 3) Planting a Naysayer in Your Text, and 4) Saying Why It Matters. I will focus on the first and fourth chapters in this section, as I find them especially useful for teachers of first-year writing.

The first chapter, "Three Ways to Respond," offers students three ways to respond to other writers' ideas: agreeing, disagreeing, or a combination of both. Their templates in this chapter are clearly generative, forcing students to include reasons for their positions. Their templates for "Disagreeing, With Reasons" include the following: "I think X is mistaken because she overlooks_____"; "I disagree with X's view that_____because, as recent research has shown, _____" (55). Recognizing that students often find it difficult to sustain an argument when they agree with a writer's ideas, the authors tackle this common problem by advising students to "agree–but with a difference" (56). The templates for agreeing require students to bring something new to the discussion: "I agree that_____, a point that needs emphasizing since so many people believe _____"; "I agree that _____ because my experience _____ confirms it" (57). In their discussion about ways to both agree and disagree, they admit (as I think most teachers would) that this option is their favorite. Students who choose this response can use templates such as, "Although I agree with X up to a point, I cannot accept his overall conclusion that _____"; (60) "My feelings on the issue are mixed. I do support X's position that_____, but I find Y's argument about _____and Z's research on_____ to be equally persuasive" (61). They also recognize that some students are uncomfortable expressing ambivalence because they fear that they will come across as "evasive, wishy-washy, or unsure of

themselves" (61). They successfully challenge this view, I believe, when they claim that "expressing ambivalent feelings can serve to demonstrate deep sophistication as a writer" (61). By employing this kind of rhetorical move, the student writer acknowledges that real, open-ended problems do not have simple answers, that there are many stakeholders involved in any issue, and in recognizing this complexity, the writer is able to produce a sophisticated, nuanced argument.

The fourth chapter in this section, "So What? Who Cares? Saying Why It Matters," is one of the most important chapters in the book. Failure to address these two questions can often lead students to write summaries when the assignment calls for analysis or to produce "data dumps" rather than source-based arguments. The authors begin this chapter with the kinds of broad statements that teachers often read in first-year writers' essays. These generalizations masquerade as thesis statements: "Baseball is the national pastime"; "Bernini was the best sculptor of the baroque period" (88). As they point out, a reader's typical response to these statements is "So what? Who cares?" This chapter provides templates that fulfill a reader's need to know who the possible stakeholders are and what is at stake. To answer the important "So What?" question, they suggest that writers use templates such as "Ultimately, what is at stake here is _____"; "Although X may seem trivial, it is in fact crucial in terms of today's concern over _____" (94). For the "Who Cares?" question they recommend templates such as, "These findings challenge the work of earlier researchers, who tended to assume that_____"(91).

Section three, "Tying it All Together" also covers essential moves that effective writers make. It contains three chapters: 1) Connecting the Parts, 2) Academic Writing Doesn't Mean Setting Aside Your Own Voice, and 3) The Art of Commentary. In the first chapter, “Tying it All Together,” they claim that "the best compositions establish a sense of momentum and direction by making explicit connections among their different parts, so that what is said in one sentence (or paragraph) not only sets up what is

to come but is clearly informed by what has already been said" (103). This description represents what most students refer to as "flow" in writing. When asking for help on a draft, I often have students ask me to help them to make their essays flow better. Now I can refer them to this chapter, which demonstrates concrete ways to make connections for readers within a text. I like how they include additional advice beyond telling students to use transition terms–the only suggestion that most textbooks offer. In addition to this familiar advice, they explain to students that they can create coherent texts by "adding pointing words (like 'this' or 'such'); using certain key terms and phrases throughout your entire text; and repeating yourself, but with a difference" (104). The end of this chapter contains helpful exercises so that students can apply these new concepts.

This is another strength of the book; each chapter ends with exercises that invite students to create their own sentences using certain templates or to use specific rhetorical moves presented in the chapter to analyze an essay or passage. For example, at the end of the chapter on connecting all the parts, students are asked to underline all of the connecting devices in a passage from the conclusion of a PhD dissertation. I like that they include a variety of texts for students to read and analyze, from "Being Fat is Okay," published in *Jewish World Review* to "What's the Matter with Kids Today?" published in *Salon*. Each reading is followed by a list of questions titled "Joining the Conversation."

The questions often ask students to refer back to key concepts; for example, at the end of one essay, students are asked to respond to this question: "So who cares? Does [the author] make clear to her readers why this topic matters? What else could she say to make this point more effectively?" These questions model the same kinds of questions that students should ask about their own and peers' writing.

The third chapter in this section on "The Art of Metacommentary" is one that I will return to for my own writing. They define metacommentary as "a way of commenting on your claims and telling readers how–and how *not*–to think about them"

(123). This chapter contains templates for introducing commentary to achieve different rhetorical goals: 1) "to ward off potential misunderstandings; 2) to alert readers to an elaboration or previous idea; 3) to provide readers with a roadmap to your text; 4) to move from a general claim to a specific example; 5) to indicate that a claim is especially important or less important; 6) to help you anticipate and respond to objection; 7) to guide readers to your most general point" (128-130). This kind of metacommentary supplies the language that connects the various parts of a successful argument; it serves as the connecting tissue that makes an argument a whole, living, responsive entity in a reader's mind.

Their discussion of voice and academic writing is sensible and clear. Using another accessible metaphor, they claim that "although it may have been in the past, academic writing today is no longer the linguistic equivalent of a black-tie affair" (121). They give examples of how published scholars combine academic and colloquial styles, but most importantly, they end their discussion with the warning that when deciding on style or voice, the writer's judgment should always depend on audience and purpose.

Their final section, "Entering the Conversation," offers brief but essential discussions about "Entering Class Discussions" and "Reading for the Conversation." This is a chapter that I would assign early in the term. Their examples for taking part in class discussions model the kind of thoughtful, civil responses we value from students. Their discussion of reading for the conversation embodies many of the writerly moves covered in the previous three sections; however, it complicates students' notions about reading in important ways. They argue that "the move from reading for the author's argument in isolation to reading for how the author's argument is in dialogue with the arguments of others helps everyone become active critical readers rather than passive recipients of knowledge . . . . On some level, reading for the conversation is more rigorous, sophisticated, and demanding than for what one author says" (139-140). In the rest of the chapter,

they lead students through the intellectual tasks involved in reading not only for the conversation, but also reading difficult texts, such as when the writer's position is unstated. This final section brings the They Say/I Say model to the forefront, showing how it plays out in classrooms and in authors' texts every day.

I would be remiss if I did not recognize the reservations a colleague shared with me, reservations that I think anyone using this book should consider. He wrote to me in an email, explaining that he

> hopes that instructors who use the book supplement it with some in-depth discussions about the many ways in which ideas can be 'developed,' some of which rely heavily on learning certain syntactic moves, but others of which may not. A reflective attitude toward who gets to make new knowledge and in what ways, and why, when, and where is hard to come by in a template approach, even one as nuanced as that of the authors of *They Say/I Say*.

This argument about the situatedness of writing and the authority required to add something new to the conversation is not ignored in *They Say/I Say*, but it may be implied rather than addressed openly. I believe that the authors' primary goal is, in fact, to allow students to see how certain rhetorical moves can give them the ability and authority to develop and add their own views to a range of conversations, but primarily academic ones. At the end of the preface, the authors contend that the template "approach to writing has an ethical dimension: it asks students not simply to keep proving and reasserting what they already believe, but to stretch what they believe by putting it up against the beliefs of our increasingly diverse, global society, to engage in the reciprocal exchange that characterizes true democracy" (xx). They call this "engaging the voice of the other," and I believe that by asking our students to do just this, they will come to understand more about how, why, when, and where knowledge is produced and what part they themselves might play in this enterprise.

Work Cited

Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." *When a Writer Can't Write*. Ed. Mike Rose. New York: Guilford Press, 1985. 134-165. Print.