

They say _____; I say _____. – Academic Argumentative Writing

The ideas represented here are based on the book “*They Say; I Say*”–*The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein Graff. I highly recommend that book. In fact, I recommend it so much you may borrow the writing center’s copy if you promise to return it.

Them v.s. You: Checking the Value of Your Argument

The first move you need to make rhetorically is to determine whether or not you actually have an argument. Are you examining something over which there has been much debate or are you just choosing to create disagreement when it does not exist in the first place? You need to make sure, for your readers’ sake as well as your own, to examine and take a stance on an issue about which there are multiple perspectives with which you can engage.

Them v.s. You: Clarifying Position

You must articulate what your stance is as well as those stances with which you disagree. This strategy is called “entering the conversation” about a given topic and is a key rhetorical move. If you do not clarify with whom you are speaking, however, your readers will be confused about what conversation you are entering. Therefore, always make sure to identify your position as well as that of others.

Remember, however, that there are more than two sides to an argument. Do your homework, look at the varying perspectives and really share what more than one opponent to your stance is articulating so you can fully explain where your disagreement arises.

Them v.s. You: Summarizing Ideas

It is important to express your point (I say) but also the points of others (they say). You must do so, however, in a way that “they” would recognize their points. Therefore, you cannot twist their argument, ignore key points of their analysis, or do any of a million other things that allow you to point to weaknesses that aren’t actually there. You must accurately portray the ideas with which you disagree as well as those with which you agree.

Them v.s. You: Structuring the Essay

If you’re looking for a well-known example of a structured “They say; I say” argument, see Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” in which he responds to other clergy members who did not approve of his involvement in the civil rights movement.

Begin with a clear explanation of and background on what ideas you have and what ideas others are sharing. Make sure to indicate in your thesis your stance. As you move through your paper, refer back to what others have said and articulate where you agree and disagree. You need to remind your audience what ideas, notions, and claims made by others you are responding to and what ideas, notions, and claims you have that are uniquely your own in response. As you go throughout, be sure to indicate whose points you are responding to, what their points are, and what your responses to those points are. This structure maintains order in your paper and allows you to fully express each idea you want to share.

Them v.s. You: Final Tips

- It is okay to summarize. In fact, you need to in order to fully articulate what the argument you’re making entails.
- You must cite your sources in writing and in parentheticals. It is important to articulate WHO made the argument, WHERE they made the argument, and WHAT their credibility is whether or not you agree with them. Otherwise, readers will wonder why you included them, the point, etc. and you will ruin your own credibility.
- Finally, conclude your essay by summarizing your key points and making sure readers know why yours is a valuable argument to have and read about.