ONE

"THEY SAY"

Starting with What Others Are Saying

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NOT LONG AGO we attended a talk at an academic conference where the speaker's central claim seemed to be that a certain sociologist—call him Dr. X—had done very good work in a number of areas of the discipline. The speaker proceeded to illustrate his thesis by referring extensively and in great detail to various books and articles by Dr. X and by quoting long passages from them. The speaker was obviously both learned and impassioned, but as we listened to his talk, we found ourselves somewhat puzzled: the argument—that Dr. X's work was very important—was clear enough, but why did the speaker need to make it in the first place? Did anyone dispute it? Were there commentators in the field who had argued against X's work or challenged its value? Was the speaker's interpretation of what X had done somehow novel or revolutionary? Since the speaker

gave no hint of an answer to any of these questions, we could only wonder why he was going on and on about X. It was only after the speaker finished and took questions from the audience that we got a clue: in response to one questioner, he referred to several critics who had vigorously questioned Dr. X's ideas and convinced many sociologists that Dr. X's work was unsound.

> The hypothetical audience in the figure on p. 5 reacts similarly.

This story illustrates an important lesson: that to give writing the most important thing of all—namely, a point—writers need to indicate clearly not only what their thesis is but also what larger conversation that thesis is responding to. Because our speaker failed to mention what others had said about Dr. X's work, he left his audience unsure about why he felt the need to say what he was saying. Perhaps the point was clear to other sociologists in the audience who were more familiar with the debates over Dr. X's work than we were. But even they, we bet, would have understood the speaker's point better if he'd sketched in some of the larger conversation his own claims were a part of and reminded the audience about what "they say."

This story also illustrates an important lesson about the *order* in which things are said: to keep an audience engaged, writers need to explain what they are responding to—either before offering that response or, at least, very early in the discussion. Delaying this explanation for more than one or two paragraphs in a very short essay or blog entry, three or four pages in a longer work, or more than ten or so pages in a book reverses the natural order in which readers process material—and in which writers think and develop ideas. After all, it seems very unlikely that our conference speaker first developed his defense of Dr. X and only later came across Dr. X's critics. As someone knowledgeable in his field, the speaker surely encountered the criticisms first and only then was compelled to respond and, as he saw it, set the record straight.

Therefore, when it comes to constructing an argument (whether orally or in writing), we offer you the following advice: remember that you are entering a conversation and therefore need to start with "what others are saying," as the title of this chapter recommends, and then introduce your own ideas as a response. Specifically, we suggest that you summarize what "they say" as soon as you can in your text and remind readers of it at strategic points as your text unfolds. Though it's true that not all texts follow this practice, we think it's important for all writers to master it before they depart from it.

This is not to say that you must start with a detailed list of everyone who has written on your subject before you offer your own ideas. Had our conference speaker gone to the opposite extreme and spent most of his talk summarizing Dr. X's critics with no hint of what he himself had to say, the audience probably would have had the same frustrated "why is he going on like this?" reaction. What we suggest, then, is that as soon as possible you state your own position and the one it's responding to *together* , and that you think of the two as a unit. It is generally best to summarize the ideas you're responding to briefly, at the start of your text, and to delay detailed elaboration until later. The point is to give your readers a quick preview of what is motivating your argument, not to drown them in details right away.

Starting with a summary of others' views may seem to contradict the common advice that writers should lead with their own thesis or claim. Although we agree that you shouldn't keep readers in suspense too long about your central argument, we also believe that you need to present that argument as part of some larger conversation, indicating something about the arguments of others that you are supporting, opposing, amending, complicating, or qualifying. One added benefit of summarizing others' views as soon as you can: you let those others do some of the work of framing and clarifying the issue you're writing about.

Consider, for example, how George Orwell starts his famous essay "Politics and the English Language" with what others are saying:

> Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent and our language—so the argument runs—must inevitably share in the general collapse. . . .
>
> [But] the process is reversible. Modern English . . . is full of bad habits . . . which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble.

G EORGE O RWELL , "Politics and the English Language"

Orwell is basically saying, "Most people assume that we cannot do anything about the bad state of the English language. But I say we can."

Of course, there are many other powerful ways to begin. Instead of opening with someone else's views, you could start with an illustrative quotation, a revealing fact or statistic, or—as we do in this chapter—a relevant anecdote. If you choose one of these formats, however, be sure that it in some way illustrates the view

you're addressing or leads you to that view directly, with a minimum of steps.

In opening this chapter, for example, we devote the first paragraph to an anecdote about the conference speaker and then move quickly at the start of the second paragraph to the misconception about writing exemplified by the speaker. In the following opening, from an opinion piece in the *New York Times Book Review* , Christina Nehring also moves quickly from an anecdote illustrating something she dislikes to her own claim—that book lovers think too highly of themselves:

> "I'm a reader!" announced the yellow button. "How about you?" I looked at its bearer, a strapping young guy stalking my town's Festival of Books. "I'll bet you're a reader," he volunteered, as though we were two geniuses well met. "No," I replied. "Absolutely not," I wanted to yell, and fling my Barnes & Noble bag at his feet. Instead, I mumbled something apologetic and melted into the crowd.
>
> There's a new piety in the air: the self-congratulation of book lovers.
>
> C HRISTINA N EHRING , "Books Make You a Boring Person"

Nehring's anecdote is really a kind of "they say": book lovers keep telling themselves how great they are.

TEMPLATES FOR INTRODUCING WHAT "THEY SAY"

There are lots of conventional ways to introduce what others are saying. Here are some standard templates that we would have recommended to our conference speaker:

- **A number of sociologists have recently suggested <u>that X's work has several fundamental problems</u> .**
- **It has become common today to dismiss _____ .**
- **In their recent work, Y and Z have offered harsh critiques of _____ for _____ .**

TEMPLATES FOR INTRODUCING "STANDARD VIEWS"

The following templates can help you make what we call the "standard view" move, in which you introduce a view that has become so widely accepted that by now it is essentially the conventional way of thinking about a topic:

- **Americans have always believed that <u>individual effort can triumph over circumstances</u> .**
- **Conventional wisdom has it that _____ .**

- **Common sense seems to dictate that _____ .**
- **The standard way of thinking about topic X has it that _____ .**
- **It is often said that _____ .**
- **My whole life I have heard it said that _____ .**
- **You would think that _____ .**
- **Many people assume that _____ .**

These templates are popular because they provide a quick and efficient way to perform one of the most common moves that writers make: challenging widely accepted beliefs, placing them on the examining table, and analyzing their strengths and weaknesses.

TEMPLATES FOR MAKING WHAT "THEY SAY" SOMETHING *YOU* SAY

Another way to introduce the views you're responding to is to present them as your own. That is, the "they say" that you respond to need not be a view held by others; it can be one that you yourself once held or one that you are ambivalent about:

- **I've always believed that <u>museums are boring</u> .**
- **When I was a child, I used to think that _____ .**
- **Although I should know better by now, I cannot help thinking that _____ .**

- **At the same time that I believe _____ , I also believe _____ .**

TEMPLATES FOR INTRODUCING SOMETHING IMPLIED OR ASSUMED

Another sophisticated move a writer can make is to summarize a point that is not directly stated in what "they say" but is implied or assumed:

- **Although none of them have ever said so directly, my teachers have often given me the impression that <u>education will open doors</u> .**
- **One implication of X's treatment of _____ is that _____ .**
- **Although X does not say so directly, she apparently assumes that _____ .**
- **While they rarely admit as much, _____ often take for granted that _____ .**

These are templates that can help you think analytically—to look beyond what others say explicitly and to consider their unstated assumptions, as well as the implications of their views.

TEMPLATES FOR INTRODUCING AN ONGOING DEBATE

Sometimes you'll want to open by summarizing a debate that presents two or more views. This kind of opening demonstrates your awareness that there are conflicting ways to look at your subject, the clear mark of someone who knows the subject and therefore is likely to be a reliable, trustworthy guide. Furthermore, opening with a summary of a debate can help you explore the issue you are writing about before declaring your own view. In this way, you can use the writing process itself to help you discover where you stand instead of having to commit to a position before you are ready to do so.

Here is a basic template for opening with a debate:

- **In discussions of X, one controversial issue has been _____ . On the one hand, _____ argues _____ . On the other hand, _____ contends _____ . Others even maintain _____ . My own view is _____ .**

The cognitive scientist Mark Aronoff uses this kind of template in an essay on the workings of the human brain:

> Theories of how the mind/brain works have been dominated for centuries by two opposing views. One, rationalism, sees the human mind as coming into this world more or less fully formed—preprogrammed, in modern terms. The other, empiricism, sees the mind of the newborn as largely unstructured, a blank slate.

M ARK A RONOFF , "Washington Sleeped Here"

A student writer, Michaela Cullington, uses a version of this template near the beginning of an essay to frame a debate over online writing abbreviations like "LOL" ("laughing out loud") and to indicate her own position in this debate:

> Some people believe that using these abbreviations is hindering the writing abilities of students, and others argue that texting is actually having a positive effect on writing. In fact, it seems likely that texting has no significant effect on student writing.

M ICHAELA C ULLINGTON , "Does Texting Affect Writing?"

Another way to open with a debate involves starting with a proposition many people agree with in order to highlight the point(s) on which they ultimately disagree:

- **When it comes to the topic of _____ , most of us will readily agree that _____ . Where this agreement usually ends, however, is on the question of _____ . Whereas some are convinced that _____ , others maintain that _____ .**

The political writer Thomas Frank uses a variation on this move:

That we are a nation divided is an almost universal lament of this bitter election year. However, the exact property that divides us—elemental though it is said to be—remains a matter of some controversy.

T HOMAS F RANK , "American Psyche"

KEEP WHAT "THEY SAY" IN VIEW

We can't urge you too strongly to keep in mind what "they say" as you move through the rest of your text. After summarizing the ideas you are responding to at the outset, it's very important to continue to keep those ideas in view. Readers won't be able to follow your unfolding response, much less any complications you may offer, unless you keep reminding them what claims you are responding to.

In other words, even when presenting your own claims, you should keep returning to the motivating "they say." The longer and more complicated your text, the greater the chance that readers will forget what ideas originally motivated it—no matter how clearly you lay them out at the beginning. At strategic moments throughout your text, we recommend that you include what we call "return sentences." Here is an example:

- **In conclusion, then, as I suggested earlier, defenders of _____ can't have it both ways. Their assertion that**

_____ is contradicted by their claim that _____ .

We ourselves use such return sentences at every opportunity in this book to remind you of the view of writing that our book questions—that good writing means making true or smart or logical statements about a given subject with little or no reference to what others say about it.

By reminding readers of the ideas you're responding to, return sentences ensure that your text maintains a sense of mission and urgency from start to finish. In short, they frame your argument as a genuine response to others' views rather than just a set of observations about a given subject. The difference is huge. To be responsive to others and the conversation you're entering, you need to start with what others are saying and continue keeping it in the readers' view.

Exercises

1. Following is a list of topics people have debated. Working by yourself or with a partner, compose a "they say" argument for each of these topics, using any of the templates from this chapter.

   Example:

Self-driving vehicles. "Many people think that self-driving cars will make roads safer by reducing accidents caused by unavoidable human errors."

a. Free college tuition at public universities
b. Social media use among teenagers
c. The value of studying the humanities in college
d. Public-funded clean needle exchanges
e. Assigning homework in elementary school

When you finish, read aloud and compare your "they say" arguments with a partner or a small group. Which template moves were more challenging than others to use? Why do you think so?

2. Read the following passage from Kenneth Goldsmith's 2016 *Los Angeles Times* op-ed, "Go Ahead: Waste Time on the Internet."

The notion that the Internet is bad for you seems premised on the idea that the Internet is one thing—a monolith. In reality it's a befuddling mix of the stupid and the sublime, a shattered, contradictory, and fragmented medium. Internet detractors seem to miss this simple fact, which is why so many of their criticisms disintegrate under observation.

The way Internet pundits tell it, you'd think we stare for three hours at clickbait—those articles with hypersensational headlines—the way we once sat down and watched three hours of cartoons

on Saturday morning TV. But most of us don't do any one thing on the Internet. Instead, we do many things, some of it frivolous, some of it heavy. Our time spent in front of the computer is a mixed time, a time that reflects our desires—as opposed to the time spent sitting in front of the television where we were fed shows we didn't necessarily enjoy. TV gave us few choices. Many of us truly did feel like we wasted our time—as our parents so often chided us—"rotting away" in front of the TV.

I keep reading—on screens—that in the age of screens we've lost our ability to concentrate, that we've become distracted. But when I look around me and see people riveted to their devices, I notice a great wealth of concentration, focus, and engagement.

a. Where in this passage do you see Goldsmith introducing what others are saying about the internet and the amount of time we spend on screens? What do you notice about the different ways Goldsmith introduces "they say" arguments?
b. Summarize Goldsmith's argument by using the following template for introducing an ongoing debate (p. 26):

In discussions of **how the internet affects people** , one controversial issue has been _____ . On one hand, _____ argues _____ . On the other hand,

_____ contends _____ . Others even maintain _____ . My own view is _____ .

3. Read over something you've written for one of your classes—a paragraph, a short response, or an essay—and then respond to the following questions. You can do this exercise with a partner or by yourself.

   a. Where do you introduce what others are saying? Underline or highlight where you include a "they say." If you can't find a "they say" in your writing, add one using one of the templates from this chapter.
   b. How soon in your argument do you introduce these other views? Make sure that you include a "they say" early in your writing (in the first paragraph or two for a short response or essay). If the views you're responding to are buried later in your piece, revise your writing so that they appear earlier.