

# **“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 he 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.

This little story illustrates an important lesson: that to give writing the most important thing of all – namely, a point – a writer needs to indicate clearly not only his or her thesis, 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, a writer needs to explain what he or she is 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, three or four pages in a longer one, or more than ten or so pages in a book-length text 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 this early.

Starting with a summary of others' views may seem to contradict the common advice (which you may have heard from many instructors) that writers 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 claim as part of some larger conversation – and that it's important to indicate 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: 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.

George Orwell, “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 ... to the anecdote's “important lesson” regarding what speakers should and shouldn't do. ...

### **[Some] Templates for Introducing What “They Say”**

There are lots of conventional moves for introducing 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 that X's work has several fundamental problems.
- It has become common today to dismiss X's contribution to the field of sociology.
- In their recent work, Y and Z have offered harsh critiques of Dr. X for \_\_\_\_\_