Writing = A Dialogue

You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a
discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. ... You listen for a while, until you
decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers, you answer
him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you. ... The hour grows late, you must depart.
And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

- Kenneth Burke

Part I. “They Say”

The simplest template for academic writing is this one: “They say ____; I say ____.” In other words,
writing—all writing—is about listening to others, summarizing their views, and responding with your
own idea. It’s about more than asserting your own position—it’s about placing that position within
the conversation that’s already been taking place. The conversation doesn’t have to be a response to
great authors or experts or some well-known person—it can be a response to some interior struggle, or
to your sister. But there’s got to be some tension:

When I was a kid, I thought that all people could succeed if they just tried hard enough.
The older I get, though, the more I see that our chances for success are greatly restricted
by our location, our upbringing, and the institutions we participate in.

The goal of writing like this is NOT to “play it safe.” Good persuasive writing is not about repeating
the truths that are already accepted by your audience; instead, persuasive writing can only have a
purpose if it challenges some belief your readers hold. However, this expectation doesn’t mean that
you have to make ridiculous claims—and in some cases, agreement can be a part of persuasive writing,
if you have something NEW to add to the accepted view:

Her argument that ______________ is supported by new research/my own
experience/changing attitudes that ______________.

This structure works well for academic writing, but it’s not only about the academy—it’s also
a good model that helps us realize we need to listen to others different from us and find
ways of engaging with them thoughtfully and respectfully.

According to Graff and Birkenstein, argumentative writing needs to identify WHO it’s responding to,
early in the writing: “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” (18).

So, start with what they say. (Then follow up with what an indication of what you say—what you intend
to ADD to the topic. Otherwise it feels like you’re just going to deliver the party line.)
An illustrative quotation, a surprising fact/statistic, a personal experience can work as a way of introducing what they say, as long as it illustrates the view that you’re addressing.

Templates for introducing the standard view
- Americans today tend to believe that ____.
- Conventional wisdom is that ____.
- The standard way of thinking about ___ is that ____.
- My whole life I have heard it said that ____.
- Many people have agreed with ____ who claims that ____.

Presenting the standard view as your own
- I’ve always believed that ____.
- When I was a child, I used to believe that __________.

Presenting an argument that is often implied
- Although none of them have ever said so directly, my teachers have often given me the impression that _______.
- Though they may not admit it, ______ often take for granted that _______.

Setting up sides of an issue
- In discussions of ____, one controversial aspect has been _____. On the one hand, ______ argues __________. On the other hand, ________ suggests that ___________. [Because of _________,] My view is ___________.
- When it comes to the topic of ______________, most of us agree that ____________. But the agreement usually ends when we reach the question of ____________. While some believe that ____________, others feel that ____________.

As you write, you should return to the view that you’re responding to, which helps maintain a sense of purpose and significance for the writing. And it helps your readers see that you’re honestly responding rather than just presenting information about a topic.

**Summarizing the positions of others**
If you do an honest job of summarizing, your reader shouldn’t be able to tell whether you agree or disagree with the author’s position.

- Words to show that the author is making a claim: argue, assert, believe, claim, emphasize, insist, observe, suggest
- Words to show that the author agrees with someone else’s idea: acknowledge, admire, agree, corroborate, endorse, extol, praise, do not deny, verify
- Words to show questioning or disagreement: complain, complicate, contend, contradict, deny, disavow, refute, challenge, question,
- Words to show that the author is making a recommendation: advocate, call for, demand, encourage, implore, plead, urge, warn

For example, in most persuasive writing, the authors aren’t just “talking about” an idea. Instead, you might summarize by writing that Jones disagrees with authorities on _______ by providing evidence to
support his claim that __________, and he wants to encourage his readers to ___________ as a result of his assertions.

Crafting quotations to support your argument
Avoid leaving out details for your reader by building quotation sandwiches—the top slice gives the reader information to understand the quote, the middle part IS the quote, and the bottom slice helps the reader understand how the quotation is relevant to your own ideas.

Templates for setting up and following up on quotations.
• Basically, X is saying ____________.
• In other words, X believes ____________.
• In making this comment, X argues that ____________.

Part II. “I Say”
Okay, so you’ve figured out how to fairly restate what somebody else is saying. But that’s just the beginning. For persuasive writing, you also want to be able to add something to the conversation.

There are three basic ways to respond: I agree. I disagree. I both agree and disagree. Merely agreeing, or merely disagreeing, is not enough. You’ve also got to say why it matters.

Templates for disagreeing:
• I think X is mistaken because she overlooks ____________.
• X’s claim that ____________ rests upon the questionable assumption that ____________.
• In light of recent research showing _____________, I disagree with X that ____________.
• X contradicts himself. On one hand he seems to suggest that ____________ while at the same time he also asserts that ____________.
• By focusing on ____________, X distracts from the real problem of ____________.

Templates for agreeing
• I agree with X that ____________ because my own experience ____________ confirms it.
• Recent studies about ____________ support X’s point that ____________.
• X’s writing about ____________ helps to shed light on the difficult/unrelated topic of ____________.
• Since I agree with X that ____________, we need to reassess the popular belief that ____________.

Most persuasive writing, then, walks a line between texts that line up with the author’s viewpoint and those which complicate or contradict it. Usually, agreeing with some perspective also means disagreeing with some other way of looking at things.

Templates for agreeing and disagreeing
• Although I disagree with X’s main point, I concede that his point about ____________ is persuasive.
• Although I agree with X up to a point, I cannot accept her overall point that ____________.
• Whereas X provides ample evidence that ________________, X and Z’s research on _____________ convinces me that _______________ instead.

A template for speculative exploration
• I have mixed feelings about the text. On one hand, I agree with X that _______________. On the other hand, I find his claim that _________________ is problematic.

Placing yourself clearly in the writing
The danger of incorporating the ideas of other writers is that it can become hard for readers to tell where your summary of others’ ideas ends and your own stance begins. As a result, it’s important for you to provide “markers” that help to indicate where you are beginning your own argument.

Templates for marking off your own claims
• My own view, however, is that ________________.
• I believe, as X may not, that _________________.
• X’s assertion that ________________ does not fit the facts. Rather, the evidence shows that ________________. [In this sentence you’re using a claim to distinguish your ideas from source X, and then you’re letting the evidence establish your perspective.]

Acknowledging naysayers
You build credibility by acknowledging—rather than dismissing or ignoring—the beliefs of your audience. Those beliefs are sometimes counterarguments, and if you don’t address counterarguments then you run the risk of being seen as close-minded.

Templates for introducing counterarguments
• At this point I want to raise some objections inspired by the skeptic in me. She feels that I have been ignoring the issue of __________. “______,” she says to me, “____________.”
• Some readers, however, may challenge my view that _________________. After all, many believe that _________________. In truth, my argument about __________ does seem to ignore _________________.
• But is my idea realistic? What are the chances of it actually being adopted?
• Does the evidence I’ve provided compellingly show __________?-­‐

Templates for introducing counterarguments held by a specific group of people (liberals, Christians, capitalists)
• Here many feminists may object that _________________.
• Biologists, of course, may dispute my claim that _________________.
• Though not all Christians think alike, a fairly common perspective they hold, in opposition to my own, may be that _________________.

Though labeling groups introduces a level of generalization that may be uncomfortable, it also allows for the possibility of connecting your ideas to the larger interaction of ideas. The third example shows a way to avoid overgeneralization while still ascribing a view to a certain group.
Answering objections
It’s not enough just to acknowledge the views of others—you also need to answer them. And you need to answer them fairly, without mocking or oversimplifying. “That’s just wrong” is not is not backed up with any research or logic or example.

- Although I admit that __________, I still maintain that __________ since __________.
- Proponents are right to point out that ______________. But they exaggerate/misrepresent the evidence when they say ______________.
- While it is true that ______________, this fact does not necessarily cause/indicate/show that ______________.

What if you discover that a counterargument is more persuasive than your stance? Well, this discovery probably means you need to do some major revision. One goal of writing is to help you extend your own thinking, and a fair investigation of the evidence may mean that you learn something new that changes your view. That’s not a bad thing.

Establishing significance
If it isn’t clear why your audience should care about your writing, they probably won’t. Since you’re writing to persuade someone to revisit their position on some topic, one of the easy ways to help a reader see the significance of your writing is by helping them see how your claim may differ from their own. If you’re writing about something that everyone already accepts, there’s not much reason to be writing about it.

A thesis statement is not a bad place to establish significance by identifying the tension between a group’s current view and the position that you advocate.

- __________ used to think that ______________. But a shifting focus on __________ has meant that ______________.
- This position challenges the work of critics who have assumed that ______________.
- Recent studies shed new light on __________, which previous studies had not addressed.
- If sports enthusiasts stopped to think about it, they might simply assume that most athletes ______________. However, new research/events show that ______________.
- At first glance teenagers might say ______________. But on closer inspection they might realize ______________.

In addition to identifying which groups of people might care about the topic, you probably also want to explain why they should care.

- ________ matters because __________.
- Although ________ may seem unimportant, it is a crucial factor in our society’s investigation of ______________.
- My discussion of ______________ is in fact addressing the larger matter of ______________.
Hey, you might even be able to say that a good thesis statement generally identifies your position in relationship to other positions and then explains why your position on the topic matters.

To clarify and elaborate
You use these because, no matter how clear your argument, sometimes readers will end up on a sideroad. Generally writers assume that the reader is more familiar with the topic than he or she really is.

- In other words, ____________________.
- What _______ really means is that ____________________.
- To put it another way, ____________________.

Template to prevent misunderstanding
- My point is not that we should ____________________, but that we should ____________.

Template to provide a ‘roadmap’ to your structure
- The first section provides ______________ while the second section ______________.
- Having just argued that ______________, let us now turn our attention to ____________.
- Given this information about ______________ we can now begin to investigate the dispute in more detail.
- Thus, the position of ______________ is ______________. In contrast, the position of ______________ is ______________.

Moving from general claims to specific examples
- For example, ________________.
- __________, for instance, shows that ________________.
- ______________ provides a specific illustration of ________________.

The words that help you show these connections are called transitions. The most common relationships indicated by transitions are

- Addition: also, and, besides, additionally
- Exemplification: after all, for example, to illustrate, specifically
- Elaboration: by extension, that is, to put it another way, ultimately
- Comparison: along the same lines, likewise, similarly
- Contrast: on the other hand, although, but, in contrast, despite the fact that, however, nonetheless
- Cause and effect: as a result, because, since, so, then, therefore, thus
- Concession: admittedly, although it is true, granted, of course
- Conclusion: in short, in sum, to sum up, overall, ultimately