

# "THEY SAY / I SAY"

*The Moves That Matter  
in Academic Writing*

**WITH READINGS**



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## SIX

### “SKEPTICS MAY OBJECT”

#### *Planting a Naysayer in Your Text*



THE WRITER JANE TOMPKINS describes a pattern that repeats itself whenever she writes a book or an article. For the first couple of weeks when she sits down to write, things go relatively well. But then in the middle of the night, several weeks into the writing process, she'll wake up in a cold sweat, suddenly realizing that she has overlooked some major criticism that readers will surely make against her ideas. Her first thought, invariably, is that she will have to give up on the project, or that she will have to throw out what she's written thus far and start over. Then she realizes that “this moment of doubt and panic is where my text really begins.” She then revises what she's written in a way that incorporates the criticisms she's anticipated, and her text becomes stronger and more interesting as a result.

This little story contains an important lesson for all writers, experienced and inexperienced alike. It suggests that even though most of us are upset at the idea of someone criticizing our work, such criticisms can actually work to our advantage. Although it's naturally tempting to ignore objections to our ideas, doing so may in fact be a big mistake, since everyone's writing actually improves when we not only listen to these objections but give them an

#### *Planting a Naysayer in Your Text*

explicit hearing in our writing. Indeed, no single device more quickly improves a piece of writing than the practice of planting a naysayer in the text—saying, for example, that “although some readers may object” to something in your argument, you “would reply that \_\_\_\_\_.”

#### ANTICIPATE OBJECTIONS

But wait, you say. Isn't the advice to incorporate critical views a recipe for destroying your credibility and undermining your argument? Here you are, trying to say something that will hold up, and we want you to tell readers all the negative things someone might say against you?

Exactly. We *are* urging you to tell readers what others might say against you, but our point is that doing so will actually *enhance* your credibility, not undermine it. For as we argue throughout this book, writing well does not mean piling up uncontroversial truths in a vacuum; it means engaging others in a dialogue or debate—not only by opening your text with a summary of what others have to say, as we suggest in Chapter 1, but also by imagining what others might say against your argument as it unfolds. Once you see writing as an act of entering a conversation, you should also see how opposing arguments can work for you rather than against you.

Paradoxically, the more you give voice to your critics' objections, the more you can disarm those critics, especially if you go on to answer them in convincing ways. When you entertain a counter-argument, you make a kind of preemptive strike, identifying problems with your argument before others can point them out for you. Furthermore, by entertaining counter-arguments, you show respect for your readers, treating them not

as gullible dupes but as independent, critical thinkers who are aware that yours is not the only view in town. In addition, by imagining what others might say against your claims, you come across as a generous, broad-minded person who is secure enough to open himself or herself to debate—like the writer in Figure 5.

Conversely, if you don't entertain counter-arguments, you may very likely come across as closed-minded, as if you think your claims are beyond dispute. You might also leave important questions hanging and concerns about your arguments unaddressed. Finally, if you fail to plant a naysayer in your text, you may find that you have very little to say. Many of our own students have said that entertaining counter-arguments makes it easier to generate enough text to meet their assignment's page-length requirements.

Planting a naysayer in your own text is a relatively simple move, as you can see by looking at the following passage from a book by the feminist writer Kim Chernin. Having spent some thirty pages complaining about the pressure on American women to lose weight and be thin, Chernin inserts a whole chapter entitled "The Skeptic," opening it as follows.

At this point I would like to raise certain objections that have been inspired by the skeptic in me. She feels that I have been ignoring some of the most common assumptions we all make about our bodies and these she wishes to see addressed. For example: "You know perfectly well," she says to me, "that you feel better when you lose weight. You buy new clothes. You look at yourself more eagerly in the mirror. When someone invites you to a party you don't stop and ask yourself whether you want to go. You feel sexier. Admit it. You like yourself better."

KIM CHERNIN, *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness*



"YOU WILL PROBABLY OBJECT THAT I HAVE MISREPRESENTED X'S WORK HERE, AND I CONCEDE THAT X NEVER SAYS \_\_\_\_\_ IN SO MANY WORDS, NEVERTHELESS...."



FIGURE 5

In the remainder of the chapter, Chernin answers this skeptic. Though Chernin's inner skeptic challenges her book's central claim (that the pressure to diet seriously harms women's lives), she responds not by repressing its voice but by embracing it and writing it into her text. Note too that instead of dispatching this naysaying voice quickly, as many of us would be tempted to do, Chernin stays with it and gives it a full paragraph's worth of space. By borrowing some of Chernin's language, we can come up with templates for entertaining virtually any objection.

#### TEMPLATES FOR ENTERTAINING OBJECTIONS

- ▶ At this point I would like to raise some objections that have been inspired by the skeptic in me. She feels that I have been ignoring \_\_\_\_\_, "\_\_\_\_\_" she says to me, "\_\_\_\_\_."
- ▶ Yet some readers may challenge my view that \_\_\_\_\_. After all, many believe that \_\_\_\_\_. Indeed, my own argument that \_\_\_\_\_ seems to ignore \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
- ▶ Of course, many will probably disagree with this assertion that \_\_\_\_\_.

Note that the objections in the above templates are attributed not to any specific person or group, but to "skeptics," "readers," or "many." This kind of nameless, faceless naysayer is perfectly appropriate in many cases. But the ideas that motivate arguments and objections often can—and, where possible, should—be ascribed to a specific ideology or school of thought (for example, liberals, Christian fundamentalists, neopragma-

tists) rather than to anonymous anybodies. In other words, naysayers can be labeled, and you can add precision and impact to your writing by identifying what they are.

#### TEMPLATES FOR NAMING YOUR NAYSAYERS

- ▶ Here many *feminists* would probably object that \_\_\_\_\_.
- ▶ But *social Darwinists* would certainly take issue with the argument that \_\_\_\_\_.
- ▶ *Biologists*, of course, may want to dispute my claim that \_\_\_\_\_.
- ▶ Nevertheless, both *followers and critics of Malcolm X* will probably suggest otherwise and argue that \_\_\_\_\_.

To be sure, some people dislike such labels and may even resent having them applied to themselves. Some feel that such labels put individuals in boxes, stereotyping them and glossing over what makes each individual unique. And it's true that labels can be used inappropriately, in ways that ignore individuality and promote stereotypes. But since the life of ideas, including many of our most private thoughts, is conducted through groups and types rather than by solitary individuals, intellectual exchange requires labels to give definition and serve as a convenient shorthand. If you categorically reject all labels, you give up an important resource and even mislead readers by presenting yourself and others as having no connection to anyone else. You also miss an opportunity to generalize the importance and relevance of your work to some larger conversation. When you attribute a position you are summarizing to liberalism, say, or historical materialism, your argu-

ment is no longer just about your own solitary views, but about the intersection of broad ideas and habits of mind that many readers may already have a stake in.

The way to minimize the problem of stereotyping, then, is not to categorically reject labels but to refine and qualify their use, as the following templates demonstrate.

- ▶ Although not all *Christians* think alike, some of them will probably dispute my claim that \_\_\_\_\_.
- ▶ *Non-native English speakers* are so diverse in their views that it's hard to generalize about them, but some are likely to object on the grounds that \_\_\_\_\_.

Another way to avoid needless stereotyping is to qualify labels carefully, substituting "pro bono lawyers" for "lawyers" in general, for example, or "quantitative sociologists" for all "social scientists," and so on.

#### TEMPLATES FOR INTRODUCING OBJECTIONS INFORMALLY

Objections can also be introduced in ways that are a bit more informal. For instance, you can frame objections in the form of questions.

- ▶ But is my proposal realistic? What are the chances of its actually being adopted?
- ▶ Yet is it always true that \_\_\_\_\_? Is it always the case, as I have been suggesting, that \_\_\_\_\_?
- ▶ However, does the evidence I've cited prove conclusively that \_\_\_\_\_?

You can also let your naysayer speak directly.

- ▶ "Impossible," you say. "Your evidence must be skewed."

Moves like this allow you to cut directly to the skeptical voice itself, as the singer-songwriter Joe Jackson does in the following excerpt from a 2003 *New York Times* article complaining about the restrictions on public smoking in New York City bars and restaurants.

I like a couple of cigarettes or a cigar with a drink, and like many other people, I only smoke in bars or nightclubs. Now I can't go to any of my old haunts. Bartenders who were friends have turned into cops, forcing me outside to shiver in the cold and curse under my breath. . . . It's no fun. Smokers are being demonized and victimized all out of proportion.

"Get over it," say the anti-smokers. "You're the minority." I thought a great city was a place where all kinds of minorities could thrive. . . . "Smoking kills," they say. As an occasional smoker with otherwise healthy habits, I'll take my chances. Health consciousness is important, but so are pleasure and freedom of choice.

JOE JACKSON, "Want to Smoke? Go to Hamburg"

Jackson could have begun his second paragraph, in which he shifts from his own voice to that of his imagined naysayer, as follows: "Of course anti-smokers will object that since we smokers are in the minority, we should get over it and sacrifice for the larger social good." Or "Anti-smokers might ask, however, whether the smoking minority shouldn't submit to the non-smoking majority." We think, however, that Jackson gets the job done very well with the more colloquial form he chooses.

See the essay on "Family Guy," pp. 257–68, which notes—and answers—naysayers throughout.

Borrowing a standard move of playwrights and novelists, Jackson cuts directly to the objectors' view and then to his own retort, then back to the objectors' view and then to his own retort again, thereby creating a kind of dialogue or miniature play within his own text. This move works well for Jackson, but only because (using one of the strategies suggested in Chapter 5) he uses quotation marks to make clear at every point whose voice he is in.

### REPRESENT OBJECTIONS FAIRLY

Once you've decided to introduce a differing or opposing view into your writing, your work has only just begun, since you still need to represent and explain that view with fairness and generosity. Although it is tempting to give opposing views short shrift, to hurry past them, or even to mock them, doing so is usually counterproductive. When writers make the best case they can for their critics (playing what Peter Elbow calls the "believing game"), they actually bolster their credibility with readers, rather than undermine it.

We recommend, then, that whenever you entertain objections in your writing you stay with them for several sentences or even paragraphs and take them as seriously as possible. We also recommend that you read your summary of opposing views with an outsider's eye: put yourself in the shoes of someone who disagrees with you and ask if such a reader would recognize himself in your summary. Would that reader think you have taken his views seriously, as beliefs that reasonable people might hold? Or would he detect a mocking tone, or an oversimplification of his views?

There will always be certain objections, to be sure, that you believe do not deserve to be represented, just as there will be objections that seem so unworthy of respect that they inspire ridicule. Remember, however, that if you do choose to mock a view that you oppose, you are likely to alienate those readers who don't already agree with you—likely the very readers you want to reach. Also be aware that in mocking another's view you may contribute to a hostile argument culture in which someone could ridicule you in return.

### ANSWER OBJECTIONS

Finally, besides summarizing objections fairly in your writing, you need to answer those objections persuasively. After all, when you write objections into a text, you always take the risk that readers will find those objections more convincing than the argument you yourself are advancing. In the editorial quoted above, for example, Joe Jackson takes the risk that non-smokers will identify more with the anti-smoking view he summarizes than with the pro-smoking position he endorses. Another case in point is presented in *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1868), where at one point Franklin recounts how he was converted to Deism (a religion that exalts reason over spirituality) by reading *anti-Deist* books. When he encountered the views of Deists being negatively summarized by authors who opposed them, Franklin ended up finding the Deist position more persuasive. To avoid having this kind of unintentional reverse effect on readers, you need to do your best to make sure that any counter-argument you address is not more convincing than your own claims. It is good to

address objections in your writing, but only if you are able to overcome them.

One surefire way to *fail* to overcome an objection is to dismiss it out of hand—saying, for example, "That's just wrong." The difference between such a response (which offers no supporting reasons whatsoever) and the types of nuanced responses we're promoting in this book is the difference between bullying your readers and genuinely persuading them.

Often the best way to overcome an objection is not to try to refute it completely, but to agree with certain parts while challenging only those you dispute. In other words, in answering counter-arguments, it is often best to say "yes, but" or "yes and no," as we suggest in Chapter 4, treating the counter-view as an opportunity to revise and refine your own position. Rather than building your argument into an impenetrable fortress, it is often best to make concessions while still standing your ground, as Kim Chernin does in the following response to the counter-argument quoted above. While in the voice of the "skeptic," Chernin writes: "Admit it. You like yourself better when you've lost weight." In response, Chernin replies as follows.

Can I deny these things? No woman who has managed to lose weight would wish to argue with this. Most people feel better about themselves when they become slender. And yet, upon reflection, it seems to me that there is something precarious about this well-being. After all, 98 percent of people who lose weight gain it back. Indeed, 90 percent of those who have dieted "successfully" gain back more than they ever lost. Then, of course, we can no longer bear to look at ourselves in the mirror.

In this way, Chernin shows how you can use a counter-view to improve and refine your overall argument by making a con-

cession. Even as she concedes that losing weight feels good in the short run, she argues that in the long run the weight always returns, making the dieter far more miserable.

#### TEMPLATES FOR MAKING CONCESSIONS WHILE STILL STANDING YOUR GROUND

- ▶ Although I grant that \_\_\_\_\_, I still maintain that \_\_\_\_\_.
- ▶ Proponents of X are right to argue that \_\_\_\_\_. But they exaggerate when they claim that \_\_\_\_\_.
- ▶ While it is true that \_\_\_\_\_, it does not necessarily follow that \_\_\_\_\_.
- ▶ On the one hand, I agree with X that \_\_\_\_\_. But on the other hand, I still insist that \_\_\_\_\_.

Templates like these show that answering naysayers' objections does not have to be an all-or-nothing affair in which you either definitively refute your critics or they definitively refute you. Often the most productive engagements among differing views end with a combined vision that incorporates elements of each one.

But what if you've tried out all the possible answers you can think of to an objection you've anticipated and you *still* have a nagging feeling that the objection is more convincing than your argument itself? In that case, the best remedy is to go back and make some fundamental revisions to your argument, changing its very substance. Although finding out late in the game that you aren't fully convinced by your own argument can be painful, it can actually make your final text more intellectually honest, challenging, and serious. After all, the goal of writing

is not to keep proving that whatever you initially said is right, but to stretch the limits of your thinking. So if planting a strong naysayer in your text forces you to change your mind, that's not a bad thing. Indeed, some would argue that that is what the academic world is all about.

### Exercises

1. Read the following passage by the cultural critic Eric Schlosser. As you'll see, he's not planted any naysayers in this text. Do it for him. Insert a brief paragraph stating an objection to his argument and then responding to the objection as he might.

The United States must declare an end to the war on drugs. This war has filled the nation's prisons with poor drug addicts and small-time drug dealers. It has created a multibillion-dollar black market, enriched organized crime groups and promoted the corruption of government officials throughout the world. And it has not stemmed the widespread use of illegal drugs. By any rational measure, this war has been a total failure.

We must develop public policies on substance abuse that are guided not by moral righteousness or political expediency but by common sense. The United States should immediately decriminalize the cultivation and possession of small amounts of marijuana for personal use. Marijuana should no longer be classified as a Schedule I narcotic, and those who seek to use marijuana as medicine should no longer face criminal sanctions. We must shift our entire approach to drug abuse from the criminal justice system to the public health system. Congress should appoint an independent commission to study the harm-reduction policies that have

been adopted in Switzerland, Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands. The commission should recommend policies for the United States based on one important criterion: what works.

In a nation where pharmaceutical companies advertise powerful antidepressants on billboards and where alcohol companies run amusing beer ads during the Super Bowl, the idea of a "drug-free society" is absurd. Like the rest of American society, our drug policy would greatly benefit from less punishment and more compassion.

ERIC SCHLOSSER, "A People's Democratic Platform"

2. Look over something you've written that makes an argument. Check to see if you've anticipated and responded to any objections. If not, revise your text to do so. If so, have you anticipated all the likely objections? Who if anyone have you attributed the objections to? Have you represented them fairly? Have you answered the objections well enough, or do you think you now need to qualify your own argument? Did you use any of the language found in this chapter's templates? Does the introduction of a naysayer strengthen your argument—why, or why not?