

# Writing Matters



## Sorting Through the Layers

Any writing assignment—especially one that requires research—asks our students to use multiple layers of skills that aren't always readily apparent. In order to perform research properly, students must have an understanding of the writing and scholarship within that particular discipline, sharp critical reading skills, vocabulary skills, and skills in knowing what kinds of questions to ask of a text and how to utilize the information they find there. In order to write their research well, students must have skills in vocabulary, spelling, integrating quotations, creating paraphrases, using citations, developing a thesis, producing valid points/arguments, and developing paragraphs just to name a few! When we begin to peel back the layers of skills that students need in order to produce quality writing and solid research, it is no wonder that we see some of them struggling. Knowing these struggles, we can support our students as we guide them through a research assignment.

## Assigning the Research Project

While most instructors have written several (if not many) research papers and feel quite comfortable with them, our students are often unfamiliar and decidedly uncomfortable with research. They don't know how to begin the process, how to manage their time, how to analyze and organize the sources they find, and how to write their research in proper format.

The first step in helping students through research is to realize where they are in their educational process. Many times, students have not completed an English research class (113 or 114) prior to coming to your

class. This may mean that some students have never done any research whatsoever.

Even if your students have had research instruction in English classes, your discipline presents a new challenge. Each separate discipline confronts students with new reading, new values, new context, new formats, and new ways of thinking and writing. You can guide them through your class's research through explicit, concrete instruction on the steps they should take during the writing process. What should they be reading? How should they read it? What format

should they use when writing? If students are unable to perform any one of these skills during the writing process, it will greatly affect all the steps that come after it.

In formulating your research assignment, then, begin with the end in mind. Once you have a solid idea of what you want students to produce, work backwards from that end goal to create the steps which students should take in order to produce that final paper. These steps should be concrete instructions for students to follow. For example, if you want students to create an

outline of their papers before writing, show them the kind of outline you want them to create. Otherwise, students who have never written an outline will be left struggling and may simply choose not to complete the assignment.

Finally, talk to your students about the fact that research is not the scary monster that they make it out to be. Instead, it is simply entering into a conversation on a topic. It is discovering who else is writing and thinking about a certain idea, then condensing that information down to a paper that shows what "they say" and what "I say" in return.

**Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.**

**—Zora Neale Hurston**

# Writing Matters



## MAKE THE ANNOUNCEMENT! FOURTH ANNUAL WAC ESSAY AWARDS—DEADLINE MARCH 29!

Your students could win cash for the essays they  
write for your classes!

Any essay written by an SCC student in an SCC class (Summer 2011-Spring 2012) is eligible! Research and non-research categories are offered.

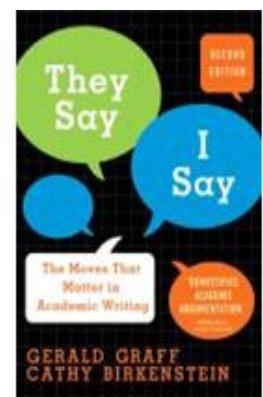
**CASH PRIZES in each category! 1st = \$200, 2nd = \$100, 3rd = \$50**

See the WAC website for entry forms and complete rules: [www.southwesterncc.edu/wac](http://www.southwesterncc.edu/wac)

### Book review: **They say/I say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing**

Authors Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein work from the premise that good academic writing is an act of entering into conversation about a subject. That conversation involves certain “moves” that students must make to navigate their sources and their own writing. In order to guide students through that conversation, Graff and Birkenstein have developed a variety of templates that students can use to simplify various writing tasks. For example, in the chapter entitled “The Art of Summarizing,” the authors not only walk students through typical ways to summarize (list ideas, compare/contrast, etc.), but they also list vocabulary that is commonly used in good summaries, focusing primarily on verbs (asserts, argues, claims, believes, protests, etc.).

While the idea of using “templates” sounds simplistic, I have found that students respond well to the guidance and vocabulary offered in the book. Often, students don’t even know how to begin to talk about a source, and with the practical advice found in this book, they feel empowered not only to begin that conversation but to continue it throughout their writing.



Graff, Gerald, and Cathy Birkenstein. *They Say/I Say: Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2010.

**He who sees things grow from the beginning will have the best view of them.**

**—Aristotle**