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Do Academics Really Write This Way? A Corpus Investigation of Moves and Templates in “*They Say/I Say*”

Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein’s writing textbook, “*They Say / I Say*,” has triggered important debates among writing professionals. Not included within these debates, however, is the empirical question of whether the textbook’s templates reflect patterns of language use in actual academic discourses. This article uses corpus-based discourse analysis to examine how two particular “moves” discussed in the textbook are realized in three large corpora of professional and student academic writing. The analysis reveals important differences between the textbook’s wordings and those preferred by student and professional writers. It also uncovers differences in use of “interpersonal” functions of language by experienced and less experienced writers. In offering this detailed analysis of academic prose, I aim to extend calls to recenter language in writing research and instruction. I conclude with implications for discussing academic argumentation with students.

Since its first edition, Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein’s writing textbook, “*They Say / I Say*”: *The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* (henceforth *TSIS*), has inspired familiar debates among writing professionals. Recurring lines of questioning have included the following: whether it is possible to teach academic discourse in first-year writing and, if so, whether it is efficacious or

ethical to do so; whether there is such a thing as (an) academic discourse in the first place and, if so, whether an explicit or implicit instructional approach to teaching discourse conventions or strategies is preferable; and, stepping just a bit into Sapir-Whorf territory, whether or not explicitly teaching wordings,

specifically in the form of templates, can assist students to develop new lines of reasoning or “complexity” in thinking (e.g., Benay; Birkenstein and Graff; Edlund).

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and *making concessions while still standing your ground*, to name just two. Such moves are positioned by the authors as useful concepts for acquainting student writers with a view of academic argumentation as social and dialogic. Students are encouraged to move toward and defend their stances (“I Say”) after first carefully reviewing others’ views (“They Say”). More controversially, the authors also offer sentence-level formulas, or templates, for realizing the moves. For instance, to guide students toward making concessions, the authors offer templates like, “Although I grant that _____, I still maintain that _____” and “While it is true that _____, it does not necessarily follow that _____” (89). Such templates, according to the authors, “might have the potential to open up and clarify academic conversation” for many students (xviii).

My starting point for this essay is that the reviews of this textbook are important as much for the questions they do not raise as for the ones they do, and the silences speak volumes about the status of language in composition and rhetorical studies.¹ But first, to offer a brief recap of the critical reception, the positive reviews have endorsed the template approach, agreeing with Graff and Birkenstein that language-level explicitness is needed, especially for students who struggle to “pick up” valued discursive moves on their own. According to Marna Broekhoff, templates “provide accessible means of entering academic debates” (135). The critical reviews, in contrast, have argued that the textbook offers a reductive, formalistic, and decontextualized view of academic writing. For some, its very appearance points to a “troublesome persistence of formalism” in the field (Lynch-Biniek), and, by reducing argumentation down to a two-part dialogue, they say and I say, it “encourage[s] oversimplification and deliberate ignorance of the complexity of a given conversation” (Arthur and

Case-Halferty 3). Arguably the most powerful critiques are those pointing to context (see, e.g., Hollrah and Farmer). According to this line of critique, the moves writers make, or their linguistic realizations, will vary in subtle and important ways depending on genre, (sub)disciplinary epistemologies, and writers' own individual goals.² Accordingly, beginning with formulaic structures and sentence-level wordings in the classroom is putting the cart before the horse, with the likely result that students become so focused on forms that they fail to grasp the complex rhetorical motives that gave shape to the forms.

In contrast to these lively lines of debate, there has been silence in discussions of *TSIS* on this empirical question: Do academics really write this way?³ Do the moves and templates presented in the textbook accurately reflect patterns of language use in written academic discourses, as revealed through analysis of academic writing? There is, of course, a separate question of whether the textbook *should* capture the tacitly valued discursive strategies used in academic discourses. The question I am raising is more descriptive: *Does* the textbook capture the tacitly valued discursive strategies used in academic discourses? Through silence about the linguistic details in the textbook, the implicit assumption among reviewers (positive and critical alike) seems to be, “These templates will suffice—if we are going to go the route of offering students templates, which is a huge *if*.”

But do the templates suffice? For instance, is the wording *Although I grant that . . .* (89) used frequently in academic writing to make concessions, or is the wording *Of course, many will probably disagree . . .* (82) frequently used to entertain objections? Obviously, writers can use these wordings (and ones like them), but do they, and what does it mean if corpus analysis reveals that they don’t? As someone who uses linguistic discourse analysis in my own scholarship, I find this line of questioning intriguing in its own right. But the precise wordings also matter for instructional purposes, including the ways we as writing professionals conceptualize and talk with our students about academic argumentation.

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moves. Writers may signal concessions enthusiastically (*Absolutely, Certainly, To be sure*) or more reluctantly (*Admittedly, I will concede that*). And when they entertain objections, they can project readers as the source of the objecting view (*Some readers may object that*), third-party sources (*Biologists will say that*), or anyone at all (*It could be objected that*). These options are meaningful, even if we aren't explicitly aware of them when we read and write, because they construct different roles for the reader (Thompson) and different authorial personae, or stances (Hyland, "Stance"). As Laura R. Micciche writes in her argument for teaching rhetorical grammar, "Word choice and sentence structure are an expression of the way we attend to the words of others, the way we position ourselves in relation to others" (719). Furthermore, writing research has demonstrated that patterns in these kinds of interpersonal meanings—expressions of attitudes, stances, and reader positioning⁴—have an effect on readers' judgments of overall writing quality (e.g., Barton; Coffin; Soliday). For this reason, the wordings offered in *TSIS* are important because they suggest to instructors and students certain things about the kinds of interpersonal meanings that are valued in academic contexts.

Below, I examine how the wordings in *TSIS* play out in large databases of academic writing, using tools and concepts from functional linguistics. Specifically, I use electronic concordancing software to investigate how two moves, "entertaining objections" and "making concessions while still standing your ground" (Graff and Birkenstein 78–91), are realized in three corpora of professional and student writing. It is important to understand these two moves in particular, I argue, as writing research has shown that acknowledging and negotiating with opposing views is a persistently troublesome area for novice academic writers (e.g., Penrose and Geisler; Kaufer and Geisler; Wolfe and Britt). The three corpora I examine represent academic writing at three distinct levels: published expert writing, upper-level student writing, and beginning university student writing. They therefore capture a wide range of contexts in which the wordings suggested in *TSIS* are likely to be used.

By undertaking this analysis, I do not intend to skewer a useful and well-intentioned textbook or to challenge the goal of making discourse strategies accessible for student writers. Rather, I aim to extend the *TSIS* focus on rhetorical moves by offering a systematic, descriptive analysis of how writers use language when they make certain kinds of moves. By examining whether and how the *TSIS* templates play out in instances of academic discourse, I argue that writing professionals can build their understanding of how language works to construct valued interpersonal meanings in academic writing.

Templates, Formulas, and Interpersonal Meanings

My understanding of why Graff and Birkenstein use the term *templates* instead of *linguistic resources* or *language-level devices*, or even just *examples*, is that they are interested not just in identifying the various resources that writers use to make argumentative moves but also in developing structures that students can use as heuristics for staging portions of their arguments—indeed, for structuring their thinking. As the authors put it in their *Chronicle* essay, formulas can “help [students] generate thoughts that might not otherwise occur to them” (Birkenstein and Graff, my emphasis).

Used in this way, the terms *templates* and *formulas* are interchangeable.

But linguists who have examined academic discourses mean something very different when they refer to formulas, and this difference allows us to pose the rather counterintuitive question of whether the *TSIS* formulas actually use formulaic language. Linguists associate the term *formulas* with phraseological clusters that recur in everyday language use, such as *on the one hand, the extent to which, it should be noted that*, and *as can be seen*. These prefabricated wordings, referred to by some as “lexical bundles” (Biber et al.; Hyland, “As Can”), have been shown to vary in use across registers and genres (e.g., Cortes). They have also been shown to be useful for communicating effectively in academic speaking and writing (e.g., Simpson-Vlach and Ellis).

Indeed, corpus analyses have revealed that academic prose is particularly formulaic. As Teresa Thonney notes, research by Douglas Biber and colleagues shows that approximately 20 percent of academic prose contains bundles like *due to the fact that, one of the most, the degree to which*, and many more. There is also evidence that expert writers use more of these than student writers. For instance, in her examination of history writing, Viviana Cortes found that published scholarly articles use longer (four-word) bundles like *from the perspective of and the extent to which* more frequently than undergraduate history students. Findings like these lend empirical support to Graff and Birkenstein’s “formulaic” approach, though their understanding of formulas is clearly different.

Corpus studies offer two further justifications for drawing students’ explicit attention to formulas. First, they are highly functional. They are not just stylistic “tics” or extraneous verbiage to be avoided. As Rita Simpson-Vlach and Nick C. Ellis show, they are used to frame propositions and guide the reader

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through discourse stages, among other rhetorical functions of language referred to as metadiscursive (Hyland, *Metadiscourse*). Use of particular bundles in particular social situations, furthermore, can index socially valued stances or discursive identities. Bundles such as those identified above can index an “academic” writer, one who is taking up a certain way of thinking, seeing, and doing marked by critical distance, explicitness, and consideration of others’ views (Aull and Lancaster). Second, formulaic sequences cross disciplinary boundaries. Simpson-Vlach and Ellis found that academic writers across fields frequently use hedging formulas like *it is likely that, it is possible to, to some extent, appears to be, and in some cases*. Hedges work to project a measured stance toward claims, demonstrating the writer’s awareness of complexity and concern for carefully delineated assertions (Aull). They can also be used for dialogical purposes, to open up space for alternative views and voices, creating room for readers to bring their perspectives to the discussion (Hyland, “Stance”; White). This multifunctionality may be why, as Hyland (“Stance”) found, academic writers across fields use more hedges than they do boosters, or intensifying expressions, when expressing stance. There is good research justification, then, for suggesting that some formulas do cross contexts and that certain ones, like hedging formulas, could usefully be made explicit in the classroom as a part of discussions about academic discourse. But understanding the importance of hedging means grasping the broader concept of interpersonal meanings.

Functional theories of language help us understand that the difference between a hedged formulation like *Some may challenge my view that* and a more assertive one like *Many readers will object that* is significant, with the latter projecting greater commitment to the claim of what readers are thinking. In his socially oriented analysis of language, M. A. K. Halliday places such expressions of epistemic commitment within the same general language function as expressions of attitudes, judgments, evaluations, and interaction with the listener/reader, which he refers to as the *interpersonal* macro-function.⁵

Interpersonal functions of language include the construction of recognizable voices and identities, both for the writer and reader (Ivanič; Tardy; Thompson). Often very subtle, these meanings enable writers to position themselves and their readers toward the ideational or propositional content. For the purposes of my analysis, I am distinguishing generally between interpersonal and ideational meanings, as realized through language. The choice to entertain a possible objection from the reader indirectly via *It could be argued that* instead of directly via *You may object that* communicates specific

interpersonal meanings—in this case, an involved but still distant role for the reader—while projecting (potentially) the same propositional content. Such discrete, seemingly minor choices in wording have been shown to accumulate and pattern together in texts, creating what the linguist Susan Hood refers to as “prosodies of interpersonal meanings” (38) that gain rhetorical force as a text unfolds, constructing evaluative “keys” or authorial voices (cf. Coffin; Martin and White) that potentially shape readers’ responses to the overall writing.

Research on Interpersonal Meanings in Student Writing

Interpersonal meanings are the driving force behind the discourse strategies that Graff and Birkenstein refer to as “entertaining objections” and “making concessions while still standing your ground” (78–91)—two moves that recur throughout academic discourses. Indeed, while writing scholars know that different kinds of argumentation are used and valued depending on the disciplinary context (Wolfe), we also know that, across contexts, writers negotiate with alternative views and voices in the course of their argumentation. These “counter-argument” strategies can be essential to the very structure of a writer’s argument, as David S. Kaufer and Cheryl Geisler propose in their “main path / faulty path” argument scheme. They can also be used more narrowly, accumulating in particular sections of a research article like discussions or introductions, as writers position their claims within a research territory (Swales). Counter-argumentation is thus pervasive and necessary for building robust arguments, yet many students still struggle with, or altogether avoid, this key element of academic writing.

Christopher Wolfe and M. Anne Britt pose the important question of why. Why do many student writers ignore opposing views, leading to what has been termed the “myside bias”? Does myside bias result from biased reading and research processes, or is it rooted in students’ fundamental view of argumentation? Wolfe and Britt’s analysis suggests the latter. Based on two experimental tasks whereby students conducted research and wrote short arguments, the authors found that students who understood argumentation in fact-based terms (i.e., as a matter of supporting positions with “facts”) were more likely to exclude alternative views than students who understood argumentation as a dialogic process of engaging claims, reasons, and evidence.

Complementing this focus on myside bias are linguistic studies of interpersonal meanings in students’ texts. One important line of this research comes from Appraisal theory in systemic functional linguistics (e.g. Coffin;

Hood; Martin and White). Appraisal analyses have shown that student writers who use language in ways that open up and close down discursive space for alternative views—via choices in modality, attribution, evidentiality, concession, and negation—produce texts that project awareness of the complexity of their subject matter and the diversity of views on it (Derewianka; Lancaster).

These studies have uncovered specific linguistic means through which more and less advanced writers build mature arguments. They also suggest that “counter-argumentation” may be just as much about constructing a heteroglossic backdrop against which to position one’s views carefully and sensitively as it is about “winning” an argument by “preempting” others’ objections.

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Together, these studies suggest that students who consider multiple positions, acknowledge opposing views in their texts (actual or potential), and make concessions, among other reader alignment strategies, are better poised to develop sophisticated arguments. These studies, then, offer empirical support for the basic approach to argumentation taken in *TSIS*. However, without systematic attention to the details of language, the textbook is not able to make informed recommendations about subtle and important questions of interpersonal meanings: for example, whether it is better in certain contexts to entertain objections directly or indirectly. This and related questions are the type I take up in my analysis below.

The Corpus Study

The three corpora I examined offer a snapshot of academic writing at three distinct levels. The first corpus is the academic section of the Corpus of Contemporary American English, or COCA (Davies). This is a 91-million-word database of published texts from almost 100 different peer-reviewed journals across disciplines. The second is the Michigan Corpus of Upper-Level Student Papers (MICUSP), an online corpus of 829 high-graded papers written by senior undergraduate students and early graduate students across sixteen fields, totaling 2.2 million words (see Römer and O’Donnell for further details). The third is a corpus of 19,456 directed self-placement (DSP) essays collected from

five years at the University of Michigan and Wake Forest University. These are essays written by newly admitted university students in response to varied prompts asking for evidence-based arguments, ones that support or challenge arguments from assigned reading(s).⁶ At 19.2 million words, the corpus is to my knowledge the largest of its kind. To be sure, these corpora are not perfectly comparable. The first-year (FY) essays are predisiplinary argumentative essays, while the COCA and MICUSP papers are a mix of essays, reports, critiques, research papers, and other academic genres across disciplines. Nevertheless, all the papers are from academic contexts and thus offer a broad testing ground for whether and how the *TSIS* templates are used.

The concordancing software I used to examine the corpora is AntConc (Anthony).⁷ The procedures involved three recursive steps: (1) targeted searches of wordings taken directly from the *TSIS* templates and from the literature on evaluation and metadiscourse (e.g., Hyland, *Metadiscourse*); (2) inductive analysis of word/phrase lists from the corpora generated by AntConc; and (3) qualitative interpretation of concordance results. The purpose of Step 1 was to examine how frequently the exact wordings from the *TSIS* templates were used, as well as how their frequency compared to alternative wordings for achieving the same function. The purpose of the inductive analysis, Step 2, was to identify other common phraseological patterns for achieving the moves, ones that were not picked up in the targeted searches. The purpose of Step 3 was to ensure form/function matching. For example, in many instances the formulation *It could be argued that* functions to entertain an objection; in other cases it is used to suggest the writer's own view in tentative terms. I carefully read the context for each instance to make sure the wording was operating to realize the rhetorical move under analysis.

I began with the templates offered in *TSIS*, highlighting the wordings likely to appear in corpus searches.⁸ For instance, from the template *Yet some readers may challenge my view that*, I highlighted the wording *readers may challenge*. Furthermore, since the salient question in this case is how frequently writers address reader objections directly, I also searched for combinations like *some/many readers, readers may/might/could + verb*, and so on. Using this process, I carefully examined the **bolded** wordings from these eleven templates, in addition to stylistically similar wordings.

Entertaining Objections

1. Yet some **readers may challenge** my view that_____.

2. Of course, **many** will probably disagree with this assertion that_____.
3. Here **many** feminists would probably object that_____.
4. But social Darwinists **would certainly take issue with the argument that**_____.
5. Biologists, of course, **may want to dispute my claim that**_____.
6. Nevertheless, both followers and critics of Malcolm X **will probably suggest** otherwise and argue that_____. (Graff and Birkenstein 82–83)

Making Concessions

7. **Although I grant that**_____, I still maintain that_____.
8. Proponents of X **are right to argue that**. But they exaggerate when they claim that_____.
9. **While it is true that**_____, it does not necessarily follow that_____.
10. **On the one hand, I agree with X that**_____.
11. But on the other hand, I still insist that_____. (89)

For all related wordings, I determined both the raw number of instances and the normalized frequency (per million words of text) so that I could compare frequencies across the three corpora. In the tables below, I show only the normalized frequencies because these reveal distributional patterns across the corpora. I first discuss results for “entertaining objections” and then turn to “making concessions.”

How Academic Writers Entertain Objections: Corpus Findings

Writers can entertain objections in any number of ways, of course. They can also make the move so indirectly that it is not picked up through corpus analysis. With this caveat in mind, the corpus analysis uncovered six recurring options for making this move, ones that are signaled through a clear linguistic exponent (see Table 1). I first explain how the options work, offering examples from all three corpora, and then turn to frequency patterns.

Note that in Table 1 the options are ordered from more to less direct. By “direct,” I am referring to how overtly the alternative view is attributed to an external source—the reader or a specific group. With this criterion, options 1 and 2 are most direct and 5 and 6 least so, with 3 and 4 somewhere in the

Table 1. Recurring linguistic resources for entertaining objections

	Options	Examples
More Direct	1. Naming the reader	Some readers may question our focus on the attitudes of hunters and livestock producers; for example, one might point out that ... (COCA)
	2. “Naming your naysayers” (83)	Cognitive theorists might assert that Sula might have had an optimistic explanatory style which allowed her to ... <u>Regardless</u> , Sula is still ... (PSY.G3.01.1) ^a
	3. Unattributed (active)	One might argue that such an extensive interview process would be unreasonable, <u>but</u> ... (FY)
	4. Unattributed (passive)	It could be objected that it is not consistent to say that I should not do something, but that ... <u>To this I would reply that</u> ... (PHI.G0.06.3)
	5. Nominalized alternative view	Another explanation for Mary Kate’s low weight may be drug abuse. ... <u>However</u> , I believe this to be an incorrect hypothesis. (PSY.G0.40.2)
Less Direct	6. Hypothetical-Real	At first glance , these treatises seem to represent opposing poles in early modern thought ... <u>My reading, however</u> , resists such characterization ... (ENG.G1.02.1)

^a Note that examples from MICUSP are offered with their unique identifiers, showing discipline, year, and paper number.

middle. Interestingly, the least direct formulations (4, 5, 6) do not appear in *TSIS* as parts of the templates. The more direct ones (1, 2, 3) do appear in the textbook. (The “entertain” resources are **bolded** while the accompanying counter, or rebuttal, resources are underlined.)

Option 1 engages reader concerns directly. Identifying *some* or *many readers* as the source of the objecting view clearly projects the reader as a potential dialogic participant. In contrast, option 2 projects a specific third-party voice. Graff and Birkenstein refer to this strategy as “naming your naysayers” (83). Their advice is to name your naysayers wherever possible, as doing so “can add precision and impact to your writing” (82–83). I return to this advice shortly, but for now I’ll just make the point that attributing the objecting view to a specific group serves a different interactional function than attributing it to the reader. The reader in (2) is positioned not as an active participant in the dialogue but as an interested bystander.

The linguistic formulations in options 3 and 4 signal that alternative views are being entertained, but they do not identify the source of those views. They leave it open to the reader to decide whether to claim the view that is credited

to one (in 3) or to no subject at all (in 4). Both are therefore indirect as reader interactional moves.

Formulations 5 and 6 are even more indirect. Option 5 grammatically reduces the opposing view by nominalizing it and placing it in subject position.

Option 6 uses what the linguist Geoff Thompson calls a Hypothetical-Real formulation, which is brought into effect through such wordings as *at first glance*, *on the surface*, and *it may seem/appear that*. These phrases function interactionally when they operate in paired parts. The first part, the “hypothetical” element, is to be taken as a view held by others, potentially the reader, while the second part is

In contrast, option 3, which we might simply call “not naming your naysayers,” was the most popular option among all three groups. Counter to Graff and Birkenstein’s advice, it appears that interpersonal tact may be a greater concern in academic writing contexts than “precision and impact.”

to be taken as the more refined or accurate view that the writer is advancing (see also Martin and White).

Importantly, Thompson discusses the wording in option 4 (*It could be argued/objection that*) in terms of Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory. He explains that this formula is pervasive in academic discourse because it works to project a reader-in-the-text with whom the writer can negotiate meanings without impinging on the reader’s face. Since, that is, the alternative view is left unattributed, the face-threatening act (FTA) of purporting to know what the reader is thinking is mitigated. It is then further mitigated through the low-certainty modal expression (*could*, *might*, *may*). Thompson’s general point is that leaving open the source of the alternative view reflects interpersonal tact because it removes pressure from the reader. It gives the reader a “way out.”

Each of these six options subtly shifts the interpersonal meaning, creating different writer/reader relationships. How are these options distributed across the corpora? At the most general level, the total frequencies of “entertain” moves are similar (see Table 2), with slightly higher numbers in the two more advanced corpora. Based on this analysis, we can see that the FY writers here do frequently entertain alternative views, nearly as often as the upper-level students and published scholars. There are two additional points of overlap worth noting.

First, all three groups preferred less direct options, particularly option 6. Second, “naming your naysayers” was not a frequently used strategy in any of the corpora. It was, in fact, used least frequently among the most experienced academic writers (COCA). In contrast, option 3, which we might simply call “*not*

Table 2. Frequency of six options (per million words) for entertaining objections

	FY	MICUSP	COCA
1. Naming the reader e.g., <i>Some readers may object that ...</i>	0.6	1.3	8.2
2. “Naming your naysayer” e.g., <i>Biologists are likely to claim ...</i>	3.2	3.3	2.7
Direct	3.8	4.6	10.9
3. Unattributed view (active) e.g., <i>Some would argue that ...</i>	75.1	64.4	55.6
4. Unattributed view (passive) e.g., <i>It could be argued that ...</i>	13.8	31.0	29.5
Middle	88.9	95.4	85.1
5. Nominalized view e.g., <i>Another possible view is that ...</i>	0.8	5.4	3.5
6. Hypothetical–Real e.g., <i>At first glance, it may seem that ...</i> <i>However, ...</i>	47.9	53.9	51.2
Indirect	48.7	59.3	54.7
Total	141.4	159.3	150.7

naming your naysayers,” was the most popular option among all three groups. Counter to Graff and Birkenstein’s advice, it appears that interpersonal tact may be a greater concern in academic writing contexts than “precision and impact.”

In contrast to the points of similarity across corpora, there are four noteworthy differences. First, the COCA writers used option 1, the direct reader-focused option, more frequently than did either of the two student groups—more than six times as frequently as the MICUSP writers and more than ten times as frequently as the first-year writers. This difference makes sense considering that the imagined readers for the students were likely a select few (instructors and perhaps administrators and classmates); thus beginning student writers are less likely than more experienced writers to think it appropriate to address explicitly what “readers” might be thinking (see also Hyland, “Representing”).

Second, the two more advanced groups used option 4, the “unattributed in passive voice” option, more than twice as frequently as the FY writers, as in example 1.

1. It could be argued that economic growth is not to be confused with development, even if . . . But democracy is more than the fair game of pluralistic elections (G. Salam, 1994). (COCA)

Third, in direct contrast to this difference, the FY writers preferred option 3, the “unattributed in active voice” option. When moving from beginning to experienced academic writers, there is a decrease in use of more direct formulations for entertaining objections like *One might argue that* and an increase in use of less direct formulations like *It could/might be argued that*. One possible reason for this is that the FY writers learned in high school to avoid passive constructions. Another is that they have not yet acquired this formulation as a lexical bundle.

These results underscore the point that the TSIS templates should be questioned, not because they are formulaic, but because they are *not* formulaic. They do not capture students' or experts' preferred wordings for entertaining objections.

(These two possibilities may go hand in hand.)

Fourth, while the nominalized view option was infrequently selected by all three groups, it was used far more frequently by the two advanced groups: three to five times as frequently.

So far, the analysis suggests that academic writers prefer indirect, subtle options for entertaining objections. What happens when we move down to finer-grained levels of language, to specific strings of words? As seen in Table 3, TSIS strings like *Some readers may challenge*, *Many will probably disagree*, and *Many ____ would probably object that* do not appear in any of the corpora. Even when the strings are teased out—for example, *readers may VERB*—they are still used infrequently. In contrast, there are other strings of words that achieve the same move and do appear frequently in all three corpora. These include *It could be argued/claimed that*, *Some would/may/might argue that*, *On the surface*, and *At first glance*.

It is not the case, then, that all wordings are equal in terms of frequency of use. Some are vastly preferred over others. This means that readers are vastly more “primed” for certain wordings over others, making these wordings less marked or visible. This is an important value of corpus analysis for writing instruction, then. It can reveal frequency patterns that could be shared and discussed with students. Table 3 shows the frequency counts for TSIS and alternative wordings. These results underscore the point that the TSIS templates should be questioned, not because they are formulaic, but because they are *not* formulaic. They do not capture students' or experts' preferred wordings for entertaining objections.

Table 3. Frequency (per million words) of wordings for entertaining objections

<i>TSIS</i> wordings	FY	MICUSP	COCA
“Some readers may challenge”	0	0	0
⇒ <i>readers may</i> VERB	0.1	0	0.2
⇒ <i>readers (might/could/will)</i> VERB	0	0	0.1
“Many will probably disagree”	0	0	0
⇒ <i>some / many will *ly</i> VERB	0	0	0
“Many _____ would probably object that”	0	0	0
⇒ <i>some / many * would *ly</i> VERB that	0.1	0	0
⇒ <i>some / many * would</i> VERB that	1.1	0	0.1
<i>Name/Group</i> “would certainly take issue with”	0	0	0
⇒ <i>_____ would (_____ ly) take issue with</i>	0	0	0
<i>Name/Group</i> “may want to dispute my claim that”	0	0	0
⇒ <i>_____ may want to dispute my/the * that</i>	0.1	0	0
<i>Name/Group</i> “will probably suggest”	0	0	0
⇒ <i>_____ will _____ ly</i> VERB	0	0	0
TOTAL from <i>TSIS</i>	1.4	0	0.4
Alternative wordings			
Some would/may/might argue that	14.2	3.3	1
On the surface	9.5	8.8	8.4
At first glance	8.9	6.6	5.1
It could be *d that	4.2	8.9	8.5
TOTAL alternative	36.8	27.6	23.0

In sum, analysis of this one move shows the following. (1) Writers in all three groups preferred to acknowledge objections namelessly, counter to the suggestion in *TSIS*. (2) They likewise preferred to interact with readers' views indirectly, without attributing propositions pointedly to the reader. (3) While writers in all three groups more frequently entertained opposing views indirectly, the experienced writers did directly address the reader (*Many readers may...*) more frequently than beginning writers, and they also more frequently engaged others' views in "academic" ways, via nominalizations and passive verb constructions. (4) Many of the *TSIS* wordings were hardly ever used, though there were other formulaic expressions used to make the same move. I discuss implications of these findings below.

How Academic Writers Make Concessions

After acknowledging an objecting view, writers may choose to accept all or part of the view before offering a rejoinder. While Graff and Birkenstein explain this strategy in terms of “overcoming” objections (88), linguists have explained concession more in terms of building solidarity with interlocutors by affirming and validating their views (e.g., Martin and White 125). This view of argumentation as a process of building sympathetic understanding between writer and reader is one with which many beginning university writers are less familiar than the view of argumentation as armed combat. I return to this point shortly.

For the purposes of my analysis here, I am viewing concessive elements as cooperating alongside counter moves. I therefore adopt Martin and White’s concept of “concede + counter” pairings. In these pairings, high-certainty adverbials like *undoubtedly*, *certainly*, and *to be sure* are often used to signal the onset of the first element in the pair, the concession. As shown in example 2, the second element, the counter, is typically signaled by such markers as *however*, *nevertheless*, and *yet*.

2. **Undoubtedly**, her position as a Korean subject is partly responsible because . . . Yet upon revisiting Akiko’s recruitment, it is . . . (ENG.G1.06.1)

Sometimes the counter alone is sufficient to encode a concessive meaning. This is especially the case with a certain subclass of counter markers including *nevertheless*, *regardless*, *at the same time*, and *still*, as seen in example 3.

3. Research has shown that creep and shrinkage are greatly reduced compared to plain concrete. **Still**, a clear understating has not been found. (CEE.G1.05.1).

Just as with entertaining objections, the analysis revealed that there are more and less direct ways to execute the concede + counter move. Table 4 offers a breakdown of the various lexico-grammatical resources used to introduce the first (concession) element. I turn to the second (counter) element below.

The most striking (and perhaps counterintuitive) result is that the FY writers used more concession signals than did the two advanced groups. They used them more than twice as frequently as the COCA writers, and there was a general decrease in use of such signals when moving toward the more experienced academic writers. After closely examining the contexts, I can suggest two possible reasons for this. One has to do with genre—specifically, the DSP essay task and students’ experiences with antecedent genres calling for explicit

Table 4. Frequency (per million words) of “concession” wordings

	FY	MICUSP	COCA
Direct signals			
<i>Although / While I *</i>	37.5	25.4	4.6
<i>Yes,</i>	28.5	5.6	4.0
<i>It is true (that)</i>	17.5	6.6	10.6
<i>While it is true</i>	5.7	1.9	1.2
<i>True,</i>	4.3	1.4	2.7
<i>I grant / concede / admit that</i>	0.1	0	0.1
<i>On (the) one hand (,) I agree</i>	0.1	0	0
<i>Proponents of X are right</i>	0	0	0
Subtotal	93.7	40.9	23.2
Indirect signals			
<i>Of course,</i>	26.1	20.7	21.1
<i>Clearly,</i>	21.8	25.4	14.0
<i>Obviously,</i>	16.3	11.8	5.5
<i>Undoubtedly/without a doubt,</i>	10.5	3.3	1.6
<i>Certainly,</i>	3.8	9.4	6.3
Sub-Total	78.5	70.6	48.5
Total	172.2	111.5	71.7

argumentation. As reflected in the FY writers’ frequent use of the formulation *Some might argue that*, the DSP essay task may suggest to students the need to strike an adversarial stance, using direct language like *Although I admit* and *While it is true*. A second possibility, one not mutually exclusive with the first, is that the MICUSP and COCA writers encoded concessive meanings just as frequently (if not more so) but through less explicit wordings.

This second possibility would follow from Danielle S. McNamara, Scott A. Crossley, and Philip M. McCarthy’s study of cohesion in high- and low-proficiency undergraduate essays. The authors found, also perhaps counterintuitively, that the higher proficiency essays in their corpus did *not* employ more markers of cohesion than the lower proficiency essays, meaning they did not

use language any more explicitly to ease the reader's comprehension. A similar phenomenon may be at play here: the more experienced writers may have made concessions without overtly marking the first element in the pair. I return to this point when I discuss the second element, the counter.

There are two further patterns to note in Table 4. First, compared to the MICUSP and COCA writers, the FY writers vastly preferred the *TSIS*-

The personalized and overt signals like / grant/concede that, I agree with/that, and Proponents of X are right are not used by any of the groups. It is therefore difficult to recommend that students use wordings like these if their aim is to approximate an academic register when carrying out this move.

like wordings (shown in the top half of the table). They used these more than twice as frequently as the MICUSP writers and more than three times as frequently as the COCA writers. The greatest difference is with the highly overt concession signals like *Yes* and *While it is true*. As with the two other formulations already mentioned, it may be that these wordings are genre appropriate for the argumentative DSP task. Second, the

personalized and overt signals like *I grant/concede that, I agree with/that*, and *Proponents of X are right* were not used by any of the groups. It is therefore difficult to recommend that students use wordings like these if their aim is to approximate an academic register when carrying out this move.

The second element in the pair is the counter (see Table 5). Here we see that the two experienced groups of writers more frequently used the concessive-oriented counters *Nevertheless*, *(Even) Still*, *Regardless*, and *At the same time*. As shown in example 3 above, it is possible that they more frequently used these second-part signals without the accompanying first-part signal.

There are two additional results worth noting. First, all three groups vastly preferred short adverbials like *Yet*, *Nevertheless*, and *At the same time* over the more personalized or elaborated counters that are offered as examples in *TSIS*. Second, *On the other hand* was infrequently used to realize a concessive or counter meaning; it was more typically used to mark a contrast between two opposing views (cf. Aull and Lancaster).

In sum, analysis of this move has revealed the following. (1) Concessions to the reader-in-the-text can be signaled explicitly (*While I agree*), implicitly through high certainty markers (*Certainly*), or unobtrusively through counters alone (*Nevertheless*). (2) The MICUSP and COCA writers used implicit and unobtrusive signals more frequently than explicit ones, while the FY writers more frequently used explicit signals, in addition to more concession signals overall.

Table 5. Frequency (per million words) of “counter” wordings

	FY	MICUSP	COCA
TSIS counters			
<i>On the other hand (,) I still * that</i>	0	0	0
<i>On the other hand (,) I</i>	1.4	1.4	0.6
<i>I still VERB that</i>	2.5	1.0	0.4
<i>It does not (necessarily) follow that</i>	0.1	1.4	0.8
Sub-Total	4.0	3.8	1.8
Other counters			
<i>Yet,</i>	51.6	59.3	28.4
<i>Nevertheless,</i>	29.0	46.6	56.9
<i>(Even) Still,</i>	17.7	20.2	33.7
<i>Regardless,</i>	7.0	10.8	1.6
<i>At the same time,</i>	19.2	38.6	41.4
Sub-Total (Condensed)	124.5	175.5	162.0
Total	128.5	179.3	163.8

Discussion and Implications for Teaching

This corpus analysis has uncovered recurring linguistic resources that academic writers use to interact with views that are alternative to their own, and, for the most part, these do not include the wordings suggested in *TSIS*. The patterns identified in this analysis are important, furthermore, because they point to qualities of argumentation that appear to be valued (if not implicitly expected) in academic writing. Specifically, the analysis revealed that writers in all three groups prefer indirect formulations for entertaining objections like *It could be argued* and *It may seem* as opposed to more direct ones like *Some readers may object* or *Biologists are likely to claim*. It also showed that writers frequently use language to validate others’ views by eagerly affirming points of shared agreement (*Of course*, *Certainly*, *To be sure*), a strategy that is used more frequently (especially among the two experienced groups) than highly direct or reluctant concession wordings. Finally, the analysis showed that the more experienced writers prefer short, unobtrusive concession markers (*Nevertheless*, *Still*), while the beginning FY writers do use the more direct, elaborated wordings suggested in *TSIS* (*Yes, it is true that . . . But*).

A note of caution is warranted regarding this distinction between experienced and less experienced writers, however. Some differential patterns between the groups may be chalked up just as much to genre differences as to experience level. Given that the FY essays are predisciplinary argumentative essays, while the COCA and MICUSP papers are a mix of reports, critiques, research papers, essays, and other genres across disciplines, it makes sense that explicitly worded concession markers like *Yes* and *While it is true* would be used more frequently in the FY corpus. These are argumentative “essayist” moves, which may be less suitable for research papers and reports. For the same reason, it also makes sense that direct “entertain” strategies like *Some might say that* would be used more frequently in the FY corpus. A limitation of this study, then, is that it does not tease out the degrees and precise ways that writers working in various contexts and genres go about making concessions and entertaining alternative views.

At the same time, the results do suggest important cross-disciplinary and cross-generic patterns in MICUSP and COCA in how the writers project an authorial persona or “discoursal self” (Ivanić).

One implication of this study for understanding academic writing, then, is that interpersonal tact may be an implicit guiding principle for writers as they go about positioning their claims. By “interpersonal tact,” I refer to light-touch language strategies for mitigating face-threatening acts (cf. G. Myers; Thompson), in particular by not attributing views directly to the reader or specific groups of people.

and negotiating with views that *could* belong to the reader.

One implication of this study for understanding academic writing, then, is that interpersonal tact may be an implicit guiding principle for writers as they go about positioning their claims. By “interpersonal tact,” I refer to light-touch language strategies for mitigating face-threatening acts (cf. G. Myers; Thompson), in particular by not attributing views directly to the reader or specific groups of people. Attributing views to specific groups is sometimes necessary, of course, and this move is represented in the corpora, but it is infrequent, likely because it can come across as overly bold or presumptuous. I also refer to language strategies for validating the reader’s opposing views, as opposed simply to trying to correct or overcome them. Because these interpersonal

strategies are so pervasive in academic writing, it makes sense to question the *TSIS* templates less in terms of how “formulaic” they are and more in terms of how well they reflect these implicit politeness conventions.

It is important to note, however, that many of the *TSIS* templates do use hedges, which, while complex in functionality, have been interpreted in terms of politeness (e.g. G. Myers). Consider, for instance, that five of the six “entertaining objections” templates that I examined use hedges, including *may challenge*, *will probably disagree*, and *may want to dispute my claim*. That these wordings are infused throughout the *TSIS* templates, and without commentary, suggests that Graff and Birkenstein (like most scholars, I would presume) do not “see” them when they read and write, having acquired them naturally over time. What I have tried to show is that there is value in uncovering and trying to understand patterns in these kinds of tacit choices in interpersonal meanings, and not just in regard to hedging, but also writers’ choices of grammatical subjects, passive versus active verb constructions, attitude markers, and other wordings that reflect “the way we position ourselves in relation to others” (Micciche 719).

In general, results of this analysis suggest that entertaining opposing views and making concessions may be understood more accurately, and perhaps more progressively, as strategies for building mutual understanding and respect between writer and reader and other participants in the discourse. Unfortunately, agonistic orientations to argumentation are more deeply embedded in the public’s and academy’s metalanguage about writing (cf. Lakoff and Johnson; Tannen). In instructional settings, we tend to discuss counterargument strategies with our students as efforts to *defend* or *strengthen our positions*, which, while not glaringly agonistic, do stem from the argument-as-war metaphor discussed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. While Graff and Birkenstein are clear that their aim is to assist students to enter academic *conversations*, they also associate making concessions with yielding and then “standing your ground” (89) and entertaining objections with “disarming critics” and “making a kind of preemptive strike” (79).

Such combative language is difficult to avoid; it pervades our ordinary talk about argumentation. My suggestion, though, is that if we are to embrace the conversational metaphor fully, we can try to shift our talk about writing as

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much as possible to reflect it. Good conversationalists, or discussants, carefully listen to, mirror, and validate others' views, even those with which they disagree. They give room for others to ask questions and express concerns, and they try not to put words in others' mouths. They try to be fair, respectful, and open-minded, asking questions, offering reasons for their judgments, and pausing to consider counter views and evidence. At its best, academic writing reflects these qualities, and students can be offered examples of texts that achieve them, along with accompanying explanations.

To be sure, students are exposed to fewer examples than we might wish of this kind of interpersonally tactful argumentation in public discourses. Popular news programs and talk shows tend to frame complex issues as debates between two sides, provoking heated, strident exchanges (Cioffi; Tannen). A similar critique can be made of writing tasks in standardized tests, where students are rewarded for writing assertive, "clear" arguments that express adversarial, competitive epistemological stances (see, e.g., Barton). Considering these experiences of argumentation, it isn't surprising that many students would look upon even concession as an adversarial tactic. Such a view could result in abbreviated, token nods toward concession rather than more fully realized moves to establish shared understanding.

Consider, for instance, this concession move from the FY corpus. This move appears to be inspired by *TSIS*, as marked in the **bolded** words.

4. **Proponents** of Osborn's claims **are right to argue** that the quantity of ideas generated when dissention is present is reduced. However, **I still maintain that** the quality of the ideas that come out of criticized discussion far outweigh the ideas created with a strictly divergent production technique. (FY)

The wording of this text shows awareness of the value of conceding before countering. But the writer could be encouraged to extend and revise the interpersonal meanings he is expressing. As currently formulated, this student's text would position a reader who sees value in brainstorming as a "proponent" of Osborn's claims, and it offers little further validation of this point of view. In light of this study's findings, I would suggest that the concession be carried out less pointedly and given more space, with a more qualified counter, perhaps like this:

Certainly, the quantity of ideas generated during brainstorming is increased when dissention is reduced. Brainstorming is a crucial strategy, then, for encouraging

participation and for generating ideas during initial stages of tackling a problem. Furthermore, brainstorming is especially useful when . . . At the same time, however, the value of dissent and critique can't be underestimated, and the quality of the ideas that come out of criticized discussion may outweigh . . . , especially during refining stages.

This revision strikes me as more considered. It does realize a distinctly different voice from the original, and I cannot argue that this voice is inherently "better," but it offers an alternative to the more agonistic stance. In general, if beginning university writers would like to adopt the kind of measured, "adjudicator" voice (Coffin) that is apparently valued in much of academic discourse—which they have every right to strive for, if they so choose—they could learn from examples of academic texts that achieve this quality, perhaps ones from disciplinary contexts that interest them. They could also attempt multiple realizations of argumentative moves in their own writing.

Another teaching implication of this study is that students can learn to see that, in many ways, they are already making the kinds of moves explored in *TSIS*, but less overtly. For instance, when a FY writer selects the kinds of resources in example 5, she may be tacitly recruiting the reader's participation.

5. **At first glance, it may seem** that the success of these empires was because of the sheer amounts of money and resources the trade routes were bringing in. **But** these trade routes also brought in many bright people from different backgrounds. (FY)

This writer could be assisted to see that she selected *At first glance* and *it may seem* in order to engage with an anticipated conclusion from the reader (cf. Thompson). In this way, she could be encouraged to examine her own writing for similar instances of interactional moves, along the way developing a metalanguage for talking in explicit terms about textual choices related to audience and reader positioning.

Concluding Remarks

In this article I have aimed to extend calls to recenter language in writing research and instruction (e.g., Aull; MacDonald; Micciche; S. Myers; Rossen-Knill), specifically by showing that systematic analysis of academic discourse can uncover patterns of interpersonal meanings that are apparently valued in academic writing. Composition's disciplinary divide from linguistics may be responsible for the gap I indicated at the outset in the critical reception of *TSIS*.

In addition to exposing this gap, I hope also to have made the case that stepping in to fill it is a worthwhile endeavor, both for informing our understanding of the patterned ways writers use language to create valued interpersonal meanings and for refining the ways we talk with students about the details of language in written argumentation.

Before closing, let me affirm that I have not argued that student writers should be pressured to “write like academics.” I do think writing instructors have a responsibility to assist students to understand some of the linguistic peculiarities of academic registers, but ultimately student writers should decide for themselves, in an informed manner, the kinds of discoursal selves (Ivanić) or voices they wish to construct in their own writing, as well as the likely consequences of projecting some voices over others. I have also not argued that there is *no* use in offering formulas to students. I have not offered a wholesale critique of a project like *TSIS*, which I find valuable and useful.

What I have tried to argue, in line with Graff and Birkenstein, is that there is pedagogical value in recognizing that there are recurring moves in academic writing and that, while there are many ways writers can go about accomplishing these moves, they are often realized through specific wordings, ones which can be studied and deployed. I have also offered evidence that, by not capturing these frequently selected wordings, *TSIS* misses important interpersonal meanings that recur in academic writing. Students can learn from explicit discussions about these meanings, as well as from the opportunity to receive feedback on related language choices they have made in their own writing and the possible effects on readers.

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Notes

1. I consulted the following reviews and references to *TSIS*: Arthur and Case-Halferty; Benay; Broekhoff; Edlund; Frey and Fisher; Grow; Hollrah and Farmer; Lynch-Biniek; Thonney. I also consulted the April/May 2008 archives for the Writing Program Administrator (WPA) listserv, which followed Birkenstein and Graff’s defense of formulas in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

2. Graff and Birkenstein have acknowledged and responded to this critique in multiple ways. In their *Chronicle* essay, they explicitly make the point, “Students can and should be encouraged to modify [their templates] to suit particular arguments and audiences.”
3. As a notable exception to this silence, Jelena Colovic-Markovic has presented on this very question at the CCCC Annual Convention in 2011 in Atlanta.
4. More specifically, by *interpersonal meanings* I refer to the interpersonal macro-function of language discussed in SFL (systemic functional linguistic) theory, explained by Halliday (*On Grammar* 199) as “the speaker’s intrusion in the speech event: his attitudes, evaluations and judgments; his expectations and demands; and the nature of the exchange he is setting up—the role that he is taking on himself in the communication process, and the role, or rather the role choice, that he is assigning to the hearer.”
5. The two other macro-functions in SFL theory are the *ideational*, which has to do broadly with expressions of propositional content (or field specific meanings), and the *textual*, which has to do broadly with expressions of cohesion and coherence.
6. For further details on DSP prompts, theory, and logistics see Aull; Gere et al.
7. AntConc was developed by Laurence Anthony of Waseda University, Tokyo. The software and instructions are free for download from the author’s homepage at <http://www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/>.
8. To be clear, under “entertaining objections” I also included the templates for “naming your naysayers” (Graff and Birkenstein 83). The difference between these two categories, as discussed in TSIS, is whether the source of the objection is named or left nameless; e.g., *Many biologists might claim* vs. *Many people might claim*.

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