

T H E D R . ' S R E V I E W
P R E S E N T S

Signal Phrases *That Work*

A Complete Academic Writing Toolkit for Postgraduate Students

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Based on the framework in They Say, I Say by Gerald Graff & Cathy Birkenstein ©Linda Bloomberg

How to Use This Guide

This guide covers all six types of signal phrases used in academic writing. Each type serves a different purpose — and knowing which one to use, and when, is the difference between a paper that summarizes and a paper that analyzes.

For each section, you will find:

- ◆ The purpose of the signal phrase type
- ◆ A table of specific phrases with what each one signals
- ◆ A pro tip for using them effectively

Keep this guide open while you write. The more you practice using precise signal phrases, the more natural they will feel — and the more your scholarly voice will come through on the page.

Section 1: Capturing Authorial Action

For Summarizing and Paraphrasing

Use these phrases when you are conveying the essence of what a scholar has argued, claimed, observed, or emphasized. The verb you choose should reflect the intellectual move the author is actually making — not just the fact that they said something.

SIGNAL PHRASE	WHAT IT SIGNALS
X acknowledges that ____	The author admits or accepts something, possibly reluctantly
X argues that ____	The author is making a case for a position
X believes that ____	The author holds this as a conviction
X celebrates the fact that ____	The author is expressing approval or enthusiasm
X claims that ____	The author asserts this, possibly with some controversy
X complains that ____	The author expresses dissatisfaction or criticism
X concedes that ____	The author reluctantly agrees with something
X demonstrates that ____	The author shows evidence for this
X emphasizes that ____	The author stresses this as particularly important
X insists that ____	The author maintains this firmly, perhaps against opposition
X observes that ____	The author notes this from evidence or experience
X questions whether ____	The author expresses doubt or skepticism
X refuses to claim that ____	The author deliberately withholds this position

SIGNAL PHRASE	WHAT IT SIGNALS
X reminds us that ____	The author is bringing something back to attention
X reports that ____	The author is conveying findings or information
X suggests that ____	The author proposes this tentatively
X urges ____	The author advocates strongly for this

Pro Tip: The verb you choose is a form of analysis. "Concedes" signals reluctant agreement. "Urges" signals advocacy. "Questions" signals doubt. Choose based on what the author is actually doing — not just what feels comfortable.

Section 2: Introducing Quotations

For Direct Quotes

Use these phrases when you are about to quote directly from a source. They alert the reader that a citation is coming, identify who is being quoted, and establish the context — so the quote never lands without preparation.

Remember: every direct quote must be introduced. A floating quote forces the reader to do interpretive work that belongs to you as the author.

SIGNAL PHRASE	WHAT IT SIGNALS
X states, " ____ "	Neutral introduction; lets the quote speak
In her book [title], X maintains that " ____ "	Grounds the quote in a specific published source
Writing in [journal], X complains that " ____ "	Situates the quote in its publication context
As the prominent philosopher X puts it, " ____ "	Elevates the authority of the source
According to X, " ____ "	Straightforward attribution; widely used
X himself writes, " ____ "	Signals a direct self-referential quote from the author
In X's view, " ____ "	Frames the quote as the author's perspective
X agrees when she writes, " ____ "	Signals the quote supports an existing point
X disagrees when he writes, " ____ "	Signals the quote introduces tension or opposition
X complicates matters further when he writes, " ____ "	Signals the quote adds complexity to the discussion

Pro Tip: The phrases that signal agreement or disagreement (e.g., "X complicates matters further when he writes") are especially powerful in literature reviews. They tell the reader how to receive the quote before they read it — which means you stay in control of the conversation.

Section 3: Explaining Quotations

For Analysis After a Quote or Paraphrase

Every paragraph that includes a quote or paraphrase must show clarification, interpretation, or analysis. This is not optional. It is how you, the author, take back the final word in your paragraph.

These phrases signal to your reader: here is what this quote means in the context of my argument.

SIGNAL PHRASE	WHAT IT SIGNALS
Basically, X is saying ____	Translates the quote into accessible terms
In other words, X believes ____	Restates the quote's meaning for clarity
In making this comment, X argues that ____	Connects the quote to a broader intellectual move
X's view confirms the view that ____	The quote directly supports your point
X's view clarifies the view that ____	The quote adds precision to your argument
X's view reaffirms the view that ____	The quote reinforces a point already established
X's point is that ____	Distills the core of the quote
The essence of X's argument is that ____	Captures the author's central claim
X is insisting that ____	Emphasizes the author's conviction behind the quote

Pro Tip: Notice the difference between "confirms," "clarifies," and "reaffirms." They are not synonyms. Each signals a different relationship between the evidence and your argument. Choosing the right word is a micro-level form of analysis.

Section 4: Introducing Statistics or "Standard Views"

For Data, Research Findings, and Conventional Wisdom

This section addresses one of the most common citation questions in academic writing: when do you cite something, and when do you not?

The rule: numerical data and specific research findings must be cited. Widely-held beliefs and conventional wisdom do not require a citation.

For Conventional Wisdom — No Citation Required

SIGNAL PHRASE	WHAT IT SIGNALS
Americans today tend to believe that ____	Introduces a widespread cultural assumption
Conventional wisdom has it that ____	References common general knowledge
Common sense seems to dictate that ____	Invokes what most people would assume
The standard way of thinking about X has it that ____	Establishes the prevailing view before challenging it
It is often said that ____	References commonly repeated beliefs
Many people assumed that ____	Notes a historical or common assumption

For Numerical Data and Research Findings — Cite It

SIGNAL PHRASE	WHAT IT SIGNALS
A recent study shows ____	Introduces empirical research findings
Scientists recently noted that ____	Attributes findings to researchers in the field
Doctors at [Institution] claim that ____	Grounds data in a specific authoritative source
In the [year] Census, it was shown that ____	Attributes data to a specific, citable dataset

Pro Tip: When in doubt, cite. It is better to over-attribute than to allow a committee member to question whether a claim is supported. But knowing when you don't need to cite — conventional wisdom — also prevents cluttered, over-cited writing.

Section 5: Introducing Contrasting Arguments

For Presenting the Other Side

Including sources that disagree with your argument is a strength, not a weakness. A literature review that presents only evidence in your favor signals to your committee that you either did not read widely, or you are not confident enough in your argument to let the other side speak.

Use these phrases to introduce counterarguments with control and confidence.

SIGNAL PHRASE	WHAT IT SIGNALS
In their recent work, Y and Z have offered harsh critiques of Dr. X for ____	Introduces named scholars in active disagreement
X argues ____	Introduces a contrasting position directly
According to both X and Y, ____	Shows that opposition is shared across multiple scholars
Politicians ____, X argues, should ____	Embeds a contrasting claim within a broader argument
A number of sociologists have suggested that X's work has fundamental problems	Sets up a contested scholarly reputation
It has become common today to dismiss X's contribution to ____	Names the prevailing dismissal before engaging with it

Pro Tip: The most effective use of contrasting argument phrases involves scaffolding — presenting the full debate before offering your own analysis. When you lay out the tension first, your conclusion lands harder because the reader already understands the stakes.

Section 6: Expressing Authorial Opinions

Your Expert Voice — Without First Person

Yes, you are allowed to have an opinion in a research paper. No, you cannot say "I think" or "I believe." These phrases let you step into the role of expert interpreter — analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing the evidence — without using first person.

SIGNAL PHRASE	WHAT IT SIGNALS
But ___ are real and, arguably, the most significant factor in ___	Asserts importance of a factor with scholarly hedging
But X is wrong that ___	Directly challenges a source's conclusion
However, it is simply not true that ___	Refutes a claim with confidence
Indeed, it is highly likely that ___	Asserts probability while maintaining scholarly tone
But the view that ___ does not fit all the facts	Notes a disconnect between a claim and the evidence
X is right that ___	Affirms a source's position before adding nuance
X is wrong that ___	Directly disputes a source's position
X is both right and wrong that ___	Holds complexity — partial agreement and disagreement
Yet a sober analysis of the matter reveals ___	Positions your analysis as measured and evidence-based
Nevertheless, new research shows ___	Signals that evidence has shifted the conversation
Anyone familiar with ___ should see that ___	Appeals to shared scholarly knowledge
Proponents of X are right to argue that ___. But they exaggerate when they claim that ___.	The nuance move: agree and push back in one sentence
While it is true that ___, it does not necessarily follow that ___	Acknowledges partial truth while limiting a claim

Pro Tip: The "nuance move" — "Proponents of X are right to argue that ___. But they exaggerate when they claim that ___." — is one of the most sophisticated tools in academic writing. It shows your committee that you can hold complexity, weigh partial truths, and land somewhere precise. Use it to close your most important paragraphs.

Quick Reference: Which Type Do I Need?

SIGNAL PHRASE	WHAT IT SIGNALS
I am summarizing what a scholar said	Section 1: Capturing Authorial Action
I am quoting directly from a source	Section 2: Introducing Quotations
I just used a quote and need to explain it	Section 3: Explaining Quotations
I am citing a statistic or research finding	Section 4: Statistics — cite it
I am referencing a general belief or assumption	Section 4: Standard Views — no citation needed
I am including a source that disagrees with me	Section 5: Contrasting Arguments
I want to share my analytical conclusion	Section 6: Expressing Authorial Opinions

A Final Word

What you can see, you can finish.

Signal phrases are not a shortcut or a crutch. They are the vocabulary of scholarly conversation — the precise language that allows you to engage with the literature, position yourself within it, and communicate your analysis with authority.

You have done the research. You have read the literature. Now write like the expert you already are.

If you need a PhD-level editor to review your work — for signal phrases, voice, structure, formatting, or citations — I would love to help.

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