

writing. Especially with difficult texts, you not only need to find the position the writer is responding to—the “they say”—but you also need to determine whether the writer is agreeing with it, challenging it, or both.

Perhaps you’ll worry that fitting your own response into one of these three categories will force you to oversimplify your argument or lessen its complexity, subtlety, or originality. In fact, however, the more complex and subtle your argument is, and the more it departs from the conventional ways people think, the more your readers will need to be able to place it on their mental map in order to process the complex details you present. That is, the complexity, subtlety, and originality of your response are more likely to stand out and be noticed if readers have a baseline sense of where you stand relative to any ideas you’ve cited. As you move through this chapter, we hope you’ll agree that the forms of agreeing, disagreeing, and both agreeing and disagreeing that we discuss, far from being simplistic or one-dimensional, are able to accommodate a high degree of creative, complex thought.

It is always a good tactic to begin your response not by launching directly into a mass of details, but by stating clearly whether you agree, disagree, or both, using a direct, no-nonsense move such as: “I agree,” “I disagree,” or “I am of two minds. I agree that . . . , but I cannot agree that” Once you have offered one of these straightforward statements (or one of the many variations discussed below), readers will have a strong grasp of your position and then be able to appreciate whatever complexity you offer as your response unfolds.

Still, you may object that these three basic ways of responding don’t cover all the options—that they ignore interpretive or analytical responses, for example. In other words, you might

think that when you interpret a literary work you don’t necessarily agree or disagree with anything, but simply explain the work’s meaning, style, or structure. Many essays about literature and the arts, it might be said, take this form—they interpret a work’s meaning, thus rendering matters of agreeing or disagreeing irrelevant.

We would argue, however, that the best interpretations do in fact agree, disagree, or both—that instead of being offered solo, the best interpretations take strong stands relative to other interpretations. In fact, there would be no reason to offer an interpretation of a work of literature or art unless you were responding to the interpretations or possible interpretations of others. Even when you point out features or qualities of an artistic work that others have not noticed, you are implicitly disagreeing with what those interpreters have said by pointing out that they missed or overlooked something that, in your view, is important. In any effective interpretation, then, you need to not only state what you yourself take the work of art to mean, but to do so relative to the interpretations of other readers—be they professional scholars, teachers, classmates, or even hypothetical readers (as in, “Although some readers might think that this poem is about . . . , it is in fact about . . .”).

DISAGREE—AND EXPLAIN WHY

Disagreeing may seem like one of the simpler moves a writer can make, but in fact it poses hidden challenges. You need to do more than simply assert that you disagree with a particular view; you also have to offer persuasive reasons *why* you disagree. After all, disagreeing means more than adding “not” to what someone else has said, more than just saying, “Although they