Writing with Sources

"First seek to understand, then to be understood." —Stephen Covey

Consulting outside sources during a research project is as important as listening before you talk in a conversation. In writing, your contribution to an academic (or other) discussion becomes meaningful when you seek and incorporate what others have said on your subject. This handout offers guidance on consulting sources purposefully, selecting sources to use, and incorporating them effectively in your writing.

Consult Sources Purposefully

Writers who use sources well see at least five purposes for consulting them:

1. To use information that provides useful background or a context for understanding the research question.
2. To use information that answers a relevant question.
3. To use information as evidence to support a claim or idea, or in some cases, evidence that seems *not* to support as assertion but might if seen a certain way.
4. To use information from a particular author who is influential in the debate about a topic.
5. To use information to *complicate* a writer's thesis, raising interesting questions. (Ballenger, 2011, p. 486)

First, Begin with a Question, Not a Conclusion

Incorporating sources in your writing is much easier if you begin your research with questions in mind rather than conclusions. Writers sometimes face the temptation to put off research, settle on an easy conclusion, and then gather and stick in sources that support it. This method undermines true inquiry and offers useless results because the writer is simply going through the motions to turn something in.

Meaningful research is fueled by curiosity. A true desire to uncover answers can help you choose a topic you connect with, find out what has been said about it, and narrow your focus as you discover questions you want to pursue. The following chart may help you get started.

What do I know about this topic?	What do I want to know?	Where can I find this information?

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Select Your Sources Wisely

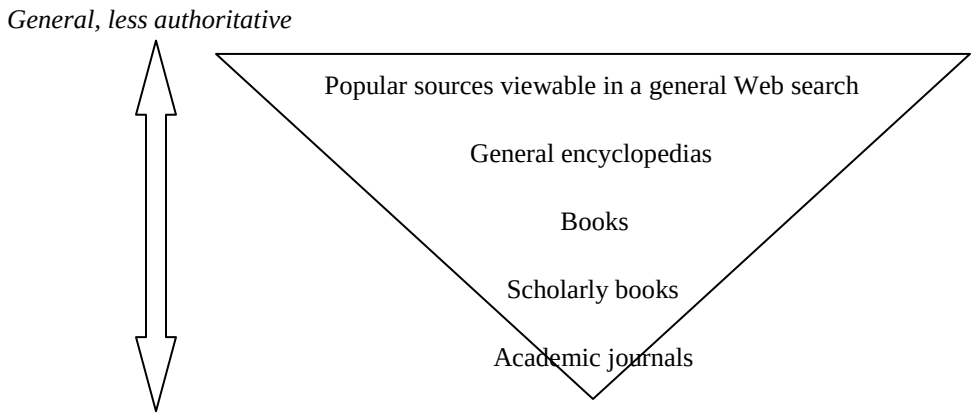
Consult Primary and Secondary Sources

Primary sources are original documents or artifacts that constitute firsthand information. These can be diaries, speeches, letters, official records, works of art, or relics. Answers in interviews that you conduct may also be considered primary sources. *Secondary sources* are publications or other works that interpret or analyze primary sources. These include journal articles, media commentary, book reviews, critical essays, or textbooks.

Good researchers use both kinds of sources but for different purposes. One would use a primary source as a subject for study or to prove information that needs hard evidence to back it up. And in the same project, secondary sources would be used to provide other writers' perspectives or to further discuss a single perspective.

Choose from General and Specialized Sources

All sources fit somewhere on a hierarchy of authoritativeness. Usually, the more specialized the source, the more authoritative it is. The appropriateness of a source really depends on the information sought. Asking your roommate about the impact of local farm shrinkage on his or her life could add a human element to your essay if your roommate can speak personally on the subject. But if you're looking for a broader picture of the impact on the community, interview the horse's mouth at your local farm bureau.



Adapted from Ballenger, 2011, p. 431

Critically Consider Your Sources

- Why choose this source and not others I've consulted?
- What do I know about this author's qualifications to write about this subject?
- What do I know about the publisher?
- How are these sources in conversation with each other?
- How does the information in this source align with or contradict other sources?
- What argument does this source make, and how does it support it?
- What in this source is most (and least) convincing to me?
- What sources does this source use?
- Would my audience trust this source? (adapted from Kleinfeld,)

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Incorporate Sources Effectively

Writers incorporate sources' ideas into their writing using three main methods: quotation, summary, and paraphrase. In each method, you must understand and accurately reflect your source's meaning, you must clearly distinguish the source's contribution from your own writing, and you must correctly cite the source. Shortcuts, such as "fluffing" (adding unnecessary words and information) and "patchwriting," (discussed below), can lead to accusations of dishonesty. Also see the handout "Understanding and Avoiding Plagiarism."

Quotation

When the exact words of a source matter—that is, when you want to analyze them or distinguish them somehow—write them the way you read or hear them, using quotation marks. Signal phrases and attribution tags, such as "Sipher asserts . . . ," help readers distinguish between your words and those of your sources. An example follows.

Original passage:

> Ask high school teachers if recalcitrant students learn anything of value. Ask teachers if these students do any homework. Quite the contrary, these students know they will be passed from grade to grade until they are old enough to quit or until, as is more likely, they receive a high school diploma. At the point when students could legally quit, most choose to remain since they know they are likely to be allowed to graduate whether they do acceptable work or not. (Sipher, 1977, p. 31)

Example Quotation:

> Sipher (1977) asserts, "[Recalcitrant] students know they will be passed from grade to grade until they are old enough to quit or until, as is more likely, they receive a high school diploma" (p. 31).

Summary

When writers want to quickly sum up a source's point (to use it as an example or to otherwise comment on it), they read or listen to the source, understand its meaning, and then communicate that meaning in a more concise way. Summaries can borrow exact wording from the source if appropriate, using quotation marks.

Example Summary:

> Sipher (1977) believes that most intractable students stay in school because they know they will graduate "whether they do acceptable work or not" (p. 31).

Paraphrase

When writers want to restate a source's points to examine them more closely, they try to capture the ideas of the source in their own words, but in roughly the same length as the original. As with summarizing, whenever a paraphrase uses exact wording from the original, quotation marks are used.

Example Paraphrase:

> Sipher (1977) says that rather than take advantage of the learning opportunities high school offers, intractable students sometimes endure the system until they can legally quit. But more often, he says, they just stay there, waiting until someone hands them a diploma no matter what their work over the past four years looks like (p. 31).

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Avoid Patchwriting

The Citation Project (Jamieson & Howard, 2011) defines patchwriting as "restating a phrase, clause, or one or more sentences while staying close to the language or syntax of the source." This is often done by copying the source text and then rearranging or changing some of the source's words.

Example of Patchwriting:

> Sipher (1977) says recalcitrant students don't do any homework and don't learn anything of value. These students know they will be passed from grade to grade until they can quit or until they receive a diploma. He says most of them choose to stay in school because they know they might be allowed to graduate whether their work is acceptable or not (p. 31).

Compare the example above with the original passage. In patchwriting, the structure and sequence of the ideas belong to the source, but either no credit is given or the line between the work of the writer and that of the source is effectively blurred. To be sure that you are using your source's material ethically, read and understand the text, close it, and write your own material.

Genre Exceptions

Occasionally, you may need to use source material that is so specialized and information-dense that writing the material in other words is dangerous, ineffective, or impossible. This can apply to product labels, drug information sheets, or genres that may strictly follow models, such as mission statements or handouts. In these cases, to properly credit the source, quoting may be the best method. If not, be sure to note the way in which the source material is used. For example, if you compose a mission statement using the structure of another statement you admire, add a note at the bottom thanking that organization or author for the structure of the statement.

References

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