Writing with Sources

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, incorporate, and respond to 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

First, Why Use Sources?

Because it's required? Because using sources makes us sound smart? Because we need to back up our opinions? Kind of. 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 an 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)

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. 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 ideas 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

Critically Consider Your Sources

Remember your purposes for consulting sources:

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 an 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)

Aside from choosing sources to fulfill the purposes above, consider the following questions:

- 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 do these sources relate with each other?
- How does the information in this source align with or contradict other sources?
- What argument does this source make, and how is it supported?
- What sources does this source use?
- Would my audience trust this source? (adapted from Kleinfeld, 2011)

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. 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 primary and secondary 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. Perhaps for the same project, secondary sources might be used to provide other writers' perspectives or to further discuss a single perspective.

Choose from General and Specialized Sources

General sources, such as those retrieved in a Web search or from a general encyclopedia, usually address wide audiences and discuss subjects in general terms. Specialized sources, such as scholarly books and academic journals, usually address narrower audiences in specific fields and discuss subjects in greater detail. Specialized sources are also often peer reviewed for accuracy and reliability, among other things. For this reason, specialized sources are often sought for authoritative answers to research questions. General sources can also be useful, but not for the same purposes. For example, if you're looking for information on the impact of long-distance running on the human body, consult the *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research*. To add a human element to your project, you might use an example quotation from a contributor to electronic forum you found through a search engine.

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Incorporate Sources Effectively

Writers incorporate sources' ideas into their writing using three main methods: quotation, summary, and paraphrase. To use each method ethically, you must
- understand and accurately reflect your source's meaning
- clearly distinguish the source's words and ideas from your own, and
- accurately cite the source.

Shortcuts, such as "fluffing" (adding unnecessary words or information) and "patchwriting," (discussed below), can lead to accusations of dishonesty or even plagiarism. Also see the handout "Understanding and Avoiding Plagiarism."

Quotation

When the exact words of a source matter—that is, when you want to analyze or distinguish them somehow—write them exactly the way you read or hear them in the source, using quotation marks (" "). Signal phrases and attribution tags, such as "Sipher asserts . . . ," help readers distinguish between your words and those of your source. And if you need to add a word or phrase for clarity's sake, put it in brackets ([ ]). 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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Move Beyond 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. Students sometimes learn to patchwrite before they learn how to effectively summarize sources.

> 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 the line between the work of the writer and that of the source is blurred. To be sure that you are using your source's material in effective, ethical ways, ***read the source, understand the source, close the source, and write your own material***.

Writing scholar Rebecca Moore Howard (1995) has developed the following exercise to assist writers in moving beyond patchwriting to effectively summary. Try this with one of your sources:

1. Read the source once through, quickly, perhaps only reading the first sentence of each paragraph if there are multiple paragraphs.
2. Reread the source, this time a little more slowly to get details.
3. Read the source a third time, taking notes.
4. Let some time elapse, perhaps a half-hour.
5. With the source closed, write your own summary of the information you are using.
6. Look at the source again to see if any of your phrasing is similar.
7. If so, consider quoting the similar phrases if the author's words are particularly important. Remember to use quotation marks. Periods and commas always go inside the quotation marks; other punctuation goes inside only if part of the quotation.
8. Include in-text citations for quotations and paraphrases.
9. Check your summary against the source to see if you forgot anything or if you added something that shouldn't be there. (Howard, 1995, p. 801)

Your first time doing this will likely take the longest, but practice speeds up the process.

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.

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Questions to Ask Your Professor

Some questions have different answers for different academic disciplines. So it may be a good idea to ask your professor any of the following questions:

- What if you think of something and it turns out someone else already thought of it first?
- What if you find the same idea in two books?
- What if it's something you heard somewhere, but you don't remember where?
- Why would a professor say to cite everything that doesn't come from me when it's clear that my sources don't do that? And what's "common knowledge" in this field?
- Why do all of my source articles use their own format and citation rules?
- How many copied words in a row are okay?
- What's the difference between a fact and an opinion?
- How much of my own ideas can I put in my paper?

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