18.

LISTENING TO SOURCES, TALKING TO SOURCES

Learning Objectives

- Contribute original thinking in an essay that uses sources
- Apply strategies for effectively integrating sources into an essay
- Use primary research to support an original thesis

Theses and Sources

Everyone knows that a thorough analysis and persuasive argument need strong evidence. The credibility of sources is one key element of strong evidence, but it also matters how sources are used in the text of the paper. Many students are accustomed to thinking of sources simply as expert corroboration for their own points. As a result, they tend to comb texts to find statements that closely parallel what they want to say and then incorporate quotes as evidence that a published author agrees with them. That's one way to use sources, but most professors–not to mention most readers–expect more.

Recall from prior chapters that writing academic papers is about joining a conversation. You're contributing your own original thinking to some complex problem, be it interpretive, theoretical, or practical. Citing sources helps situate your ideas within that ongoing conversation. Sometimes you're citing a research finding that provides strong evidence for your point; at other times, you're summarizing someone else's ideas in order to explain how your own opinion differs or to note how someone else's concept applies to a new situation.

Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein encourage you to think about writing with sources as a "they say / I say" process. You first report what "they" say—"they" being published authors, prevalent ideas in society at large, or maybe participants in some kind of political or social debate. Then you respond by explaining what you think: Do you agree? Disagree? A little of both?

This "they say / I say" approach can help student writers find balance in their use of sources. On one extreme, some students think that they aren't allowed to make any claims without citing one or more expert authors saying the same thing. When their instructors encourage them to bring more original thinking into their writing, they're confused about how to do it. On the other extreme, some students tend to describe, more or less accurately, what sources say about a topic but then go on to state opinions that seem unrelated to the claims they just summarized. For example, a student writer may draw on expert sources to explain how the prevention and early detection of cancer have saved lives but then argue for more funding for curing advanced cancer without making any explicit link to the points about prevention and screening. On one extreme, the sources are allowed to crowd out original thinking; on the other, they have seemingly no impact on the author's conclusions.

How can you know when you're avoiding both of these extremes? In other words, what kinds of thesis statements or claims ("I say") can count as original and still be grounded in the sources ("they say")? Here are five common strategies:

Combine research findings from multiple sources to make a larger summary argument.

You might find that none of the sources you're working with specifically claim that early twentieth-century British literature was preoccupied with changing gender roles but that, together, their findings all point to that broader conclusion.

Combine research findings from multiple sources to make a claim about their implications.

You might review papers that explore various factors shaping voting behavior to argue that a particular voting-reform proposal will likely have positive impacts.

Identify underlying areas of agreement.

You may argue that the literature on cancer and the literature on violence both describe the unrecognized importance of prevention and early intervention in order to claim that insights about one set of problems may be useful for the other.

Identify underlying areas of disagreement.

You may find that the controversies surrounding educational reform—and its debates about accountability, curricula, and school funding—ultimately stem from different assumptions about the role of schools in society.

Identify unanswered questions.

Perhaps you review studies of the genetic and behavioral contributors to diabetes in order to highlight unknown factors and argue for more in-depth research on the role of the environment.

There are certainly other ways authors use sources to build theses, but these examples illustrate how original thinking in academic writing involves making connections with and between a strategically chosen set of sources. You synthesize source information to create something original.

Incorporating Sources

Here's a passage of academic writing (an excerpt, not a complete paper) that illustrates several ways that sources can figure into a "they say / I say" approach:

Example

Willingham draws on cognitive science to explain that students must be able to regulate their emotions in order to learn (22–23). Emotional self-regulation enables students to ignore distractions and channel their attention and behaviors in appropriate ways. Other research findings confirm that anxiety interferes with learning and academic performance because it makes distractions harder to resist (Perkins and Graham-Bermann 95; Putwain and Best 580).

Other cognitive scientists point out that deep learning is itself stressful because it requires people to think hard about complex, unfamiliar material instead of relying on cognitive shortcuts.

Kahneman describes this difference in terms of two systems for thinking: one fast and one slow. Fast thinking is based on assumptions and habits and doesn't require a lot of effort. For example, driving a familiar route or a routine grocery-shopping trip is not usually an intellectually taxing activity. Slow thinking, on the other hand, is what we do when we encounter novel problems and situations. It's effortful, and it usually feels tedious and confusing. It is emotionally challenging as well because we are, by definition, incompetent while we're doing it, which provokes some anxiety. Solving a tough problem is rewarding, but the path itself is often unpleasant.

These insights from cognitive science enable us to critically assess the claims made on both sides of the education reform debate. On one hand, they cast doubt on the claims of education reformers that measuring teachers' performance by student test scores is the best way to improve education. For example, the Center for Education Reform promotes "the implementation of strong, data-driven, performance-based accountability systems that ensure teachers are rewarded, retained and advanced based on how they perform in adding value to the students who they teach, measured predominantly by student achievement" ("Teacher Quality"). The research that Willingham and Kahneman describe suggests that frequent high-stakes testing may actually work against learning by introducing greater anxiety into the school environment.

At the same time, opponents of education reform should acknowledge that these research findings should prompt us to take a fresh look at how we educate our children. While Stan Karp of Rethinking Schools is correct when he argues that "data-driven formulas [based on standardized

> testing] lack both statistical credibility and a basic understanding of the human motivations and relationships that make good schooling possible," it doesn't necessarily follow that all education reform proposals lack merit. Challenging standards, together with specific training in emotional self-regulation, will likely enable more students to succeed.

In this example, the ideas of Willingham and Kahneman are summarized approvingly, bolstered with additional research findings, and then applied to a new realm: the current debate surrounding education reform. Voices in that debate were portrayed accurately, sometimes with representative quotes. Most importantly, all references were tied directly to the author's own interpretative point, which relies on the quoted claims.

As you can see, there are times when you should quote or paraphrase sources that you don't agree with or do not find particularly compelling. They may convey ideas and opinions that help explain and justify your own argument. Similarly, when you cite sources that you agree with, you should choose quotes or paraphrases that serve as building blocks within your own argument. Regardless of the role each source plays in your writing, you certainly don't need to find whole sentences or passages that express your thinking. Rather, focus on what each of those sources is claiming, why, and how exactly their claims relate to your own points.

The remainder of this chapter explains some key principles for incorporating sources, principles that follow from the general point that academic writing is about entering an ongoing conversation.

Principle 1

Listen to Your Sources

Have you ever had the maddening experience of arguing with someone who twisted your words to make it seem like you were saying something you weren't? Novice writers sometimes inadvertently misrepresent their sources when they quote very minor points from an article or even positions that the authors of an article disagree with. It often happens when students approach their sources with the goal of finding snippets that align with their own opinion. For example, the passage above contains the phrase "measuring teachers' performance by student test scores is the best way to improve education." An inexperienced writer might include that quote in a paper without making it clear that the author(s) of the source actually disputes that very claim. Doing so is not intentionally fraudulent, but it reveals that the paper writer isn't really thinking about and responding to claims and arguments made by others. In that way, it harms his or her credibility.

Academic journal articles are especially likely to be misrepresented by student writers because their literature review sections often summarize a number of contrasting viewpoints. For example, sociologists Jennifer C.

Lee and Jeremy Staff wrote a paper in which they note that high schoolers who spend more hours at a job are more likely to drop out of school (158–178). However, Lee and Staff's analysis finds that working more hours doesn't actually make a student more likely to drop out. Instead, the students who express less interest in school are both more likely to work a lot of hours *and* more likely to drop out. In short, Lee and Staff argue that disaffection with school causes students to drop out, not working at a job. In reviewing prior research about the impact of work on dropping out, Lee and Staff write, "Paid work, especially when it is considered intensive, reduces grade point averages, time spent on homework, educational aspirations, and the likelihood of completing high school." If you included that quote without explaining how it fits into Lee and Staff's actual argument, you would be misrepresenting that source.

Principle 2

Provide Context

Another error beginners often make is to drop in a quote without any context. If you simply quote, "Students begin preschool with a set of self-regulation skills that are a product of their genetic inheritance and their family environment" (Willingham 24), your reader is left wondering who Willingham is, why he is included here, and where this statement fits into his larger work. The whole point of incorporating sources is to situate your own insights into the conversation. As part of that, you should provide some kind of context the first time you use that source. Here are some examples:

> Willingham, a cognitive scientist, claims that...
>
> Research in cognitive science has found that...(Willingham 22).
>
> Willingham argues that "students begin preschool with a set of self-regulation skills that are a product of their genetic inheritance and their family environment" (Willingham 24). Drawing on findings in cognitive science, he explains...

As the second example above shows, providing a context doesn't mean writing a brief biography of every author in your bibliography—it just means including some signal about why that source is included in your text.

Even more baffling to your reader is when quoted material does not fit into the flow of the text. For example, a novice student might write,

Schools and parents shouldn't set limits on how much teenagers are allowed to work at jobs. "We conclude that intensive work does not affect the likelihood of high school dropout among youths who have a high propensity to spend long hours on the job" (Lee and Staff 171). Teens should be trusted to learn how to manage their time.

Your professor might call this a "dumped" or "dropped" quote because it's simply plunked in between two original sentences. The reader is thinking, "Who is this sudden, ghostly 'we'?" Why should this source be believed? If you find that passages with quotes in your draft are awkward to read out loud, that's a sign that you need to contextualize the quote more effectively. Here's a version that puts the quote in context:

Schools and parents shouldn't set limits on how much teenagers are allowed to work at jobs. Lee and Staff's carefully designed study found that "intensive work does not affect the likelihood of high school dropout among youths who have a high propensity to spend long hours on the job" (171). Teens should be trusted to learn how to manage their time.

In this latter example, it's now clear that Lee and Staff are scholars and that their empirical study is being used as evidence for this argumentative point. Using a source in this way invites the reader to check out Lee and Staff's work for themselves if they doubt this claim.

Many writing instructors encourage their students to contextualize their use of sources by making a "quotation sandwich"—that is, introduce the quote in some way and then follow it up with your own words. If you've made a bad habit of dropping or dumping quotes into your writing, the quotation sandwich idea may help you improve your skills, but in general, you don't need to approach every quote or paraphrase as a three-part structure to have well-integrated sources. You should, however, avoid ending a paragraph with a quotation. If you're struggling to figure out what to write after a quote or close paraphrase, it may be that you haven't yet figured out what role the quote is playing in your own analysis. If that happens to you a lot, try writing the whole first draft in your own words and then incorporate material from sources as you revise with "they say / I say" in mind.

Principle 3

Use Sources Efficiently

Some student writers are in a rut of only quoting whole sentences. Others get overly enamored of extended block quotes and the scholarly look they give to the page. These aren't the worst sins of academic writing, but they get in the way of one of the key principles of writing with sources: shaping quotes and paraphrases efficiently. Efficiency follows from the second principle because when you fully incorporate sources into your own explicit argument, you zero in on the phrases, passages, and ideas that are relevant to your points.

It's a very good sign for your paper when most quotes are short (key terms, phrases, or parts of sentences) and the longer quotes (whole sentences and passages) are clearly justified by the discussion in which they're embedded. Every bit of every quote should feel indispensable to the paper. An overabundance of long quotes usually means that your own argument is undeveloped. Too many quotes may also suggest you haven't really listened to your sources but have instead copied important-sounding phrases into your writing. Too many quotes and long quotes will not help you make a strong argument.

Also, some students forget that quoting is not the only way to incorporate sources. Paraphrasing and summarizing are sophisticated skills that are often more appropriate to use than direct quoting. The first two paragraphs of the example passage above do not include any quotations, even though they are both clearly focused on presenting the work of others. Student writers may avoid paraphrasing out of fear of plagiarizing, and it's true that a poorly executed paraphrase will make it seem like the student writer is fraudulently claiming the wordsmithing work of others as their own. Sticking to direct quotes seems safer. However, you need to master paraphrasing and summarizing a text so that your essays are clear, concise, and in your own voice. Paraphrasing and summarizing also shows that you have really listened to your sources.

For example, here's a passage from a hypothetical paper with a block quote that is fully relevant to the argument but, nevertheless, inefficient:

Ineffective Long Quote

Drawing on a lifetime of research, Kahneman concludes our brains are prone to error:

> System 1 registers the cognitive ease with which it processes information, but it does not generate a warning signal when it becomes unreliable. Intuitive answers come to mind quickly and confidently, whether they originate from skills or from heuristics. There is no simple way for System 2 to distinguish between a skilled and a heuristic response. Its only recourse is to slow down and attempt to construct an answer on its own, which it is reluctant to do because it is indolent. Many suggestions of System 1 are casually endorsed with minimal checking, as in the bat-and-ball problem. (417)

While people can get better at recognizing and avoiding these errors, Kahneman suggests, the more robust solutions involve developing procedures within organizations to promote careful, effortful thinking in making important decisions and judgments.

Even a passage that is important to reference and is well contextualized in the flow of the paper will be inefficient if it introduces terms and ideas that aren't central to the analysis within the paper. Imagine, for example, that other parts of this hypothetical paper use Kahneman's other terms for System 1 (fast thinking) and System 2 (slow thinking); the sudden encounter of "System 1" and "System 2" would be confusing and tedious for your reader. Similarly, the terms "heuristics" and "bat-and-ball problem" might be unfamiliar to your reader. Their presence in the block quote just muddies the waters. In this case, a paraphrase is a much

better choice. Here's an example passage that uses a paraphrase to establish the same points more clearly and efficiently:

Effective Paraphrase

Drawing on a lifetime of research, Kahneman summarizes that our brains are prone to error because they necessarily rely on cognitive shortcuts that may or may not yield valid judgments.9 We have the capacity to stop and examine our assumptions, Kahneman points out, but we often want to avoid that hard work. As a result, we tend to accept our quick, intuitive responses. While people can get better at recognizing and avoiding these errors, Kahneman suggests that the more robust solutions involve developing procedures within organizations to promote careful, effortful thinking in making important decisions and judgments.

Not only is the paraphrased version shorter (97 words versus 151), but it is also clearer and more efficient because it highlights the key ideas, avoiding specific terms and examples that aren't used in the rest of the paper. If other parts of your paper did refer to Kahneman's System 1 and System 2, then you might choose to include some quoted phrases to make use of some of Kahneman's great language. Perhaps something like this:

Paraphrase with Quotation

Drawing on a lifetime of research, Kahneman summarizes that our brains are prone to error because they necessarily rely on cognitive shortcuts that may or may not yield valid judgments. System 1, Kahneman explains, "does not generate a warning signal when it becomes unreliable" (416). System 2 can stop and examine these assumptions, but it usually wants to avoid that hard work. As a result, our quick, intuitive responses are "casually endorsed with minimal checking" (417). While people can get better at recognizing and avoiding these errors, Kahneman suggests, the more robust solutions involve developing procedures within organizations to promote careful, effortful thinking in making important decisions and judgments.

Whether you choose a long quote, short quote, paraphrase, or summary depends on the role that the source is

playing in your analysis. The trick is to make deliberate, thoughtful decisions about how to incorporate ideas and words from others.

Paraphrasing, summarizing, and the mechanical conventions of quoting take a lot of practice to master, but mastering these skills is key to your academic success.

Principle 4

Choose Precise Verbs of Attribution

It's time to get beyond the all-purpose "says." And please don't look up "says" in the thesaurus and substitute verbs like "proclaims" (unless there was actually a proclamation) or "pronounces" (unless there was actually a pronouncement). Here's a list of useful alternatives:

- Claims
- Asserts
- Relates
- Recounts
- Complains
- Reasons
- Proposes
- Suggests (if the author is speculating or hypothesizing)
- Contests (disagrees)
- Concludes
- Shows
- Argues
- Explains
- Indicates
- Points out
- Offers
- Questions
- Admits
- Reports
- Maintains
- Illuminates
- Discusses
- Grants

- Contends

More precise choices like these carry a lot more information than "says," enabling you to relate more with fewer words. For one thing, they can quickly convey what kind of idea you're citing: a speculative one ("postulates"), a conclusive one ("determines"), a controversial one ("counters"). You can further show how you're incorporating these sources into your own narrative. For example, if you write that an author "claims" something, you're presenting yourself as fairly neutral about that claim. If you instead write that the author "shows" something, then you signal to your reader that you find that evidence more convincing. "Suggests," on the other hand, is a much weaker endorsement. Saying more with less makes your writing much more engaging.

Primary Research

Research methods and practices vary widely from field to field, and, as you progress through your college career, your coursework will teach you much more about what it means to be a researcher within your field. For example, engineers, who focus on applying scientific knowledge to develop designs, processes, and objects, conduct research using simulations, mathematical models, and a variety of tests to see how well their designs work. Sociologists conduct research using surveys, interviews, observations, and statistical analyses to better understand people, societies, and cultures. Graphic designers conduct research through locating images for reference for their artwork and engaging in background research on clients and companies to best serve their needs. Historians conduct research by examining archival materials—newspapers, journals, letters, and other surviving texts—and through conducting oral history interviews. Research is not limited to what has already been written or found at the library, also known as secondary research. Primary research is research that is collected firsthand rather than found in a book, database, or journal.

Primary research is often based on the principles of the scientific method, a theory of investigation first developed by John Stuart Mill in the 19th century in his book *Philosophy of the Scientific Method*. Although the application of the scientific method varies from field to field, the general principles of the scientific method allow researchers to learn more about the world through observable phenomena. Using the scientific method, researchers develop questions or hypotheses and then collect data on events, objects, or people, measurable, observable, and replicable data. The ultimate goal in conducting primary research is to learn about something new that can be confirmed by others and to eliminate our own biases in the process.

Primary research grows out of an examination of what has already been discovered about a topic–in other words, researchers "listen to sources" and identify a question or issue raised in the sources; then, researchers develop a plan to conduct primary research. Primary research includes

- **Surveys**. Asking participants about their opinions and behaviors through a short questionnaire.
- **Interviews**. Asking participants questions in a one-on-one or small group setting.
- **Observations**. Observing and measuring the world around you, including observations of people and other measurable events.
- **Data/Text Analysis.** Analysis of an existing collection of data or texts.
- **Case Study.** In-depth analysis of a person or group of people over a period of time.
- **Focus Group**. Planned small-group discussions around a particular topic.
- **Clinical Trials.** Study of a medical approach, device, or treatment.

In a first-year writing class, you're not likely to conduct case studies, clinical trials, or focus groups, but you may be asked to analyze a work of literature or another text, and you may want to conduct surveys, interviews, or observations as part of your research. How do you choose between a survey, an interview, or an observation? It depends on what kind of information you are looking for. You should use surveys if you want to learn about a general trend in people's opinions, experiences, and behavior. **Surveys** are particularly useful to find small amounts of information from a wider selection of people in the hopes of making a general claim. Interviews

are best used when you want to learn detailed information from a few specific people. **Interviews** are also particularly useful if you want to interview experts about their opinions. **Observations** are useful for gathering data about actual human behavior by recording it as it occurs. In sum, then, use surveys to learn general patterns from many people, interviews to gain details from a few people, and observations to determine how people behave or act.

You may also combine two or more of these primary research methods for their projects. For example, an elementary education major who is exploring the impact of technology on reading abilities might observe the classroom where she has been placed by her program in addition to interviewing the teacher about the students' use of technology. Alternatively, a business major who is researching college students' knowledge of student loans might survey students to gauge their levels of knowledge and interview a professor who is an expert in that field.

Primary research is one way you can "talk" to sources and make your argument original.

Conclusion

Like so many things in adult life, writing in college is often both more liberating and more burdensome than writing in high school and before. For some students, their high school experiences made it seem that their own opinions didn't matter in academic writing, and they think that they can't make any claims that aren't exactly paralleled by a pedigreed quotation. Writing papers based on their own insights and opinions can seem freeing in contrast. When they get to college, they find professors want them to have original and well-considered ideas about subjects they know little about–pre-Columbian Latin American history, congressional redistricting, sports in society, postcolonial literatures, and nanotechnology, all in about two weeks. Under these conditions, it's easy to see why some would long for the days when simple, competent reporting did the job. You probably won't have an authentic intellectual engagement with every college writing assignment, but approaching your written work as an opportunity to dialogue with the material can help you find the momentum you need to succeed with this work.

Key Takeaways

- Writing research papers in a college setting requires more than simply finding sources that make your arguments for you; you have to contribute something original.
- Contributing something original means synthesizing information from sources and, in some

cases, conducting primary research.
- Source information needs to be integrated into your writing by weaving quotations into your text, paraphrasing, and summarizing

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