

Revising: Effective Use of Sources

When you write a paper you generally draw on at least three types of materials: your own thoughts and insights; standard, commonplace knowledge (such as proverbs, fairy tales, or well-known historical facts); and the particular thoughts, insights, or words of someone else. This last category raises some special concerns. As you revise, spend some time looking at the way you've used your sources.

When to Quote

Don't pack your paper with huge blocks of quotations or intersperse every sentence with quoted words and phrases. You'll drown out your own voice. Quote only when you can answer the following questions with a *yes*:

- Are the words themselves at issue in your paper?
- Is the language of the source especially vivid or colorful or precise?
- Will paraphrase or summary lose or distort meaning?
- Will a direct quotation harness the authority of the source more effectively?
- Will the exact words reinforce emphatically what you've already said?

Integrating Your Sources

Be sure that your reader always knows the relationship between your sources and your own argument. If you agree with the quoted author, make that clear (for example, you could introduce the quotation by saying "As Johnson perceptively notes. . . ." If you're skeptical, try "Johnson admits, somewhat defensively. . . ."). Don't expect your reader to see the quoted material in the same light that you do; your responsibility is to guide the reader by telling her what *you* make of it for purposes of *your* argument.

On the stylistic level, integrate your sources smoothly with your own sentences. Take a look at the following sentence:

The review concluded with "Given Dickinson's popularity, a new edition of her work is likely."

The unfortunate conjunction of "with" and "Given" is probably something you wouldn't put up with in your own prose; don't let it get by just because you're working with a quotation.

Alert: Avoid using too much punctuation just because you're quoting. In the following example, the comma after "that" is superfluous:

Johnson claims that, "Jones is a true protectionist."

You'll probably introduce most of your quotations with verbs like *claims*, *states*, *asserts*, *writes*. As a rule of thumb, if you use a *that* after these verbs, do *not* use a comma (as in the above

example). If you omit the *that*, use a comma after the verb for clarity. (See the write-up on the colon in handout # 11 above for more discussion of quotations and punctuation.)

Acknowledging and Documenting Your Sources

You have no obligation to acknowledge your own ideas and insights, of course, nor is it necessary to acknowledge commonplace information readily available to anyone. You may not know, however, what counts as commonplace information in a particular field of study until you do some reading in it. As you read, notice what the experts do and follow their lead. If they cite the information, that means that they don't consider it commonplace, and so neither should you. Likewise, if they treat it as commonplace, so can you.

If such information is at all controversial or its origins problematic, however, you must acknowledge. For example, in most contexts the population of Iowa would be common information, but if your paper's context suggests census tampering and political scandal, your reader needs to know the source of the population figures you use.

You must always cite your source when you quote even a few words (and, of course, those words must be in quotation marks).

You must always cite your source when you paraphrase or summarize someone else's ideas or observations.

How to Acknowledge

Different disciplines use different formats or styles for citing sources. English, for example, uses the style of the Modern Language Association (MLA), while psychology and most other social sciences use the style of the American Psychological Association (APA) and so on. While all styles of citation share the common purpose of acknowledging the debt and enabling the reader to locate the exact source of the information, styles differ markedly in form and arrangement. When in doubt, ask your instructor what style you should use. Many handbooks and style sheets outlining the conventions of these various styles are available at the Jacobson Center.

Copyright 2000, the Jacobson Center for Writing, Teaching and Learning at Smith College.