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10-Writing Tips
When to Quote, Paraphrase, or Summarize

This section features advice for using sources well in your writing projects.

If your final product is a term paper or essay, much of your writing will be devoted to:

- Reporting what others have said about your research question.
- Convincing your audience that your answer is correct or, at least, the most reasonable answer. (Giving them evidence.)
- Describing the situation surrounding your research question for your audience and explaining why it’s important.

To do that writing you will often use direct quotes from your sources and will paraphrase and summarize sources. But how should you choose which technique to use when?

**TIP: Citing Sources**

Remember to cite your sources when quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing. See [How to Cite Sources](#) for details.
Choose a **direct quote** when it is more likely to be accurate than would summarizing or paraphrasing, when what you’re quoting is the text you’re analyzing, when a direct quote is more concise that a summary or paraphrase would be and conciseness matters, when the author is a particular authority whose exact words would lend credence to your argument, and when the author has used particularly effective language that is just too good to pass up.

Choose to **paraphrase or summarize** rather than to quote directly when the meaning is more important than the particular language the author used and you don’t need to use the author’s preeminent authority to bolster your argument at the moment.

Choose to **paraphrase instead of summarizing** when you need details and specificity. Paraphrasing lets you emphasize the ideas in source materials that are most related to your term paper or essay instead of the exact language the author used. It also lets you simplify complex material, sometimes rewording to use language that is more understandable to your reader.

Choose to **summarize instead of paraphrasing** when you need to provide a brief overview of a larger text. Summaries let you condense the resource material to draw out particular points, omit unrelated or unimportant points, and simplify how the author conveyed his or her message.

The OSU Writing Center has more on **paraphrasing and summarizing**, including an example of how to do one of each. While you’re at this site, you’ll notice other helpful information available about essays and term paper construction.

**ACTIVITY: Quote, Paraphrase, or Summarize?**

Open activity in a web browser.
Helping Others Follow

As you switch from component to component in your paper, you'll be making what are called rhetorical moves—taking subsequent steps to move your argument along and be persuasive. Your readers will probably know what you're doing because the components in everyday oral argument are the same as in written argument. But why you're switching between components of your argument, and with these particular sources, might be less clear.

NOTE:
The ideas and examples in this section are informed by all three editions of Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein. *They Say/I Say*. The third edition of the *They Say/I Say* provides templates of actual language to be used in written arguments. This can be extremely helpful to beginning writers because it takes some of the mystery out of what to say and when to say it. For these templates, check the book out from your library.

You can help readers follow your argument by inserting phrases that signal why you're doing what you're doing. Here are some examples:

- **To state that what you’re saying in your thesis (answer to your research question) is in opposition to what others have said:**
  
  “Many people have believed …, but I have a different opinion.”

- **To move from a reason to a summary of a research study that supports it (evidence).** “Now let’s take a look at the supporting research.”

- **To introduce a summary of a resource you’ve just mentioned.**
  
  “The point they make is…”

- **If the objection is that you’re not being realistic.**
  
  “But am I being realistic?”

- **To acknowledge an objection you believe a reader could have.**
  
  “At this point I should turn to an objection some are likely to be raising…”

- **To move from the body of an essay to the conclusion.**
  
  “So in conclusion…”

Phrases like these can grease the skids of your argument in your readers' minds, making it a lot easier for them to quickly get it instead of getting stuck on figuring out why you're bringing something up at a particular point. You will have pulled them into an argument conversation.

**EXAMPLES: The Language of Arguments**

The blog that accompanies the book *They Say/I Say* with Readings, by Gerald Graff, Cathy
Birkenstein, and Russel Durst, contains short, elegantly constructed contemporary arguments from a variety of publications. Take a look at the They Say/I Say blog for a moment and read part of at least one of the readings to see how it can be helpful to you the next time you have to make a written argument.

Additional Advice Sources

Take a look at these sites for argument essay advice for students:

- Developing Your Thesis – Dartmouth Institute for Writing & Rhetoric
- Handouts – Ohio State Center for the Study and Teaching of Writing
- Introductions, Body Paragraphs, and Conclusions for an Argument Paper – Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL)
- Argument Handout – University of North Carolina Writing Center
- Rewriting: how to do things with texts – Utah State University Press (Project Muse affiliates only)
Synthesis of Your Own Ideas

Professors want to see evidence of your own thinking in your essays and papers. Even so, it will be your thoughts in reaction to your sources:

- What was the author really trying to say?
- What parts of them do you agree with?
- What parts of them do you disagree with?
- Did they leave anything out?
- What does an author’s work lead you to say?

It’s wise to not only analyze—take apart for study—the sources, but also to try to combine your own ideas with ideas you found in class and in the sources.

Professors frequently expect you to interpret, make inferences, and otherwise synthesize—bring ideas together to make something new or find a new way of looking at something old. (It might help to think of synthesis as the opposite of analysis.)

ACTIVITY: Creative Thinking

Synthesis is a creative act. Are there places, things, activities, or situations that you already use to spark your creativity? Sometimes even simple things can help us be more creative. Take a look at the article 5 Ways to Spark Your Creativity for some tips.

The book Thinker Toys, by Michael Michalko, can help you expand your ability to think creatively. The author’s web page contains fun but challenging thinking exercises, including this one that lets you practice making associations between seemingly disparate concepts.

Getting Better at Synthesis

To get an A on essays and papers in many courses, such as literature and history, what you write in reaction to others’ work should use synthesis to create new meaning or show a deeper understanding of what you learned.

To do so, it helps to look for connections and patterns. One way to synthesize when writing an argument essay, paper, or other project is to look for themes among your sources. So try categorizing ideas by topic rather than by resource—making associations across sources.

Synthesis can seem difficult, particularly if you are used to analyzing others’ points but not used to making your own. Like most things, however, it gets easier as you get more experienced at it. So don’t be hard on yourself if it seems difficult at first.
EXAMPLE: Synthesis in an Argument

Imagine that you have to write an argument essay about Woody Allen's 2011 movie *Midnight in Paris*. Your topic is “nostalgia,” and the movie is the only resource you can use. In the movie, a successful young screenwriter named Gil is visiting Paris with his girlfriend and her parents, who are more politically conservative than he is. Inexplicably, every midnight he time-travels back to the 1920's Paris, a time period he's always found fascinating, especially because of the writers and painters—Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Picasso—that he's now on a first-name basis with. Gil is enchanted and always wants to stay. But every morning, he's back in real time—feeling out of sync with his girlfriend and her parents.

You've tried to come up with a narrower topic, but so far nothing seems right. Suddenly, you start paying more attention to the girlfriend's parents' dialogue about politics, which amount to such phrases as “we have to go back to...,” “it was a better time,” “Americans used to be able to...” and “the way it used to be.”

And then it clicks with you that the girlfriend's parents are like Gil—longing for a different time, whether real or imagined. That kind of idea generation is synthesis.

You decide to write your essay to answer the research question: How is the motivation of Gil's girlfriend's parents similar to Gil's? Your thesis becomes “Despite seeming to be not very much alike, Gil and the parents are similarly motivated, and Woody Allen meant *Midnight in Paris*'s message about nostalgia to be applied to all of them.”

Of course, you'll have to try to convince your readers that your thesis is valid and you may or not be successful—but that's true with all theses. And your professor will be glad to see the synthesis.

There is a lot more you can learn about creating synthesis in scholarly writing. One place synthesis is usually required is in literature reviews for honors’ theses, master's theses, and Ph.D. dissertations. In all those cases, literature reviews are intended to contribute more than annotated bibliographies do and to be arguments for the research conducted for the theses or dissertations. If you are writing an honors thesis, master's thesis, or Ph.D. dissertation, you will find more help with Susan Imel's *Writing a Literature Review*.

ACTIVITY: Balancing Sources and Synthesis

Here’s a technique to quickly assess whether there is enough of your original thought in your essay or paper, as opposed to information from your sources: Highlight what you have included as quotes, paraphrases, and summaries from your sources. Next, highlight in another color what you have written yourself. Then take a look at the pages and decide whether there is enough you in them.
For the mocked-up pages below, assume that the yellow-highlighted lines were written by the writer and the pink-highlighted lines are quotes, paraphrases, and summaries she pulled from her sources. Which page most demonstrates the writer’s own ideas? See the bottom of the page for the answer.

Mocked-up passages showing the division between quotes, paraphrases, and summaries and original ideas


ANSWER TO ACTIVITY: Balancing Sources and Synthesis

The answer to the “Balancing Sources and Synthesis” Activity above is:

The Middle Sample.

The yellow-highlighted sections in The Middle Sample show more contributions from the author than from quotes, paraphrases, and summaries of other sources.