What are “sources” and how do you use them in college?

A source is anything that you didn’t write or create; a source is anything that you are using to build something that you are writing or creating. You’re probably used to thinking of sources for research papers, such as articles you found through library databases. But you will use sources for almost ALL of your writing in college. For example, the novel, poem, or play you’re reading in English is a source for the literary analysis paper you have to write; a website is a source for a market analysis in your business class; a newspaper editorial is a source for your response in a current events class; a film is the source for a film analysis; a source could be a quote you use to begin a paper in history class, and so on.

*Any time that you use something that you did not write or create yourself, you are using a source.*

What kinds of projects use sources?

Most of the writing that you will do here will use some kind of source. You will use sources not only in research papers and projects, but also in summaries, analyses, responses, presentations, video and audio projects, editorials, websites, blog posts, slide shows, and even personal essays. Basically, almost everything you write here will have to engage with sources in some way.

Why do you have to involve sources in your writing?

Depending on the size and scope of the writing project, you may have to build arguments based on sources you’ve read in class, you may have to write an argument based on research sources, you may have to write a personal response to a course text, you may have to summarize or analyze a course text, or you may have to present on a text in class. In short, you will need to support what you communicate in the college classroom. You will need evidence. Sources are that evidence.

There is a larger philosophical reason: *when you write in academia, you take part in a conversation that has gone on for centuries before you and will go on long after you.* Using sources is the main way you become involved in—and later help to shape—that conversation. You converse both with your colleagues and professors about sources, but you also converse with the sources, and that dialogue composes a large measure of your learning. In order to take part in that conversation, you need to understand the conventions of academic culture (even though you may be skeptical or critical of parts of that culture at times). These conventions are not only the conventions of American
Standard English, but are also the conventions of good source use. This academic conversation is sometimes called the “Burkean Parlor,” for the philosopher Kenneth Burke, who describes academic dialogue in this way:

*Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.[i]*

**What kinds of sources should you use, and what parts of them do you use?**

The type of class and the assignment will determine what kinds of sources you use. Sometimes you’ll use texts that your professor has supplied, and other times, you’ll have to go and do research to find outside sources. When dealing with written sources, you’ll either quote, paraphrase, or summarize.

- **When you quote**, you use the exact wording from the source.
- **When you paraphrase**, you put a passage or part of a text in your own words, being careful not to copy the sentence structure of the original source.
- **When you summarize**, you give a very broad overview of a passage or a text-- writing your summary in a 10th of the size of the original text.

**How do you use sources well in your writing?**

Good source use means both ethical source use and well-integrated source use. They work together so that at the same time you are giving due credit to the creator of the source you're using or engaging, you are making it work well with your words and ideas.

**Ethical Source Use** means giving credit, and it also means providing the required information about the source. Giving credit in something you write may look a lot like the Burke example above, where Burke was introduced by name and then the quote was annotated. There are a number of valid ways to ethically use a source, and these often depend on what discipline you're writing in, such as English, psychology, journalism, or history.

**Guidelines for Source Use**
1. Make sure you have permission to use the source. How do you know? For the most part, you can use a small part of any written text in something you create for school, if you know you have permission and if you give proper credit. An exemption to the U.S. Copyright law says that using a small amount of a source is fine if you’re using it “for commentary or scholarship.”

2. Properly cite the source. This means providing information that your reader can use to find the source. In the MLA and APA citation styles, proper citation includes both the in-text citation of the page number, year, and/or author of the source and the full citation at the end of the paper. Other styles, such as the Chicago style (used by historians) use footnotes instead of parenthetical in-text citations.

3. Include the full citation for the source at the end of your paper.

**Explicating Sources**

You can see examples of citations in Documenting Your Source Material in Unit 3. In addition to properly citing the source, you need to integrate it well. This means both Introducing Cited Material Effectively with signal phrases and explicating quotations and paraphrases. You do not need to explicate summary, since you are giving a broad overview and don’t have to explain it in detail.

In addition to properly introducing and documenting sources, writers need to explicate quotations and paraphrases. Explicating sources means justifying their place in your work. A good guideline to follow for explicating source material (in the form of quotations and paraphrases) is for every sentence of quotation or paraphrase that you use, follow it with three sentences of explication. Those sentences should include this information:

- **“In other words”**: Tell your readers what the quote or paraphrase means.

- **How it supports your argument**: Tell your readers how this quote or paraphrase is evidence that supports your argument.

- **Context**: Provide some context for this quote or paraphrase--where in the text did it come from--the beginning, middle, or end? What is the author of the source doing or trying to do in this section or passage?

**Tips**

- **Restrict direct quotations to when an author(s) says something that just can't be paraphrased, or when an author(s) says something in a unique way.**

- **Quote when authors say something especially relevant or meaningful.**

- **Use quotes sparingly. For most of the papers you write, you won't need very long quotes--a good guideline is to use no more than three sentences (which each need three sentences of explication) each time you quote.**
• Do not rely on block quotes; use those only when absolutely necessary and follow your style's the formatting rules for block quotes.


1 For more information, see Stanford University's Fair Use legal resource: http://fairuse.stanford.edu/.

This material is adapted from the following open textbook:

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