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How to cite textual evidence in an essay

Academic writing often requires students to use evidence, and learning how to use evidence effectively is an important skill for college writers to master. Often, the evidence college writers are asked to use comes from their textbooks, course readings, or other written work by professional scholars. It is important to learn how to use these writings responsibly and accurately. General Considerations There are three methods of incorporating the writing of others into your paper as evidence: quotation, which is anything from a word to several sentences taken word-for-word from the original source and enclosed in quotation marks; paraphrase, which is a rephrasing in your own voice and sentence structure of one portion of the original source and is about the same length as the original sentence or sentences you are paraphrasing; summary, which is shorter than the original source and gives the text’s central idea in your own words. Some words to use in signal phrases are argues, asserts, contends, emphasizes, explains, observes, suggests, writes. In what follows, you will learn some strategies for using these methods of incorporating evidence into your paper. In Practice Quoting When you use a quotation as evidence, you should integrate it into your own writing using a “signal phrase.” Take, for example, this quotation, taken from page 418 of the essay “Prejudice and the Individual” by Gordon Allport: “Much prejudice is caught rather than directly taught.” Here are three ways to integrate Allport’s quotation into a sentence of your own with a signal phrase: Allport claims that “prejudice is caught rather than directly taught” (418). “Much prejudice is caught rather than directly taught,” claims Allport (418). “Much prejudice,” Allport claims, “is caught rather than directly taught” (418). You can adapt a quotation to fit your own paragraph and sentence structure by making small changes to words and indicating those changes with square brackets. Say, for example, you liked this quotation from Allport: “It should be added that overgeneralized prejudgments of this sort are prejudices only if they are not reversible when exposed to new knowledge” (417). However, you want to apply Allport’s words to a specific example of your own. You could adapt the quotation like this: The young man in my example was not prejudiced, according to Allport’s definition; his opinion was “reversible when [he was] exposed to new knowledge” (417). You can also use ellipses to indicate that you have left irrelevant words out of a quotation. Again, say you wanted to use this quotation from Allport: “The best opinion today says that if we eliminate discrimination, then—as people become acquainted with one another on equal terms—attitudes are likely to change, perhaps more rapidly than through the continued preaching or teaching of tolerance” (417). But the middle part is less important to your paper than what Allport says at the start and the end. You could modify the quotation like this: “The best opinion today says that if we eliminate discrimination . . . attitudes are likely to change, perhaps more rapidly than through the continued preaching or teaching of tolerance” (417). Longer quotations must be formatted in a special way; usually, they are indented from the left margin and/or single-spaced. Depending on what citation style you use, guidelines differ regarding what defines a long quotation and how a long quotation should be formatted. Typically, a quotation of four or five lines is considered long. Paraphrasing To paraphrase a source for use as evidence, you should use as little of the original language as possible and put the passage in your own voice and sentence structure. Also, because paraphrasing involves wrapping your words around someone else’s idea, people often forget to give credit to the author. Even though a paraphrase is in your words, it is not your idea. Remember to cite your source when you paraphrase. Here is another quotation from Allport and an example of weak and strong paraphrase: “Education combats easy overgeneralizations, and as the educational level rises we find a reduction in stereotyped thinking” (Allport 422). WEAK PARAPHRASE: Learning fights against stereotypes, and as more people are more educated we notice a decrease in prejudice (422). STRONG PARAPHRASE: Allport explains that the more we learn, the harder we will find it to make unfair assumptions about groups of people, which means as more people pursue more education, prejudice decreases (422). In the weak example above, you can see the sentence structure in the paraphrase is very similar to the quotation—notice, for instance, the use in both the original sentence and the weak paraphrase of a comma plus the conjunction “and.” Also, the replacement of Allport’s words with synonyms makes the paraphrase too close to the original—Allport’s “education” is replaced with “learning” in the paraphrase; his “combats” is exchanged for “fights”; “overgeneralizations” becomes “stereotypes.” The strong example above does a better job of restating Allport’s idea in a new sentence structure and without simple word substitution. Also, notice the weak paraphrase does not give Allport credit by mentioning him, but the strong one does. Summarizing When you summarize another writer’s idea to use as evidence in a paper of your own, you are taking the essence of the writer’s idea and stating it more briefly, with less detail and explanation, than in the original. You may summarize an article or a chapter, or even a book, in a sentence, a paragraph, a page, or more—the purpose of your summary should dictate how specific you are. Summaries should be mostly in your own words, but often summaries include quotations or paraphrases when it is necessary to highlight a certain key point. When you are writing a summary, you need to be very careful not to use the original writer’s words without putting those words in quotation marks. You also need to be sure that when you summarize, you are fairly representing the original writer’s main idea. Here is a paragraph from Allport and examples of weak and strong summary: “While discrimination ultimately rests on prejudice, the two processes are not identical. Discrimination denies people their natural or legal rights because of their membership in some unfavored group. Many people discriminate automatically without being prejudiced; and others, the “gentle people of prejudice,” feel irrational aversion, but are careful not to show it in discriminatory behavior. Yet in general, discrimination reinforces prejudices, and prejudices provide rationalizations for discrimination. The two concepts are most distinct when it comes to seeking remedies. The corrections for discrimination are legal, or lie in a direct change of social practices; whereas the remedy for prejudice lies in education and the conversion of attitudes. The best opinion today says that if we eliminate discrimination, then—as people become acquainted with one another on equal terms—attitudes are likely to change, perhaps more rapidly than through the continued preaching or teaching of tolerance.” (Allport 417) WEAK SUMMARY: Discrimination is when people are denied their rights because they belong to some unfavored group, and it is addressed with legal action or a change in social practices. Eliminating discrimination from society would have a drastic effect on social attitudes overall, according to Allport (417). STRONG SUMMARY: Allport explains that discrimination occurs when an individual is refused rights because he or she belongs to a group which is the object of prejudice. In this way, discrimination reinforces prejudice, but if instances of discrimination are ruled illegal or seen as socially unacceptable, prejudice will likely decrease along with discrimination (417). You will notice that the weak summary above uses exact words and phrases from the source (“unfavored group,” “social practices”) and also some words and phrases very close to the original (“when people are denied,” “eliminating discrimination”). It does not effectively restate the original in different language. It also does not fairly represent the complete idea of the source paragraph: it does not explain the relationship between discrimination and prejudice, an important part of what Allport says. The strong example does a better job using independent language and fairly conveying Allport’s point. How to choose which method of incorporating evidence to use These methods of incorporating evidence into your paper are helpful in different ways. Think carefully about what you need each piece of evidence to do for you in your paper, then choose the method that most suits your needs. You should use a quotation if you are relying on the reputation of the writer of the original source to give authority or credibility to your paper. the original wording is so remarkable that paraphrasing would diminish it. A paraphrase is a good choice if you need to provide a supporting fact or detail but the original writer’s exact words are not important. you need to use just one specific idea from a source and the rest of the source is not as important. Summary is useful when you need to give an overview of a source to orient your reader. you want to provide background that leads up to the point of your paper. Last but certainly not least, remember that anytime you use another person’s ideas or language, you must give credit to that person. If you do not know the name of the person whose idea or language you are using, you must still give credit by referring to a title or any such available information. You should always check with your instructor to see what method of citing and documenting sources you should use. The examples on this handout are cited using MLA style. Exercises The sample text in these exercises is Holly Devor’s “Gender Role Behaviors and Attitudes.” 1. Read the paragraph from Devor below, then identify which summary of it is weak and which is strong. “Body postures and demeanor which communicate subordinate status and vulnerability to trespass through a message of “no threat” make people appear to be feminine. They demonstrate subordination through a minimizing of spatial use: people appear to be feminine when they keep their arms closer to their bodies, their legs closer together, and their torsos and heads less vertical than do masculine-looking individuals.” (486) A. Devor argues that body language suggests a great deal about gender and power in our society. People who minimize the body space they occupy and whose physical gestures are minimal and unobtrusive appear inferior and feminine (486). B. Devor says that body postures and demeanor that imply weakness make people look feminine. Minimizing the space one takes up and using infantile gestures also makes one appear feminine (486). 2. Read the sentence from Devor below, then identify which paraphrase of it is weak and which is strong. “They demonstrate subordination through a minimizing of spatial use: people appear to be feminine when they keep their arms closer to their bodies, their legs closer together, and their torsos and heads less vertical than do masculine-looking individuals.” (486) A. Devor explains that people demonstrate a lesser position by using less space, keeping arms close, legs together, and head less upright (486). B. According to Devor, taking up less space with one’s body—keeping arms and legs close and hunching to reduce height—makes one appear inferior and implies femininity (486). 3. The quotations of Devor below, taken from the paragraph in exercise 1, contain technical errors. Identify and correct them. A. Devor argues that “[b]ody postures and demeanor which communicate subordinate status and vulnerability make people appear to be feminine” (486). B. The actress looked particularly feminine because she “point their toes inward and use their hands in small or childlike gestures” (486). C. Devor claims that “using their hands in small or childlike gestures” makes people look feminine (486). Answers: 1. A. STRONG B. WEAK - This example uses too many exact words and phrases from the original. 2. A. WEAK - This example uses too many exact words and phrases from the source, and its sentence structure is also too close to the original. B. STRONG 3. A. Devor argues that “[b]ody postures and demeanor which communicate subordinate status and vulnerability . . . make people appear to be feminine.” B. The actress looked particularly feminine because she “point[s] her[] toes inward and use[s] her[] hands in small or childlike gestures.” C. Devor claims that “us[ing] their hands in small or childlike gestures” makes people look feminine. Resources: Allport, Gordon, “Prejudice and the Individual,” in *The Borozoi College Reader*, 6th ed. Eds. Charles Muscatine and Marlene Griffith (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1988): 416-22. Devor, Holly, “Gender Role Behaviors and Attitudes,” in *Signs of Life in the USA: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers*, 4th ed. Eds. Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon (New York: Bedford / St Martin’s, 2003): 484-89.



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