

Week Seven: What to do when you quote

Introduction: The myth of the perfect quote

Last week, we discussed different ways to *use* the passages that you cite in your essays and we invited you to think of those moments where you cite other people's words as moments where you are demonstrating what you can *do* with what you've read. In placing this emphasis, we mean to stress that citation is an intellectual rather than a mechanical activity. And, because we think of citation in this way, it influences how we read: for whether we are reading student papers or published essays, we always pay particular attention to those moments when the writer is citing someone else. These moments can show how the writer's mind works on a problem, what the writer thinks counts as evidence, and how the writer engages with other writers.

The most common misconception we've found in the first year writing course, though, is that there are "correct passages" to cite. So, as you think about what passages you should cite in your own work, you should realize that there are no correct or right or perfect passages out there in the assigned readings waiting for you to choose them; there are just words on the page or on the web which are available to be worked on by you. It is your job as a writer to show why the words you've selected to discuss are important and worthy of further discussion. Thus, there's no way to guide you to the "right" passages to cite. What we can do in what follows is provide you with the questions that can help you to work on the passages you're considering citing, questions that will help you assess whether or not the passages are worth including in your own essays.

Please note: you'll note find discussed here the mechanics of citation (i.e., where the quotation marks go and other punctuation matters). For a full consideration of these issues, please refer to the grammar handbook required for the course.

Choosing an appropriate passage to work on

As you think about which passages to bring into your own writing, ask yourself the following questions about what you've read:

- What passages in the assigned reading do you think the author wanted you to focus on? Are there passages that the author has made to stand out in some way—through the use of italics, say, or by indentation or by placing under a heading?
- Is there a passage where the author introduces a new term or concept?
- Is there a passage where the author uses a familiar term—like "evolution," "dialogue," or "war"—in a new way?
- Are there passages where the author is saying something that you find surprising?
- Is there an example that the author uses that stands out in your mind?
- Are there passages that you had trouble following? Places where you think the author's argument isn't persuasive?

You'll note that these questions are meant to help you think about working with two different kinds of passages: those where you feel the author is doing new and interesting work and those where the author's writing has caught your attention. Both sorts of passages provide

opportunities for you to explore the implications and the significance of what the author in the assigned reading has written; both sorts of passages give you material that you can *work on* with your own writing.

Choosing between direct quotation and paraphrase

When using passages from sources in your essay, you have two choices: to provide the passage as a direct quotation or to paraphrase the passage in your own words. A direct quote incorporates the exact words from the text (set off by quotation marks or, for passages more than four lines long, through indentation) into your essay. A paraphrase articulates the same idea or information provided in the source text, but puts it in your own words (i.e. it does not use the exact words or phrases found in the source). Here are some guidelines for choosing when to quote directly and when to paraphrase:

As a rule of thumb, you should consider using direct quotation when:

- you want to draw attention either to the particular words the author has chosen to use or to the particular way the author has chosen to make his or her statement;
- you are referring to the author's use or definition of a specific term or concept;
- you have chosen a passage that is central to your own argument;
- you plan on staking out a position that relies on a shared understanding of what the author's writing means.

As a rule of thumb, you should consider paraphrasing what you've read when:

- you feel that the language the author has used in the selected passage is not significant or does not warrant particular attention;
- you are going to present factual information or data that is not likely to be disputed;
- you want to condense an idea that the author expresses at length.

For a particularly good example of an author choosing when to use direct quotation and when to paraphrase, refer to Henry Jenkins's essay, "Why Heather Can Write," in *The New Humanities Reader*. Note how Jenkins sets off the passages where he is citing directly from what his subjects have written or said and follows those passages with his own extended interpretations of what he has made of their words. At these moments, Jenkins is showing what he can do with the words of another. Elsewhere in "Why Heather Can Write," Jenkins paraphrases his subjects' thoughts, when he does not wish to draw attention to their specific words or phrases; at these moments, Jenkins is using paraphrase to get to the next stage of his own argument.

Working your citations into your writing

At this point, you can see that part of the work that you do while reading is making decisions about which passages are important and what you think warrants further consideration. Once

you've made your initial decisions about the passages you are going to work with, you will then need to focus on how you bring those passages into your own writing. We would like you to think about using the words that you surround the cited passage with as showing, in some way, the work that you have done on the cited passage. Here's one way to make your work with the cited passage clear:

- In the sentence before the quotation you are going to work with, identify the author of the passage and introduce the key ideas that you want the reader to notice. For example, a quote from Daniel Gilbert's essay could be prefaced as follows:

Gilbert's surprising contention is that our experience of events is shaped by the way we interpret those events. As he puts it, "explanations allow us to make full use of our experiences, but they also change the nature of those experiences " (225).

The introductory sentence makes a statement about Gilbert's position: it notes that his contribution to the study of happiness is "surprising." The cited passage provides an example, in Gilbert's own words, of the effect that explanations have on human perception.

- In the sentence immediately after a direct quote, explain in your own words what you think the writer means by that comment. To continue with the example above:

Gilbert's surprising contention is that our experience of events is shaped by the way we interpret those events. As he puts it, "explanations allow us to make full use of our experiences, but they also change the nature of those experiences " (225). **The influence of explanations works, according to Gilbert, as a defense mechanism against strongly negative experiences, but also has the side-effect of reducing the impact of strongly positive events (225).**

The sentence following the direct quote establishes that the writer understands that Gilbert's position is nuanced: his model of human experience includes a theory about what causes the tendencies he's noticed, as well as some unexpected effects of that tendency. With the final sentence, the writer, paraphrasing Gilbert's words, makes clear how Gilbert explores the implications of his own position.

- Be sure to explain in detail how the quote or paraphrase that you have worked on has affected your position. Perhaps the passage raises a question about your own argument; perhaps it supports a point you've been trying to make: your job is to make it clear why you feel the passage warrants attention. To return to our example one final time:

Gilbert's surprising contention is that our experience of events is shaped by the way we interpret those events. As he puts it, "explanations allow us to make full use of our experiences, but they also change the nature of those experiences " (225). The influence of explanations works, according to Gilbert, as a defense mechanism against strongly negative experiences, but also has the side-effect of reducing the impact of strongly

positive events (225). **But, if what Gilbert claims were true, it would seem that human happiness would be relatively unaffected by events, which conditions such as depression and post traumatic stress disorder indicate is not always the case. To understand which events have an impact on happiness, we must look more closely at his discussion of how explanations work.**

The sentences that conclude this paragraph show the writer exploring the consequences of Gilbert's argument. How powerful are explanations? Why can they neutralize some experiences, but not others? These are issues, presumably, that would be taken up in the paragraphs that follow the paragraph in our example.

Note that working on just one sentence from Gilbert's essay has resulted in a lengthy paragraph, a paragraph that ends not with a judgment about Gilbert, but with the emergence of a question. This is how we would like you to think about your work with the passages you cite: your goal is use the passages to take your discussion somewhere that it couldn't go otherwise. Think of your citations, in other words, as a way of moving your own discussion forward.

Summary

The act of quotation is a moment where you make your own work with the assigned readings visible; it is where you show what you can *do* with what you've read. There are no perfect passages to cite; it is your own work on the passages you elect to cite that determines whether or not those passages are "perfect" for your argument. Your job is to show that you can do more than just agree or disagree with what you've read: your job is to show that you can use what you've read to think thoughts that are new for you.