SUMMARIZING, PARAPHRASING, AND QUOTING

Working with sources requires different levels of engagement with the words and ideas of other authors. How you should handle sources will depend on the assignment and often on the conventions of the discipline within which you are writing. Regardless of whether or not you are summarizing, paraphrasing, or quoting, all sources you use must be acknowledged within your own text and at the end of your paper. Here are some common strategies for working with sources and some guidance for when each strategy might be appropriate:

When to Summarize: Summaries provide an overview of source material and are significantly shorter than the original. In general, they convey what the work on the whole is “about” in a condensed, concise fashion. When you summarize, the words and sentence structure you use should be entirely your own. Summarize when

- You want to establish background information or offer an overview of a particular topic.
- You want to synthesize knowledge from different sources about a topic. When you have multiple sources that present similar ideas or information, you can bring them together (and cite them) within a single summary. This is a common feature in literature reviews in the natural and social sciences.
- You want to condense the main ideas of a single source. Summaries of this kind often foreground more involved work with that source that will come later in the essay.

When to Paraphrase: Paraphrasing, or conveying another author’s ideas in your own words, is especially common in the natural and social sciences. You should paraphrase when you want to highlight specific information, data, or claims put forth by another author without quoting the author directly. If the general idea of the work is more important, you’ll want to summarize (see above). If the specific way an author phrases an idea is important, you’ll want to quote directly (see below). When you paraphrase, you must significantly change the wording, phrasing, and sentence structure of the original source (not just a few words). Paraphrase when

- You want to include information or ideas conveyed by another author in your own writing, but the author’s exact wording is not important. (If you want to highlight the actual phrasing of the original author, use direct quotation.)
- You want to clarify or elaborate on a specific idea from another author’s text. Paraphrasing allows you to emphasize the important elements of a passage from another author while also including your own analysis or interpretation.
- You want to avoid overusing quotations. Variety is the spice of life!

When to Quote: Quotations are the exact words of an author, copied directly from a source and surrounded by quotation marks. The social and natural sciences privilege paraphrasing over quotation because, in those disciplines, the ideas are more important than the specific language with which those ideas are conveyed. On the other hand, quotation is very common in the humanities, especially in the study of literature, where the texts themselves are often the objects of study. Use direct quotation when

- You want to highlight particularly eloquent or powerful phrases or passages. Specific, powerful, persuasive language is worth quoting when you want to emphasize the effect of the author’s words.
- You want to focus your reader’s attention on a specific phrase or moment in another author’s text.
- You want to respond to a particular moment in another author’s text. Quotation can be a great way to show the difference between your ideas and another author’s ideas by making the contrast physically present in your paper.