

Engaging with Sources

Even if you know how to paraphrase, quote and cite a source, it's often a challenge to do more than simply repeat or echo what the source material has to say. But strong academic writing manages to represent and analyze a source's ideas accurately and thoughtfully while also extending or complicating these ideas. In other words, you need to *do something* with what you paraphrase and quote. Taking an approach similar to Joseph Harris's *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts* (2006), the guide below offers you a variety of ways to engage with sources. These practices highlight how writers expand or complicate the ideas they borrow.

Rerouting: This word may make you think of a train switching from one track to another. Imagine that the train is a source and your job is to move the source's train of thought from one track (its own) to a new one (your paper's). That is to say, you are accurately conveying the source's ideas, but also placing these ideas in some new context or setting. Take a look at the excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr.'s seminal essay on the Civil Rights Movement, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," as he cites ideas from three texts and works to extend their meaning in the new context he has in mind. King writes:

You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, at first glance it may seem rather paradoxical for us consciously to break laws. One may well ask: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is no law at all."

Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a manmade code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, substitutes an "I - it" relationship for an "I - thou" relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. Hence segregation is not only politically, economically, and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and sinful.

King, Martin Luther Jr. "Letter from Birmingham Jail." *50 Essays: A Portable Anthology*. Ed. Samuel Cohen. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007. 225-26. Print.

Here we see King working with three different sources (Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and Martin Buber). It's worth noting that King's letter is addressed to his "fellow clergyman" in the religious community who are against non-violent protests. Thus, his choice of sources (all prominent religious thinkers) makes rhetorical sense. However, King doesn't merely repeat these theologians' words. Rather, he mixes selected quotes (choosing only those words that matter) with adept paraphrase to concisely and effectively articulate his source's positions. Then, he "reroutes" their ideas, using them to develop his own train of thought in the new context of civil rights. Hence, he is doing more than borrowing someone else's ideas. He's extending and rethinking the value of these ideas in a new situation.

Amplifying: When working with evidence from a source that requires some explication, a writer has an obligation to accurately represent its ideas. However, a writer also has the opportunity to pay homage to the source by rewording its ideas in language that amplifies its power. The excerpt from biologist Sue Hubbell's "Passionate Science" serves as a strong example of such amplification:

[...] Robert O'Hara, part philosopher, part zoologist, wondered how humans might be classified if an arthropod were making up the scheme. Anthropoda, meaning "joint-footed," is the biggest phylum of animals, those that by numerical rights, at least, should do the classifying if they were so inclined. The phylum includes spiders, insects, crabs, and lobsters. An arthropod might, according to O'Hara, describe us and our near relatives this way: "the anarthropods are a primitive group with few species and a limited diversity of form. Their reproductive rates prevent them from adapting to their environments closely, and the giantism exhibited by many anarthropods has kept their numbers very low and is no doubt the cause of their general sluggishness."

The invertebrates could get along without us quite nicely, and did for hundreds of millions of years, but we could not get along without them, so dependent are we on the life processes they have initiated and keep going. We humans are a minority of giants stumbling around in the world of little things, often not noticing our neighbors, not even being able to see many of them because they are *very* small. Yet each and every species, constituted from the same basic handful of chemicals as we are, has a complicated and special way of getting on in the world, different from ours and different from one another.

Hubbell, Sue. "Passionate Science." *Advanced College Essay*. Eds. Elisa Linksy and Pat C. Hoy II. Boston: Pearson Learning Solutions, 2013. 44-45. Print.

Hubble not only contextualizes the quote, allowing the reader to quickly grasp O'Hara's position and point of view, but also bookends the quote with interpretive language that does more than simply repeat or explain O'Hara's satire. Notice how the tone and cadence of the sentences change as we switch from O'Hara's mock technical jargon to Hubble's more earnest appeal. O'Hara's "the giantism exhibited in many anarthropods" becomes, in Hubble's words, "We humans are a minority of giants stumbling around in the world of little things." Hubble distinguishes her

project from O'Hara's by adding imagery and a sense of poetry that evoke her intellectual passion. Her words don't take away from O'Hara's message; on the contrary, they seem to heighten it.

Countering: It's not unusual for a writer to quote from a source that he does not agree with. However, when doing so, one must be careful to not misrepresent the original meaning of the source or dismiss its ideas out of hand. At the same time, the writer wants to make his point of disagreement clear. The problem becomes: How can a writer take issue with a source without dismissing it and shutting down all conversation? How can a writer challenge an argument while raising one of his own? Joseph Harris calls this move "countering" and notes that it is a very different rhetorical stance from simply correcting a source. In countering, the writer points out the flaws of an argument, not to dismantle it, but to construct something new. Literary and cultural critic Edward Said models this delicate balancing act of disagreeing without dismissing in his essay "Cashing Civilizations?" Writing in the aftermath of 9/11, Said argues:

Samuel Huntington's article "The Clash of Civilizations?" appeared in the summer of 1993 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, where it immediately attracted a surprising amount of attention and reaction. Because the article was intended to supply Americans with an original thesis about "a new phase" in world politics after the end of the Cold War, Huntington's terms of argument seemed compellingly large, bold, even visionary. "It is my hypothesis," he wrote,

that ... the great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation-states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principle conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.

Most of the argument in the pages that followed relied on a very vague notion of something Huntington called "civilization identity" and "the interactions among seven or eight [*sic*] major civilizations," of which the conflict between two of them, Islam and the West, gets the lion's share of his attention. In this belligerent kind of thought, he relies heavily on a 1990 article by the veteran orientalist Bernard Lewis, whose ideological colors are manifest in its title, "The Roots of Muslim Rage." In both articles, the personification of enormous entities called "the West" and "Islam" is recklessly affirmed, as if hugely complicated matters such as identity and culture existed in a cartoonlike world where Popeye and Bluto bash each other mercilessly, with one always more virtuous pugilist getting the upper hand over his adversary. Certainly neither Huntington nor Lewis has much time to spare for the internal dynamics and pleurality of every civilization; or for considering that the major contest in most modern cultures concerns the definition or interpretation of each culture; or for the unattractive possibility that a great deal of demagoguery and downright arrogance is involved in presuming to speak for a whole religion or civilization. No, the West is the West, and Islam is Islam.

Said, Edward. "Clashing Civilizations?" *50 Essays: A Portable Anthology*. Ed. Samuel Cohen. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007. 365-66. Print.

While Said clearly explains and contextualizes Samuel Huntington's widely read thesis on global politics, he is unafraid to announce his bias. Qualifying language like "intended to supply" and "seemed compellingly large" begins to poke holes in Huntington's authority right from the start. The language becomes more caustic as we move down the page: "belligerent kind of thought;" "recklessly affirmed;" "demagoguery and downright arrogance." Said even goes so far as to paint Huntington's ideas as comically absurd via the image of Popeye and Bluto. Although this is an unsubtle, bold example of critique, it is also an example of countering. Said is doing more than tearing down an argument. He isn't just showboating or flexing his intellectual muscles. He deeply cares about what Huntington's thesis misunderstands. He wants his readers to realize how unfair and dangerous it is to define entire cultures by such uninformed, unyielding labels as Islam and the West; in contrast, the "internal dynamics and plurality of every civilization" marks the starting point of his own argument.

Weaving: Another way to dynamically engage with a source is to highlight key phrases. That is to say, rather than offering a full quote, a writer might weave key terms from a source or sources into her own sentences. By doing so, the writer not only emphasizes the terms she deems important, but also fluidly incorporates the source or sources without sacrificing her own voice or authority. Anthropologist Emily Martin's "The Egg and Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles," for example, weaves key terms from standard biology textbooks to advance her own argument about the patriarchal bias inherent in science writing:

At its extreme, the age-old relationship between the egg and the sperm takes on a royal or religious patina. The egg coat, its protective barrier, is sometimes called its "vestments," a term usually reserved for sacred, religious dress. The egg is said to have a "corona," a crown, and to be accompanied by "attendant cells." It is holy, set apart and above, the queen to the sperm's king. The egg is also passive, which means it must depend on sperm for rescue. Gerald Schatten and Helen Schatten liken the egg's role to that of Sleeping Beauty: "a dormant bride awaiting her mate's magic kiss, which instills the spirit that brings her life." Sperm, by contrast, "have a mission," which is to "move through the female genital tract in quest of the ovum." One popular account has it that the sperm carry out a "perilous journey" into the "warm darkness," where some fall away "exhausted." "Survivors" "assault" the egg, the successful candidates "surrounding the prize."

Martin, Emily. "The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles." *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose, Second Edition*. Eds. Laura Buzzard, Julia Gaunge, Don LePan, Mical Moser, & Tammy Roberts. Toronto: Broadview Press, 2011. 352. Print.

By culling and weaving evocative language from a variety of sources into her own writing, Martin manages several tasks at once: 1) She provides evidence for her argument; 2) She offers context for a reader to understand the quotes even if the sources are unfamiliar; 3) Most importantly, she surrounds her quotes with interpretive language to persuade her readers that these sources harbor a fundamental gender bias. She does all of this without slowing down the rhythm of her sentences or weakening the strength of her argument.