Using Source Material

To write strong papers in college, you need to develop the skill of using material from sources other than your own thoughts and ideas. This means knowing how to take phrases and passages other people have written and use those passages and phrases in your own paper to accomplish specific goals. You can use source material to support arguments or ideas, to define terms or develop illustrations, or to provide a point of view that is different from yours so you can refute opposing ideas.

What does "source material" mean?

Source material includes anything that someone else wrote, said on record, or produced. Source material typically comes in one of three kinds:

Primary sources. These are texts, artifacts, and objects that you are writing about. They provide the direct subject of your investigation.

Secondary sources. These are works that provide analysis and commentary about primary sources and topics of investigation.

Tertiary sources. These are works that summarize secondary sources. As such they probably are the least useful kind of source material.

Writers find source material in all kinds of media. The most commonly used source materials include:
- written works such as books, articles, reports, social media posts, and blogs
- recorded speech in interviews, documentaries, videos, and podcasts
- data and statistics published by an organization
- pictures, graphs, and charts published in any kind of media
- expressed opinions of any individual or group

What does it mean to "use" source material?

Since someone else — an author or organization — is the *source*, and since their work is the *material,* then using source material means including someone else's work in your own paper. Using source material is the conventional way to strengthen the substance of your writing, but it needs to be done with precision and accuracy. To use source material, three methods will work in any paper or essay you have to write in college:

Paraphrase. Reformulate the meaning of a passage in your own words.

Summarize*.* Explain the meaning of a passage in shorter phrases or sentences.

Quote. Use the exact words of your source material.

Always notify your readers when you use source material

These three methods above — paraphrasing, summarizing, and quoting — must be accurately documented in your paper. "Documentation" means using specific words and keyboard characters that visually highlight source material in your paper. Correct documentation is how you as a writer notify your readers of any phrase or passage you did not write. All writers need to document their source material as a way of acknowledging that they are using phrases and passages that they themselves did not write. "Plagiarism" is when a writer does not accurately document their outside sources. Plagiarism is a serious [academic offense](#).

Using Source Material: Pro Tips

When it comes to using source material, there are a lot of rules and expectations. Here are the basic, most important tips:

Use all three methods in your essay. A hallmark of strong writing is knowing when to *summarize*, when to *paraphrase*, and when to *quote* directly. Long, complicated passages usually need to be summarized. Confusing passages can

be paraphrased. Well-written phrases and sentences can be quoted directly. No essay should feature just one method only.

Use signal phrases to introduce source material. A signal phrase is a short series of words that tells your reader (1) who the source is and (2) what the source is doing. Signal phrases identify what a source is doing by choosing a descriptive verb. For example, the source *states, notes, agrees, observes, finds, suggests, acknowledges,* and so on.

Use source material to supplement what you are saying; don't use it to repeat what you are saying. There is no need to write the same thing twice in the same paragraph. It is better to use source material to support an observation you want to make instead of making the observation and then, for example, integrating a direct quote that simply repeats the observation that already has been established.

Don't "plop" source material. Plopping means putting a quotation into your paragraph without introducing it or explaining what it is there. Sometimes this error is called "floating" or "hanging" a quotation. There are three easy ways to avoid this error:
1. Paraphrase part of the source material and directly quote another part of the source material.
2. Introduce a quotation by first saying who wrote it and why they wrote it.
3. Before quoting, write a sentence that first explains what the quote means.

Always cite your sources

In standard academic English, "to cite" means "to document." To *cite* your source material is to *document* your source material, and to *document* your source material is to *notify* your readers that you are using source material. Different academic disciplines use different citation styles, so you may need to learn more than one citation style while you are in college.

The Internet is full of citation guides, instructions, and templates. Some are better than others, and it is easy to get overwhelmed by the volume of information about citing sources. Use these links to get started:

Thomason Library Citation Guide

Purdue OWL