TWO

Reading and Writing about Other Texts

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Academic Reading

Read everything.

—Paul Kei Matsuda

First of all: I know that you already know how to read.

Like writing, reading is a bit different in university than it is outside of it. The texts you read in university courses are likely longer and more complex, and might be hard to read (or boring, to be honest) at first. If the thing you're reading is an introductory textbook, the author is probably an expert who is trying to get a lot of information across to you in a short space, and it might feel overwhelming. If it's an article from an academic journal, the author is usually a researcher who knows so much about their subject that the only people who can really understand them are other experts in that field, which is who their intended audience usually is.

Read before You Read

A good way to start is what some people call "prereading" or "reading around" a text. You should start by reading

everything but the actual text. If you've got a journal article, read the title, the author's name, and the name of the journal. If it's got an abstract, read that, and read it carefully. The abstract is a short paragraph before a research article that gives you a summary of the whole thing. It's almost always useful. It will tell you all the important information in the text. (In fact, if you're in a hurry you can *just* read the abstract, but don't tell your professor I said that.) Then read any section headings that are in the text, and if you have time, skim the introduction and conclusion. If you've got a textbook chapter to read, look at the whole table of contents to see where the chapter fits, read all the headings and subheadings in the chapter, look at the pictures, charts, and diagrams, and, again, skim the intro and conclusion.

Then ask yourself what you know about the text before you start reading it. Hopefully, you have some idea of the academic field the text is a part of, who wrote the text and why they wrote it, and what the general focus or purpose of the text is. This context might be part of how your prof introduced the reading, but if it isn't, you can look for those things on your own.

Write While You Read

You should get in the habit of taking notes while you read. A lot of people think writing notes by hand on actual paper is the best way to do this, and I agree, but it's OK if you don't

have any paper. It's helpful to make little notes in the margins; you can summarize as you read to help you remember what each section or paragraph or part is about. You may also want to make notes of things you agree or disagree with, things that confuse you or make you angry, or questions you have about something the author claimed. All this will help you take in the text, understand it, and process it, so your notes will be useful when you start writing about it.

Something that can be helpful is making a "reverse outline." Usually, an outline is a rough sketch or plan of the different parts of a paper you plan to write, and it's usually written before you start writing the actual paper, or around the time you start writing. The reverse outline is the same – a rough sketch of the different parts of the text – but it's written *after* you have read a complete text. If you're reading something dense or difficult and want to keep everything straight in your head, try writing a short summary – usually not even a complete sentence – of the main ideas of each paragraph or couple of paragraphs in the margins of the text. This might help you retain the information better and remind you how the writer's ideas fit together.

Really, though, it's OK if you don't understand everything you read. Ideally, you'll be able to make it through a text without stopping every few seconds to look up a word or a concept; you can make notes of things you need to clarify and then look them up, or perhaps even better, talk

to a classmate or ask about it on your class group chat, if you have one. Meanings can become clearer when we try to learn them along with other people.

TL;DR: Do a lot of skimming before you start reading to get some idea of what a text is going to do, and always take notes while you read.

Summary

Let me explain. No, there is too much – let me sum up.

—Mandy Patinkin as Indigo Montoya in *The Princess Bride*

Explaining Another Text

Summarizing means explaining what another text is about in "your own words." I put *your own words* in quotes because what are "your own words" anyway? (See the sections on paraphrasing and plagiarism for more on this.) So, for now, let's talk about some basic rules for writing a summary.

Overall, your summary should briefly answer these questions: What was that text mostly about? What was its main idea, point, or argument?

Here are four things to keep in mind when summarizing:

Be objective and accurate. You need to accurately and objectively tell your reader what the text was mainly about. This means that there's not much room for you to express your own reactions to the text (unless your professor wants you to); your main task is to get the information

across. Even if you disagree with the author, it's important to present their views or ideas accurately rather than going into detail about why you think they're wrong.

Be thorough but concise. Ideally, you should imagine that the reader has not read the text you're summarizing, so you'll usually need to explain things like the names and significance of people or organizations mentioned in the text. So don't just say the text is about "Dr. Smith, who works with the ABCDE organization"; let the reader know it's Josephine Smith, a researcher at (let's say) the University of Alaska, and she works with the Association of Broccoli, Carrot, and Daikon Enthusiasts.*

At the same time, you don't need to mention a lot of small details that don't serve the main focus or purpose of the original text. Maybe the original author mentioned Dr. Smith's dog in one sentence; unless the article is mostly about dogs, you can leave the dog out.†

Provide context. Don't just jump right into reporting "the facts." Your readers need to know where this information is coming from. Provide some sense of who wrote the article and what the overall vibe is; where it fits in the larger world of the thing the author is writing about.

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* I'm sorry for that weird example. This is why I don't use a lot of examples.

† Again, sorry.

Attribute words and ideas to their authors. This is a big one: use phrases like "according to [author's name]…" or "[author] claims that…" or "Finally, [author] explains that…" *a lot.* Use them *way* more than you think you need to. If you don't attribute almost everything to the original author, the reader most likely won't know where this stuff came from, and in many cases may assume you're claiming these are your words and ideas. We will talk about this in detail in the next few pages.

TL;DR: Summaries should be mostly objective, thorough, concise, and clearly attributed to the person who wrote the text you're summarizing.

Attribution

You miss 100 percent of the shots
you don't take – Wayne Gretzky.

—Michael Scott, *The Office*[*]

Why Attribution Matters

Information isn't a neutral thing just floating around out there. It's part of a larger social and cultural world. This is why it's important to distinguish your "voice" as the writer of the summary from the voice of the author in the original text. You didn't make all this information up; it came from somewhere else.

But wait – didn't the last section say you should be "objective" in a summary? Why are we talking about your voice, then?

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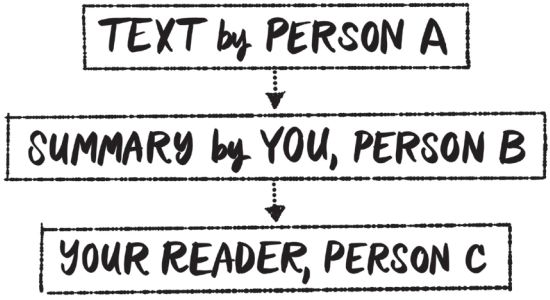
[*] This is a joke from the American TV show *The Office,* but if you've never seen it or don't know who Wayne Gretzky is, it needs a little explaining. The joke is that while Wayne Gretzky, who many people consider the greatest hockey player of all time, really did say this, the character in the show, Michael Scott, is attributing the quote to Gretzky, which is accurate and correct, but he's also attributing it to himself, which just makes this whole thing confusing.

By *voice,* I don't mean your opinions or views. When you're just summarizing, it's true that those things are often not useful or called for.

What I mean is this: in academic writing, you often have to remind your reader that you're the one putting together information from a variety of sources.

Here's what is happening in the chain of communicating this information:



You're not a journalist or researcher on the ground, reporting events or ideas first-hand; you're the middleman, the mediator between the original text and your reader.

This might sound strange, but the best way to show that you have a voice as a summarizer is to use attribution to show that you're not the original author – make it clear to your reader that you're not the person who discovered or created the information to begin with. Paradoxically, if you use a lot of attribution, you create a *new* voice for yourself. Rather than positioning yourself as the neutral

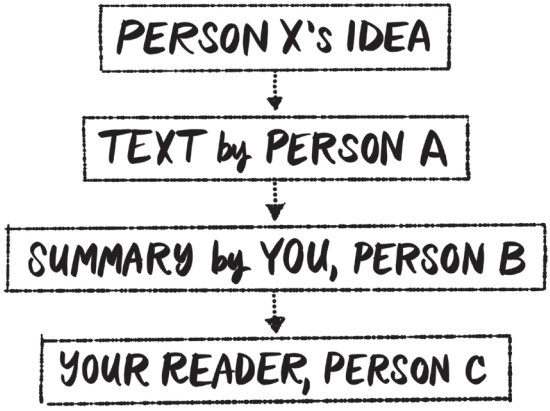
conduit of neutral information (which doesn't really exist, remember!) you create an identity as the understander, the messenger, or the interpreter of the original text or texts, passing on the important information to the reader through the lens of your own reading.

Two Types of Attribution

The most obvious type of attribution you'll do is to the original author of a text you read, as discussed in the last section ("The author says X," "The author claims X," etc.). (By the way, you may be in the habit of literally writing the words *the author,* but in higher-level academic writing, it's much more common to refer to the author by their name, which we'll touch on in a minute.)

However, you may also need to do a kind of "secondary" attribution to people the author mentioned and attributed ideas to in the original text. The author of the text *you* read and are summarizing wasn't just sharing their own ideas; they probably borrowed some words and ideas from other people. And now it's your job not only to show what you're borrowing from them, but what they borrowed from others.

When that happens, the chain of communicating information looks like this:



This is getting complicated, I know. Now you have to communicate to your reader that what they're getting is fourth-hand information: Person C (the reader) is learning about Person X's idea through Person B (you) explaining how Person A wrote about it.

How can we do this kind of attribution? Different style guides have rules about what's called "secondary citations," but the basic form turns out not to be too hard:

Person A explains that Person X's argument is…

Person A interviewed Person X, who claimed that…

Person A uses Person X's concept of [whatever] to show how…

Boom.

Using the Author's Name, Not Just "the Author"

Some people get in the habit of referring to the writer of a text as "the author." This might be something that is taught in high school, or it might just be a habit because it's simple and easy to do. It's not wrong, but it's also not precise. Chances are you'll be writing papers that include information that comes from a wide variety of authors and texts, and in this case, referring to the writer of a text simply as "the author" will be confusing.

Different style guides have different ways of referring to writers (more on this in a later section), but you can't go wrong with using the writer's actual name almost every time you want to refer to them or attribute an idea to them. I tell my students to use the writer's real name in most sentences of a summary, even if it feels repetitive, and I almost always advise against using the phrase *the author* except in cases of multiauthored papers, where it can get tiresome to repeat several names over and over. In that case, I usually advise something like this:

Heng Hartse and Kubota (2014) have a different view. Although the authors acknowledge the complexities of this phenomenon, they also argue that ...

Here, I've used the authors' actual last names (in APA style), referred to them as "the authors," and used the pronoun *they* rather than repeating their names. If I continued

to refer to Heng Hartse and Kubota's 2014 paper in this paragraph, I would probably employ this same mix of words again, but I would use the actual names more often than *the authors.*

TL;DR: You should explain that you're using other peoples' ideas as clearly as you can, usually by mentioning their names a lot. Like a *lot.*

Paraphrasing and Quotation

We defined *paraphrasing* as restating a passage from a source in fresh language, though sometimes with keywords retained from that passage.

—Rebecca Moore Howard, Tricia Serviss, and Tanya K. Rodrigue, "Writing from Sources, Writing from Sentences"

How to Refer to Other People's Words and Ideas

Some writing guides lump "paraphrasing, summary, and quotation" together as three ways of explaining other texts. Really, paraphrasing and quotation are two tools you can use while doing the larger project of summarizing.

Paraphrasing is writing about the original author's ideas using language that is *similar* enough to the original to give your reader the information they need but *different* enough that it shows the reader that you understood and processed the original text. (Remember, your audience, whoever else you might imagine, is ultimately your professor, and they want to know that you're learning the material.)

Quotation is using the *exact same* words, sentences, and structures as the original author, and putting those words inside quotation marks. That's these little guys:

“ ”

Using Quotations

How much quotation should you use in a summary? Not a lot. It depends, but maybe no more than about ten to twenty percent of your whole text should be quotes. In general, it's best to quote only technical explanations, or definitions of key concepts, or short passages that you think are so powerful or well-written that you feel the reader really needs to see them.

It's important to integrate quotes into your own sentences or paragraphs in a way that explains them in context – you shouldn't just drop a quote into your paper with no explanation. Here's a quick example. Let's say a student is using a quote from a short story by the writer C.D.B. Bryan called “So Much Unfairness of Things” (1962), which is about a kid who gets kicked out of a private high school.

NO **Sometimes it's hard to learn important lessons. “You will *never* be able to look back on this and laugh. But you may be able to understand.”**

ϟ There's no explanation about where the quote comes from, who wrote or said it, or why it's being used here.

BETTER **Sometimes it's hard to learn important lessons. As C.D.B. Bryan wrote in 1962, "You will *never* be able to look back on this and laugh. But you may be able to understand."**

⚡ This helps, because at least we know where the quote comes from, but it's still not clearly connected to whatever the student is writing about.

EVEN BETTER **Sometimes it's hard to learn important lessons. Although we may not "be able to look back" on our mistakes "and laugh," as C.D.B. Bryan wrote in "So Much Unfairness of Things" in 1962, we "may be able to understand" the consequences of our actions in hindsight.**

⚡ The quote is really chopped up here, which might seem strange if you're not used to doing it, but it's perfectly acceptable to do this in academic writing, and often it's a good strategy. The goal is to integrate the quote into the "flow" of your own sentences and ideas. We will talk about this a bit more in the next section when we get to the concept of using sources.

Paraphrasing

Most of your summary should be paraphrasing. Paraphrasing is "using your own words," which you have heard about in school for most of your life. What this does *not* mean is the method you might call "using mostly the same

words as the original text but changing a few of the important words."

If you got into the habit of doing this, you'll need to stop, because this is really not OK in university. At best, it's seen as unsophisticated; worse, it's seen as lazy; and at worst it's seen as a serious form of plagiarism or cheating. (We will talk about plagiarism more soon, but I feel like I should really stress this: sometimes what people think of as paraphrasing before they get to university is a lot closer to what university professors think of as plagiarism.)

Paraphrasing, at its best, involves making major changes in things like which words you use, what order they are in, what forms those words are in, and how they're put into sentences.

Here's a quick example using the second sentence of this section, "Really, paraphrasing and quotation are two tools you can use while doing the larger project of summarizing."

1. **Truly, paraphrasing and quotation are two things you can use while doing the bigger project of summarizing.**
2. **Your main project is writing a summary, and there are two strategies you can use to do that: one is paraphrasing the original text, the other is quoting some of its exact words.**

You can see that no. 1 is pretty much the exact same sentence as the original text, with a few words changed or removed. No. 2 rearranges the information, changes most (but not all!) of the words, and even adds some additional context. No. 2 is much better.

Generally, if you see yourself using more than three or four words in a row from the original, you should check and see if there's another way to rearrange things or change words. Or you can decide to go ahead and use the exact words, but as a quotation.

TL;DR: Summarizing includes paraphrasing, which means presenting the same information but in a *very* different arrangement of words, and a bit of quotation, which means using the exact same words from the original, in quotation marks.

Response

I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking,
what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means.

—Joan Didion, "Why I Write"

Telling Readers What You Think about Other Texts

Even though the last few pages talk about summaries as if they're always 100 percent objective and your opinion doesn't matter, most assignments do involve some subjectivity – that is, providing your own perspective in some way. There are a lot of different ways to describe what we do when we provide our perspective on other texts. After you read something, you may be asked to do one of the following:

- respond to
- critique
- criticize
- reflect on
- analyze
- evaluate.

Whatever your professor calls it, you may encounter assignments in which you're asked to say what you think about something. But you have to do this in a way that balances your "objective" summary, which shows you understand and can explain the text (the things we talked about in the last few sections), with your own reactions to it.

First, should you use the word *I* and phrases like "I think" or "in my opinion" in your text? Despite what many high school teachers teach, *I* is used in high-level academic writing all the time but is less common in some fields than others. You can probably tell, for example, from the way I've been using it in this book that I think it's totally fine to use *I* in some contexts, because, I think, it makes the writer seem maybe more friendly or trustworthy or honest or personal. (I mean, I hope so!)

Don't try to come up with weird ways to wiggle around *I* if you can't or don't want to use it; just say what you think. (Like, instead of "I think dogs are awesome," just write "dogs are awesome.") As usual, you need to get to know the person who's grading your assignments to know how OK it is.

Regardless of whether you use *I,* what exactly should you be reacting *to?* Usually, I recommend two different approaches: responding to ideas and arguments, and responding to how the ideas are communicated.

Responding to ideas and arguments. This is where you can be direct about agreeing or disagreeing with whatever main point or points the text is making. I'm going to do an imaginary example here, so bear with me.

Let's say the original text is by someone called Gerald Bookman (I just made him up), and one sentence in it says,

More people are reading e-books today than ever before, and it's time for publishers to consider phasing out print books entirely.

I love books, and I would hate to see them die, so if this were me, I know that at some point I would just come out and say it, in maybe one of these ways:

"I disagree with Bookman."
ϟ You can't get much more direct than that.

"Bookman is wrong."
ϟ Again – very clear.

"While e-books may be gaining popularity, print books should not be abandoned."
ϟ This one is a bit longer, and you'll notice I didn't really make an evaluative judgment of his argument – I just stated a claim that is opposed to the one he made.

Any of these might be a good place to start, but I can't stop here, because I haven't explained *why* I disagree, or why anybody should listen to what I have to say about this. Someone could easily reply with a quote from the classic nineties film *The Big Lebowski:* "That's just, like, your *opinion,* man."

In other words, you've got to be sure you have something that can do one of the following to your position:

- back it up
- support it
- give evidence for it
- explain it.

Don't stop at "I agree" or "I disagree." You need to tell the reader why you responded the way you did.

What is an acceptable answer to this *why?* In some cases, the why will need to have hard evidence behind it, like statistics, or information from empirical research; many times, especially in an assignment I call "The Paper," which we'll talk about in the next chapter, you'll usually refer to the work of other authors, scholars, or experts whose positions align more with your own. In some cases, you may be able to write mainly based on your own life experiences or deeply held beliefs, or simply try to create a convincing hypothetical or imagined example that has the ring of truth.

Responding to how ideas are communicated. This can be trickier, but it's sometimes better to do than simply saying, "I disagree."

If you want to explain why you think the writer made their point in a way that was not effective, or problematic, or ignorant, you can draw attention to the problems with their evidence, reasons, explanations, and so on. This can involve things like pointing out that the writer has failed to consider other perspectives and what those perspectives might add, or pointing out that something in the author's argument doesn't make sense or isn't fair, or that they didn't mention something that would be important to consider when thinking about the issue under discussion.

There are other things you can do, but these – responding to the argument and responding to the way the author made their argument – are two of the most direct and simplest things you can do when responding to a text. Depending on how you feel about the point the original text made, you can choose one, or you can do a combination of both.

A Note about Agreeing with the Original Text

Somehow, this feels harder to do well. Maybe it's because we're taught that "critical thinking" is important when we respond to ideas, and we think being critical means we have to be negative or disagree. If your professor gives you a text to respond to, and you think pretty much everything

in it seems 100 percent right, but you still have to write five hundred words, what are you supposed to do? Just write "I agree with Bookman" over and over? Probably not. I suggest using a modified version of the disagreement-type strategies mentioned above – you can still provide reasons and evidence in support of the position of the original text, and, in fact, you'll have a lot of things from the text itself to borrow from. (Not that you want to repeat everything they said exactly, but you can highlight parts that seem especially strong and explain why they're so convincing, from your own perspective.)

You can also do what Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein talk about in their book, *They Say / I Say,* which is to respond with, "OK, but …" This is a kind of agreement with a twist. You might agree with some parts of what the original text said, but not all of it.

This gives you the chance to explain your own position more directly, but keep in mind the genre of the assignment. If the main goal is to critically respond to the original text, you should keep your response rooted in the text, bringing up your multisided agreement-disagreement in relation to specific points made in the text. Try not to go too far down the path of offering your opinion about something only partially related to the original text, however. I've seen a few "response" papers that make this mistake. The writer might begin, "I agree with Bookman that e-books have many advantages, but paper

books are better for children," which sounds interesting, but then they go on to write several paragraphs about how technology has been harmful to children and talk about television, smartphones, YouTube, and many other unrelated things until the question of print books has vanished altogether.

So don't do that, but do feel free to have a more nuanced, double-sided approach, if that's what makes sense to you – as long as you keep your response directly related to the original text's points. (Maybe you can refer back to that reverse outline you made of the text while you were reading it. You did do that, right?)

TL;DR: Many assignments ask for your response to another text, which you can do by directly agreeing or disagreeing with or critiquing the original writer's argument (with evidence to back up your view). Make sure that what you do is grounded in the things the original text says, not just whatever was already in your head before you started reading.

Stance

Here I stand; I can do no other.

—Martin Luther*

Using Language to Show Your Position

The last section may have made it sound as if every text you respond to will be an argumentative one, and that you might have an argument to make in response to it. This isn't strictly true, even if it can be a good way to think about approaching this kind of assignment. I don't even like to use the word *argument* when I talk about responding to texts, because *argument* sounds like a knock-down, drag-out fight where you explain why your view is absolutely correct and why anyone who disagrees with you is a big dumb idiot.

That's how some people think they should write about opinions, but most academic writing doesn't really work

* According to some scholars, Martin Luther (the sixteenth-century priest who started the Protestant Reformation) did not actually say this, but it's widely attributed to him, and it looks good at the beginning of a chapter on "stance."

this way. If you write one thousand words about why people who disagree with you are wrong and stupid, you'll alienate your readers, and you won't look like a sophisticated thinker or writer.

Instead, I think a better way to think about responding is to call it a "stance." I ask questions like this: Where do you stand in relation to the author? What is your position relative to the original text?

You'll notice that this is a metaphor that uses the concept of physical space to explain how you feel about an idea – imagine yourself at a party or something, and you're listening to somebody talk passionately about something they have a lot to say about. If you find what they're saying compelling, you might want to move closer to them. If you find what they're saying wrong or repulsive, you might want to get as far away from them as you can. And there are ways to do that with words.

In his article "The Rhetorical Stance," scholar Wayne Booth defines *stance* as the balance between three things:

- "the available arguments about the subject itself"
- the audience
- the voice of the speaker.

You can show your stance by doing the things I suggested in the last section – being explicit about where you agree or disagree, and critiquing the way the author makes

their points. You can also do it with the language you use, especially in the following ways:

- Vary the verbs of attribution you use. Writing "Smith *implies* X" is tentative and suggests your stance is maybe farther away from the writer. Writing "Smith *clearly shows* X" is more certain and suggests you align yourself with the author.
- Use adjectives, adverbs, or modal verbs (like *might, could, may,* and so on) that signal various degrees of agreement or certainty when you attribute things to the author. The chart below has some examples of how you can do this, but there are many more possibilities.

Language	Stance relative to author
Smith unconvincingly attempts to show …	Very far away
Smith seems to suggest …	Pretty far away
Smith suggests …	Not all that close, but almost neutral
Smith states …	Neutral
Smith clearly shows …	Pretty close
Smith unequivocally proves …	Very close

TL;DR: You can show your agreement or disagreement with texts not only by just telling your reader what you think but also by using certain kinds of words to show whether you align yourself closely with the original writer or not.

Plagiarism

Any speaker is himself a respondent to a greater or lesser degree. He is not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe.

—M.M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*

Why We Acknowledge Other People's Words

People talk about plagiarism a lot at universities, and it's important to understand and be careful about it. The problem is, not everybody agrees on what plagiarism is.

There are some things we can all agree on: you shouldn't pay people to write papers for you, or copy your friend's paper, or have AI software write your paper and put your name on it. If you turn in a paper with your name on it but you did 0 percent of the writing, this is – well, it's bad. Some people even think of it as stealing. (The Latin word *plagarius* means "kidnapper" – using other people's words without attribution is apparently as bad as stealing a child!)

You can get in a lot of trouble if you do this sort of thing. Some countries have passed laws against companies that

advertise "paper-writing services" to university students, and even if these services are not currently illegal where you live, it's almost certainly against your university's policy to pay someone to do your assignments.

That doesn't mean you can never get help with your writing. There are some grey areas. For example, it's totally fine to get someone's help editing your grammar and spelling, as long as they're not completely rewriting your paper. In some cases, you'll be encouraged to collaborate with others on some parts of a piece of writing. (My university does have a policy against the "unauthorized" use of an editor, but as ever, this usually depends on the individual course or instructor.) See the section "Feedback" for more about this.

So there are usually two different things people mean when they talk about plagiarism. The first is the obvious cheating-style situation in which the writer did not do most of the actual writing. The second, which is more common and somewhat harder to avoid, is the problem of not sufficiently explaining where ideas or words come from. (This is one reason we use citation styles like MLA and APA, which we'll talk about in a bit.)

But where *do* ideas come from? I'm tempted to quote another one of my favourite dorky nineties movies, *Empire Records,* where a character says, "Who knows where thoughts come from? They just appear!" Surely we don't have to explain how we know every single thing we know

and cite a credible expert source on literally every fact we ever mention. Like, do you need to say, "According to an article in the *Guardian* newspaper, Queen Elizabeth II was the queen of England"? Do you need to cite a biology textbook when you tell your readers that bananas are a fruit?*

No, you don't have to provide citations for these things. Some ideas are so well-known they're considered "common knowledge." In fact, don't worry too much about having to provide a reference or a citation for things that you already had in your head before you started doing the readings you did for your class or assignment. And in some science disciplines, it's *important* to use the same language as other texts, like if you're replicating an experiment and you need to write out the exact name of a chemical compound or a procedure you followed. These aren't always cited.

The problem usually comes when you try to offer a summary or a close paraphrase of a text to make a new point. If you're not careful, your voice can start to blend with the voice of the original author, and it might look like you're claiming that you're the one who said or thought something that another writer said or thought.

You probably don't mean to "steal" words or ideas, but a general rule to remember is this: if it wasn't already

* I don't know why you'd be saying this – maybe you're writing a paper about the history of the banana import-export business.

rattling around in your head before you read the text, you need to attribute and probably cite that information. And as mentioned in the "Paraphrasing" section, if you find yourself using more than a few words in a row that are identical to the original text, you're going to need to quote or cite that too.

TL;DR: Not everyone has the same understanding of what *plagiarism* means, but when you're writing in an academic setting, it's really important to explain that you read about an idea in another text.

Citations

How to Acknowledge Other People's Words

In academia, we use citation styles for the same reason we care about plagiarism: it's really important to clearly explain where words and ideas come from, and these styles are systematic and widely accepted ways to do that. Citations are like a trail back to the original source that the reader can follow if they want to. Human knowledge, all the way from the ancient philosopher to you, the twenty-first-century student, has a genealogy, and being clear about how it works is beneficial to you as a student and a writer, and to your professor as a teacher, and to any other readers, real or imagined, who might read your paper. Citation styles are one major way we do this.

There are many different styles in different fields, but two big ones you'll almost definitely come across in university are MLA (the Modern Language Association, mostly used in the humanities) and APA (the American Psychological Association, mostly used in the social sciences). If you know MLA from high school, APA will feel weird to you, but they're both fine – just different. Chicago style is also fairly common in some fields.

The two main things you should know about are

- *in-text citations:* found in the body of your paper
- *references:* the full information about the resource you used, found at the end of the paper in a list.

Here's what you need to know.

How to Use In-Text Citations, and Where to Look for Help If You Forget How

For APA style, you need to remember three things:

- author's last name
- year of publication
- page number.

An APA in-text citation looks something like this, although you can mix and match what goes in the parentheses and what goes in the actual sentence:

He later explains that "anyone who disagrees with you is a big dumb idiot" (Heng Hartse, 2022, p. 56).

For MLA style, generally you just need

- author's last name
- page number.

Also, MLA does not use "p." to introduce the page number, and it doesn't put a comma between the name and the number, both of which are different from APA. An MLA citation looks something like this:

He later explains that "anyone who disagrees with you is a big dumb idiot" (Heng Hartse 56).

Notice that for both APA and MLA, the period at the end of the sentence comes after the parenthesis. This can look weird if you're not used to it, but it's correct!

In Chicago style, in-text citations have the author's last name and the date, but also a comma before the page number, and no "p." in front of it. Kind of like a mix of MLA and APA:

He later explains that "anyone who disagrees with you is a big dumb idiot" (Heng Hartse 2022, 56).

If you forget how to do this or encounter a unique situation, I suggest searching for "APA style guide" or "MLA style guide," and so on, on the internet. Most organizations that have citation styles have their own websites that give advice on unique situations. You can also buy paper or electronic copies of the official style manuals, which I highly recommend because they're the most comprehensive guides, but if you'd rather not buy one, university libraries

often have good free, short guides to the most common situations you'll face with APA and MLA style.

How to Figure Out How to Copy Automatically Formatted References

I really don't think you need to learn how to write references from scratch anymore. There are many ways to do this automatically, and they've gotten much better in recent years. You can look up how to correctly put an edited book or journal article or podcast in your list of sources (placed at the end of your paper – what APA and Chicago call "References" and MLA calls "Works Cited"), but honestly, most of the time, you don't have to look it up and type it all out yourself.

Instead, all you have to do is find the place on whatever library database or academic search engine you're using that will give you an automatic citation. In recent years, the most common symbol for automatically generated references has become a little box with quotation marks inside it, or just the word *Cite.* This will be a small button or link near the basic information about the article. Find this, click it, then copy the reference (in whatever style) and paste it into your References or Works Cited. This list should be in alphabetical order by the author's last name.

You may find there are errors with the automatic citations from time to time; specifically, the way they capitalize

(or don't capitalize) the titles of books or articles can differ from what the style guide calls for. Here's a quick rule to remember.

APA → Sentence case
MLA and Chicago → Headline or title case

APA. Titles of articles and books are in what is called "sentence case," meaning you only capitalize the first letter of the title, any proper nouns in the title, and the first letter after a colon or other punctuation mark. However, the titles of academic journals are in what is called "title case," meaning that every word except for prepositions (like *of* or *in*) and articles (like *a* or *the*) is capitalized. Here's a journal article in APA style:

Drake, C. A. (1941). Why students cheat. *Journal of Higher Education, 12*(8), 418–20.

MLA. Unlike in APA style, titles of everything in MLA style are in what is called "headline or title case." Here's the same example:

Drake, Charles A. "Why Students Cheat." *Journal of Higher Education* vol. 12, no. 8 (1941), pp. 418–20.

Chicago. This style is pretty similar to MLA style, with a few variations.

Drake, Charles A. "Why Students Cheat." *Journal of Higher Education* 12, no. 8 (1941): 418–20.

You'll notice each style has different ways of showing you the volume and issue number of journals: "*12*(8)" in APA, "vol. 12, no. 8" in MLA, and "12, no. 8" in Chicago all mean "volume 12, issue 8" of the journal. I don't think you need to know a whole lot about this unless you plan to go to graduate school, but don't worry – the information is out there if you need it, and somewhere on your campus right now there's a reference librarian who can't wait to help you figure it out if you want.

TL;DR: MLA, APA, and Chicago style citations are ways we show where the stuff we're writing about comes from. They're different, and you can learn more from the internet about whichever one you're using. Automatic citations are your friend, but they're not always right.