

USING SOURCES EFFECTIVELY

Second Edition

Strengthening Your Writing
and Avoiding Plagiarism

Robert A. Harris



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Introduction to the Second Edition

This book is designed to assist you, the writer of a research paper, with practical and effective strategies for incorporating sources into your work. In the chapters that follow, you will learn how the skillful use of sources adds strength to your argument and interest to your writing. You will also learn what you need to know to avoid plagiarism as you bring source material into your research paper. The book includes many examples and ideas to help you apply the strategies and to make your writing especially good.

Overview of the book.

Chapter 1: The Importance of Using Sources Effectively.

This chapter discusses the purposes behind bringing sources into your writing and how the skillful use of quotations, summaries, and paraphrases can give your writing both power and sparkle. By reading this chapter, you should come to view the research process and the use of research materials as an opportunity to enrich your own thinking and provide punch to the arguments you present.

Chapter 2: Avoiding Plagiarism.

This chapter provides practical instruction about what does and does not constitute plagiarism. You may be one of the many students who never received formal instruction about plagiarism and how to incorporate sources appropriately. This chapter defines the issues and clarifies some possible misconceptions in order to help you avoid unintentional plagiarism. It also tells you how to protect yourself from a false charge of plagiarism.

Chapter 3: Selecting Sources.

This chapter covers the selection of sources and describes the various kinds of source material you will find. Some ideas are included for evaluating the quality of the sources you have located, together with advice about handling sources that disagree or conflict with one another or with the central idea you are presenting in your paper.

Chapter 4: Working with Sources.

Through examples, this chapter shows you how to work with your source material and covers the various methods of preparing your sources for incorporation into your paper. Advice is offered about deciding whether to quote, summarize, or paraphrase, and how to preserve the author's intended meaning.

Chapter 5: Putting It Together.

This chapter provides strategies and examples to help you build sources into a paper: introductory methods and styles, the use of appropriate phrases and verbs to help direct your reader, and how to punctuate your quotations accurately.

Chapter 6: Effective Use.

This chapter goes beyond mere compliance with the rules of source use and discusses how to use sources in a powerful and effective way. By employing some of the practical ideas in this chapter, you will be able to write much more vibrant and successful research papers.

Appendix A: Polishing Your Prose.

This appendix provides half a dozen short instructional reminders about grammar, mechanics, and punctuation that writers of research papers often find troublesome. The advice comes from a professor who has been teaching students the process of writing a research paper for more than 25 years. The benefit to you is that the reminders chosen for your attention are based on long experience. One of the secrets of writing instruction is that relatively few error patterns account for a large proportion of the errors in most student writing. If you master the material presented in this appendix, you will most likely have substantially improved the accuracy of your writing.

Appendix B: Citation Examples.

This appendix provides examples of citations for APA References pages and MLA Works Cited pages.

New to the second edition.

This edition has more exercises, including a True-False quiz at the end of each chapter. The mechanics and grammar reviews have been moved to Appendix A, Polishing Your Prose, which includes exercises. In the main text, a section has been added to show how to mark the boundaries for non-text information such as tables and drawings (Chapter 5, Section 5.1.5), and a section is now included on using Internet sources (Chapter 3, Section 3.3). Other improvements include information about plagiarism and copyright infringement, the overuse of tutors, and the benefits of using reference librarians. Clarifications have been made throughout.

Citation and bibliography style.

The examples in the book are presented in both APA and MLA citation styles, though the book should be a useful resource regardless of the particular style of citation and bibliography you use, whether APA, MLA, CBE, Chicago, Turabian, ASA, or some other. APA style follows that of the fifth edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2001), and MLA style follows that in the sixth edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (Gibaldi, 2003). The References page near the end of the book follows APA style.

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Tustin, California

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1

The Importance of Using Sources Effectively

The mind is but a barren soil; a soil which is soon exhausted, and will produce no crop, or only one, unless it be continually fertilized and enriched with foreign matter.

—Sir Joshua Reynolds

The overall goal of this book is to help you write better research papers, principally by incorporating sources into your work more effectively and accurately. However, a preliminary question may have arisen in your mind: Why do you have to do a research paper anyway? Why do instructors assign them? This chapter will provide you with some answers by discussing the benefits of writing a research paper.

- ◆ Writing a research paper helps to improve your writing skills.
- ◆ Researching brings you new ideas and perspectives.
- ◆ Using sources in a paper adds strength, interest, and context to your argument.
- ◆ Citing sources aids your reader and helps you to avoid plagiarism.
- ◆ Writing with sources develops your thinking and analysis skills.

1.1 Why do research?

Writing—especially research-based writing—is one of the most amazing opportunities you will have in your educational experience. By improving your ability to frame a research problem, locate relevant sources, work with those sources, and write a persuasive paper based on them, you will be developing a host of skills that will serve you well for the rest of your life. Just as swimming is said to be such good exercise because it uses so many different muscles, research-based writing is excellent mental exercise because it develops your skills not just in writing, but in creativity, problem solving, and thinking.

1.1.1 Writing is a thinking process.

It has been said that we really do not know what we think about something until we write about it. Writing requires a deeper and more careful thought process than does speaking or even meditating about a topic. By writing down your ideas, you clarify them to yourself or even discover them. More than one student has remarked, “I never knew I thought that,” after writing an essay. Writing, then, is an opportunity to strengthen your thinking ability and to extend your mind, to gain a wider view of a subject, to find personal engagement with the world of ideas, even to make the unknown interesting.

When you work with sources, you learn better how to analyze them, how to evaluate the strength of their arguments, and how to fit them together with other sources that may disagree. The process of writing a paper based on research materials broadens your

understanding of how information is used and makes you more careful about accepting unsupported claims.

1.1.2 Writing is a learning process.

Writing is a natural, inseparable part of learning, providing clarity to thinking and solidity to knowing. Writing involves the collection and organization of ideas and thoughts, of analysis, of comparing and contrasting conflicting claims. All of these activities help you learn about a subject. Where before you may have believed that some fact had been clearly established, you discover by researching and writing about it that there are complications to the supposed fact or even more credible alternative explanations of the data behind it.

The act of wide reading, whether in an area of controversy or not, will help you add to your general database of knowledge and your understanding of the world. When you write a paper that synthesizes your reading, you will learn even more about your topic as you sort out the better arguments from the weaker ones. You will also view the world with more understanding as you gain knowledge. As the proverb says, “The more you know, the better you can see.”

1.1.3 Writing develops lifelong skills.

The simple truth is this: As an educated person in an ever-more information-driven world, you will be writing for the rest of your life. By developing your writing now, you will acquire the skills you need to work effectively in the future. Whatever form your writing eventually takes—whether keyboard, dictation, or a new mind-reading software application—you will need to know how to use all the skills of writing. Thinking, analyzing, organizing, reasoning, using examples—all these and many other skills are the ones that will allow you not just to survive but to flourish.

Writing a research paper also gives you practice in making a subject interesting. In your future writing career, not every topic you are handed will be of interest to you. The subject may not even be immediately interesting to the targeted readers. It is important, then, for you to develop the ability to make a subject interesting both to yourself and to your readers. The more practice you have doing this now, the better you will become at it and the more you will be able to enjoy writing on any topic.

1.1.4 Writing allows you to contribute to the great conversation.

Writing represents mental work (creative, analytic, persuasive, or some other kind) put down in a fixed form so that others can access it at any time and make use of it. Many readers make use of others’ writing simply as a means of learning, but many others use writing as building blocks for further knowledge and for their own writing and thinking. This has been true for thousands of years. As the saying goes, “We stand on the shoulders of giants.” Every writer makes use of the work of previous writers, building on thinking and discoveries that have gone before.

Increasingly today, moreover, many writers are building their ideas together. Many corporations are developing knowledge-sharing cultures, where employees can use each other’s ideas either by direct collaboration or through the use of knowledge management databases. Developing your writing skills empowers you to take a significant place in this creating and sharing of knowledge. The better writer you become, the better writing partner you will be.

1.2 Why use sources in papers?

Understanding the purpose of using sources in papers should result in better papers. Students who believe that sources serve no purpose other than to decorate or lengthen a paper are more likely to insert long quotations without taking much care to build them into the overall presentation. The result of such a practice is, at best, padding and, at worst, a disjointed collage. Sources serve a number of important functions in a paper, both as part of, and in addition to, the requirement that the paper be based on research.

1.2.1 Research sources provide context.

Suppose you walk up to two strangers and ask them, “What do you put on your strawberries?” One of them says, “Sugar,” and the other says, “Cow manure.” How are you to understand this discrepancy? If you think for a moment, you will see that context is crucial to interpretation—a proper understanding of events and thought processes requires knowledge of the surrounding information environment. In this case, one of the strangers puts sugar on the strawberries on the breakfast table, while the other puts cow manure on the strawberries (to fertilize them) in the patch out behind the house.

Similarly, when a scholarly paper describes, analyzes, reports, or argues some point, it does not do so in a vacuum. The topic has almost certainly been treated before, experiments may have been conducted, and other interpretations may have already been made. A first function of the use of sources, then, is to provide background information. An overview, the historical context (which may influence meaning as much as the context of the strawberry comments above), a starting point such as the definition of key concepts—these can all be provided by making use of appropriate sources. In many scholarly projects, a review of the literature is a required first part to provide a history of progress in the field, information relating to the topic, a technical context, or other background for the new material to be presented.

1.2.2 Sources strengthen your argument.

One of the myths surrounding research-based writing seems to be that citing sources is a necessary evil, an unfortunate concession required by the rules of composition for giving away credit for ideas. In fact, quite the contrary is true. Using and citing sources actually strengthens your writing in the eyes of your reader, for it demonstrates that you have performed research and have integrated the findings and ideas of others into your own argument.

First, quoting or referring to sources and then discussing them demonstrates that you are aware of other writers’ positions on the topic. You are not writing in an intellectual vacuum or off the top of your head, but you have included the ideas of others in the formulation of your own thinking. Next, using sources demonstrates that your ideas have support. Writers whose ideas parallel your argument add major timber to the intellectual house you are building for your reader. Corroboration of thinking or argument, additional facts or evidence from a third party, and the information of experts all provide powerful support to your position. Finally, using and citing sources demonstrates that you can think and argue along with scholars and other professionals and that you are able to interact with the ideas connected to your subject. Your paper’s sources, then, far from being a negative, provide positive evidence for your reader about your writing and thinking ability as well as your resourcefulness.

1.2.3 Sources add interest to your paper.

As you do your research, you will discover that sources provide much more than factual information or good analysis. Sources often contain stories, personal experiences, unique data, experimental results, or other items that will add greatly to the interest of your paper. One reason to quote rather than summarize or paraphrase a source is that often the author of the source text has an interesting, colorful, or compelling way of writing. A particular sentence or even a phrase may give just the direct and clear expression of an idea that you need. Even if the source's words are not quotable, you might make the information interesting through an appropriate summary or paraphrase.

1.2.4 Sources provide you with new ideas.

As the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter indicates, our minds need the fertilizer of new ideas if we are to be consistently productive in our intellectual lives. Another critical use of sources, then, is that they enrich your mind with new ideas, give you "food for thought," and allow you to compare several different ways of thinking about an issue. Even if all of the research you discover generally agrees with the position you are taking (and that is not likely), you will still be able to refine your own thinking by discovering the various ways of conceptualizing a given idea. More likely, you will encounter ideas and arguments you have never thought of before, providing you with the opportunity to extend your thinking. You may ultimately alter or even reject the original idea you located in your research because sources have suggested a new direction or a new interpretation that is more useful in your argument. (If you should ever develop a love for classical writers such as Plato and Aristotle, you will discover that they are famous not because they are right about everything but because, when they are wrong, they are wrong in very interesting and provocative ways. They make us think.)

1.2.5 Sources reveal controversies.

You know the saying, "There are two sides to every argument," meaning that every position has its pros and cons. Even this saying has two sides to it. One side claims that the saying is correct. The other side claims that it is not correct because there are almost never only two sides to a given position: Most areas of controversy have several different sides. A benefit of research and the use of your results is to expose the areas of controversy. By pointing out ideas that conflict with your position and by responding reasonably to those who disagree with your argument, you demonstrate first that you are aware of the opposition and that there is a reasonable response to it, and second that your conclusions are based on a full contemplation of all the evidence, not just on that which agrees with the case you are presenting.

Imagine reading a paper about a controversial issue that completely ignores some strong opposing arguments you have heard elsewhere. What do you think of the paper and its writer? Is the writer simply unaware of the other arguments, and hence has based the paper on partial knowledge? Or is the writer aware of them but has decided not to mention them because there is no adequate response? In blunt terms, is the writer ignorant or dishonest?

See Chapter 3 for information about how to incorporate conflicting sources into your papers.

1.2.6 Sources help you understand how reasoned argument works.

The more you work with sources for your research papers, the more information literate you will become. Information literacy is usually defined as the ability to locate, evaluate, and use information appropriately. But the term goes beyond these practices to include an awareness of how information itself works. Specifically, you will discover how a credible argument is assembled, what kind of evidence needs to be brought to bear, how generalizations are formed from experimental samples, and so forth. You will also learn about the role of assumptions, interpretations, and even biases in arguments. (For example, the first time you locate two books each claiming to prove beyond a doubt exactly the opposite conclusion about a controversial subject, you begin to understand much about the world of books and arguments.) Many issues are still unsettled and in flux, and your research will help you become mindful of this.

1.3 Why cite them all?

As you will read again in coming chapters, you must cite the source of each idea or item of information you use, whether you quote, paraphrase, summarize, or merely refer to it. There are several good reasons for this rule.

1.3.1 Cite to help your reader.

The primary reason for citing each use of an external source or idea is to provide a path for your reader to follow in the event he or she is interested in further reading. Imagine your reader encountering one of your quotations or a summary of a study and thinking, “That’s really interesting. I’d like to read the whole article.” Your citation makes exactly that possible. You are providing a courtesy to your reader. Alternatively, instead of interest, you may have inspired indignation in your reader: “How can Jones make that claim?” your reader may demand. Your citation allows your reader to locate the article or book and read the claim in its context.

For most of your academic papers, your instructor will be your immediate, if not your only, reader. Citations perform the same courtesy here. If your instructor becomes interested (or indignant) after reading one of your sources, he or she can go directly to the source for a look. A look at some of your sources will also help your instructor determine how effectively and accurately you are using research material. Your instructor’s comments, based on this determination, will help you write better. In these cases, citing sources helps you, too.

1.3.2 Cite to show respect for fellow knowledge workers.

At this point in your life, you may not be thinking of yourself as a knowledge worker, either present or future. Yet that is just what you are likely to be. The industrial age has passed, and we now live in an information age where processing information and creating knowledge out of it are major tasks of most educated workers. Just as you would not want others to take and use your ideas or writing without crediting you, you should not take the ideas or writing of others without crediting them. It is a matter of respect.

As mentioned in Section 1.1.4 above, more and more knowledge is being created through collaboration with others. A key to the willingness of others to collaborate is the

feeling that their intellectual property (their words and ideas) will be duly respected and credited. Those who believe that their ideas will be stolen are not likely to share them.

1.3.3 Cite to avoid plagiarism.

A fundamental requirement of academic work is that you clearly distinguish your words and ideas from those of the sources you use. Citation provides the basic mechanism of distinction. A substantial amount of plagiarism is committed unintentionally, simply because the writer did not know the rules or forms of citation. Yet the penalty for such behavior is often severe because plagiarism is considered one of the most serious forms of academic dishonesty. Therefore, out of self-interest and self-protection, you want to be sure to cite your sources. (Plagiarism and the requirements for citation to avoid it are discussed in detail in the next chapter.)

1.4 Are sources the whole idea?

At least a few students approach research paper assignments with the belief that their own ideas do not count: They think a research paper is to be filled with sources elegantly strung together. These students seem to fear they will be graded down if even one of their own thoughts gets in the way of the sources. This idea is wrong, incorrect, and not true.

1.4.1 Your thinking is the star.

You will recall from Section 1.2.2 above that sources were said to support your thinking. Think of your research paper as a major motion picture. Your thinking, perhaps your central idea, is the star, while the sources you use are the supporting cast. The most important part of a research paper is not the sources themselves but what you do with them. You should use sources to support your own line of argument, your own conclusions, your own ideas. This is your paper we are talking about, not an extended summary of other papers. You are not writing *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*: That has already been done.

Another way of thinking about your use of sources is to say that just as you should honor the thinking of others by citing their ideas, so you should also honor your own thinking by presenting it clearly and supporting it with research.

1.4.2 Sources need something to support.

To accept that your ideas are the star in a research paper is to throw down a gauntlet of challenge to yourself: You must produce the star—the ideas. That is, as you research and write, you must supply not only the central idea you wish to advance, but also the analysis, synthesis, fresh insights, interpretations, conclusions, reasons, examples, and other information that drive your central idea forward and that are supported by your research. When you bring in a source, it should have a clear role in adding weight and credibility to your line of thinking or argument.

Henry Ford is credited with having said, "Thinking is the hardest work there is, which is why so few people do it." If he is correct, that may explain why so many research papers handed in to instructors contain little more than a series of thoughtlessly pasted-together quotations. Do not let your papers descend to this level. If you do, you

will lose most of the benefits of writing a research paper while reducing your workload only slightly.

1.4.3 Sources need interpreting.

Think of your role as the writer of a research paper, not as an antiquarian collector of old quotations fit to be put on display, but as a detective, a solver of a puzzle, making sense out of many different elements of information. So much information, so many viewpoints, all this raw data in need of explanation—all the materials you locate in your research need more than just organizing, but they also require sorting out and applying to a central conclusion. Much thinking and much writing must come in connection with the use of your sources as you explain the meaning, implications, and effect of each one. Forget the staplers (those who would merely staple together an assortment of source materials); you are the weaver of a beautiful and sensible tapestry. You must ultimately tell the story that the sources have helped you to discover.

Review questions.

To see how well you understand this chapter, attempt to answer each of the following questions without referring to the text. (Write down your answers to make checking easier.) Then check your answers with the text. If you missed something important, add it to your answer.

1. What are the benefits sources provide to a researcher?
2. Explain how the use of sources strengthens your writing.
3. Discuss the reasons for citing sources.
4. What is meant by the statement, “Your thinking is the star”?

Questions for thought and discussion.

Use these questions for in-class discussion or for stimulating your own thinking.

1. Think about the last paper you wrote. Apart from the new knowledge you gained about the subject, did you learn anything else, such as thinking skills or writing skills?
2. Have you ever written a research paper where you commented very little on your sources? If so, do you think you learned less than if you had written more about the sources?
3. Has this chapter made you more enthusiastic about writing a research paper? Why or why not?
4. Has this chapter convinced you of the value of citation? Why or why not?

Name _____

Course _____

Chapter 1 Review: True-false quiz.

Directions: Based on your knowledge of Chapter 1, determine whether each statement below is true or false.

1. Citations are merely for academic accountability and do not help the reader of the paper.
☐ True ☐ False
2. The sources used in a research paper should support the writer's ideas.
☐ True ☐ False
3. Citing sources weakens the writer's own argument.
☐ True ☐ False
4. A writer's own ideas are stimulated by reading others' ideas.
☐ True ☐ False
5. Citing the sources used in a paper is important for avoiding plagiarism.
☐ True ☐ False
6. Mentioning opposing sources in a paper on a controversial topic weakens the paper.
☐ True ☐ False
7. Knowing how to write well is an academic skill that usually will have little application after graduation.
☐ True ☐ False
8. Writing helps people discover what they think about something.
☐ True ☐ False
9. Because a research paper relies heavily on sources, it will therefore have little or nothing original in it.
☐ True ☐ False
10. Because most of your sources are written by highly educated writers, you will not need to explain what a quotation means.
☐ True ☐ False

Self-Assessments.

On the following pages are several self-assessments you can take to determine your attitudes and knowledge about plagiarism and citation requirements. After you have read this book and worked through the exercises, you can take these assessments again to measure what you have learned. A preliminary assessment is valuable for learning about what you already know and what you still need to know. It also focuses your attention on the concepts of importance, so that as you read the book you will be on the alert. A postassessment is valuable for discovering what you have learned. You can compare your pre- and postscores to learn how your attitudes and knowledge have changed.

Name _____

Course _____

Self-Assessment: Researched writing survey.

Directions: This survey is designed to discover how confident you now feel about several skills and tasks related to the writing process. There are no right or wrong answers. Please respond to each question by putting a mark at a point along the scale that best represents your opinion.

1. When you are assigned a research paper in a course, do you welcome it as an opportunity to learn, or do you see it as a burden or unwelcome task?

A horizontal scale from 1 to 7. Above the scale, the word "Welcome" is positioned above the number 1, "Neutral" is positioned above the number 4, and "Unwelcome" is positioned above the number 7. The scale itself consists of a dashed line with solid square markers at each integer value from 1 to 7.

2. How confident are you in your ability to use supporting material (quotations, examples, research) effectively to strengthen your ideas in a paper?

Very Confident Neutral Not At All Confident

3. How confident are you in your ability to paraphrase an idea for use in a research paper?

Very Confident Neutral Not At All Confident

A horizontal line with seven empty square boxes spaced evenly along it, used for rating confidence.

4. How much formal training have you had regarding plagiarism and how to avoid it?

[illegible]

5. In writing a research paper, how easy have you found it to incorporate sources that conflict with your central argument or idea?

Very Easy Somewhat Challenging Very Difficult

6. How confident are you that you know the rules for using sources well enough to avoid unintentional plagiarism?

Very Confident Neutral Not At All Confident

Name _____

Course _____

Self-Assessment: Rules of citation quiz.

Directions: Based on your knowledge, decide whether each statement is true or false.

1. When you use an idea you found in a source, you do **not** need to cite the idea if you put it entirely into your own words.
☐ True ☐ False
2. As long as you put the author's name at the end of the paragraph, you may use the author's exact words, without needing quotation marks or a block indentation.
☐ True ☐ False
3. In a research paper, you must cite every fact and idea that is not your own, such as the date Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Japanese.
☐ True ☐ False
4. If you copy a paragraph from an old work that is no longer copyrighted, you still must show it is quoted and cite it, even though it is now in the public domain.
☐ True ☐ False
5. Anything posted on the Web is common knowledge and therefore can be used without citation.
☐ True ☐ False
6. Common knowledge does not need to be cited, unless you quote the exact words of the source (such as an encyclopedia).
☐ True ☐ False
7. If a source presents your own opinion better than you could express it, then you can copy those words into your paper without quotation marks or citation.
☐ True ☐ False
8. If you summarize the general argument of a book into a paragraph of your own words, you still must cite the source.
☐ True ☐ False
9. Plagiarism refers only to copying a source's words without citation: You cannot plagiarize ideas.
☐ True ☐ False
10. There is no such thing as "unintentional plagiarism."
☐ True ☐ False
11. If you copy a drawing or map and use it in your paper, you must cite the source because those are also forms of ideas.
☐ True ☐ False