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Citational Practice

In a book focused primarily on the analysis of academic style in the humanities (and not, as here, on its production), I would spend more time than I'm about to teaching you how to read citational practice as a central feature of epistemological and rhetorical activity. By "citational practice" I mean something like the sum total of the ways in which an author or a piece of writing marshals information, manages critics, handles notes and footnotes, and refers to or cites the work of primary and secondary sources.

A quick comparison of the citational practice of two writers like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault will, for instance, reveal a vast series of differences in their patterns of citation and reference: Derrida will often partially cite upcoming primary material in advance of its appearance; Foucault tends to refer and paraphrase more than he cites; Derrida tends to have longer footnotes, and will cite and recite himself; Foucault not so much; and so on.

This amounts to little more than a brief description of the difference between deconstructive and new historicist styles, you say. Yes, but it's understanding how those styles produce knowledge differently at least partly through patterns of citation and reference that will help you grasp the ways in which critics or schools put their preferred modes of intellection and analysis into play, or rather, the ways in which that putting into play—citation, reference, mention, the distinction drawn between primary and secondary—itself constitutes a mode of thought and analysis.

Which is to say, your citational practice will depend at least partly on how you read, and will reflect in a conscious or unconscious way your belonging to a school or schools of thought. Knowing this is the first step in taking control of your intellectual and writerly process, not only as a matter of rhetoric but as a matter of understanding (and being able to justify) the epistemological presumptions, advantages, and blind spots that result from your chosen practice.

Chicago vs. MLA Style

Let's begin the discussion of citational practice with an intensely practical matter: should you use Chicago or MLA style? Usually your choice will be made for you by the press or journal that takes your work. But if you can choose I recommend Chicago, because it allows you to do one very important thing that MLA style does not: to conceal, permanently or temporarily, the source of a citation.

Why is that useful? Suppose you want to do something like this:

[Henry James's] *The American Scene* reads as a transitional text between one American generation's fascination with objects of possession and the next generation's engagement with objects as such. But its power lies in James's capacity to reenergize an obsolete trope—a trope that realism eschews, a trope we associate with the sentimental and gothic traditions—on behalf of exposing the ontological grounds on which modernity proceeds in the name of progress, and on behalf of literalizing the common sense that tells us that “an attack on architecture . . . is an attack on man.”²⁸ At the same time, James's plea on behalf of architecture (which he hears as architecture's self-defense) cannot be reduced to a claim on behalf of the authority of merely static physical structure, for the structures are anything but static and they are rendered as something less and more than physical.²⁹ His animation of the world might even be said to hark back to those premodern times and places where objects were anything but inert, where “things themselves had a personality and an inherent power”—even as it anticipates modernism's capacity to vivify the physical object world by other means, means that themselves literalize the work of prosopopeia.³⁰ (Brown 187–88)

Now, who would you guess Bill Brown is quoting in the sentences that end with notes 28 and 30? If you answered “not Henry James,” give yourself a prize. The first citation is from Georges Bataille (note 29, which follows, is entirely about Bataille); the second from Marcel Mauss.

—Oh. Hmm. I guess that means that Brown has chunked or highlighted those citations earlier, so that the reader already knows who they’re from.

—Nope. Bataille appears once elsewhere, on page 3; Mauss not at all. And because the book uses endnotes, not footnotes, you have to turn to the back of the book to find out that Bataille and Mauss are involved in this paragraph at all.

So what is Brown doing? Well, this is the penultimate paragraph of the book—not a great place to be throwing around new names, which will send the reader’s mind haring off in new directions; Brown wants to keep the main line of thought clear of obstructions. At the same time, though, he wants to use these quotes. It would have been easy enough to cut them, but he leaves them there. Yet what are they doing? Both quotations allow Brown to quickly and with little fanfare support large-scale, relatively vague claims: “common sense” in the first instance and “premodern times” in the second. The support these citations lend is *increased*, not diminished, by the fact that the names behind them remain off the page. Could we see them, either in footnotes or in-line parentheticals, we might be tempted to argue: Well, yes, but Mauss’s position on premodern cultures has been superseded by so-and-so, or, I think Bataille is nonsense. Anonymous citation allows Brown to support these general claims, which he needs—but only a little—for his argument, without having to manage the further array of expectations or questions they would raise. He’s *mentioning* these ideas, not using them.

You just can’t do that when you have to put the names in parentheses, which is why I prefer using Chicago style when I can. Chicago also allows you to move page numbers up into the text when you’d like (with a note that says “further references in the text”), letting you manage far more precisely than MLA the reader’s access to your citational information. In that sense it’s a more writer-friendly, but less reader-friendly, way of doing things; or rather it leaves the degree of reader-friendliness up to the writer, rather than making it a professional norm.

Block Quotes, Full Quotes, Partial Quotes

Whether in Chicago or MLA, you're not always citing material for the same reasons. Sometimes you want what you quote to remain at the forefront of the reader's consciousness; sometimes you're happy to have it dissipate immediately so you can move on to the next idea. Some material is primary, some secondary; some subject to close reading, some not; some establishes that reading's contextual foreground, some its distant background.

The most obvious metalinguistic way to communicate that difference lies in how you quote. Partial quotes like the ones Bill Brown uses above, which integrate the cited material into the writer's own sentences, give the material far less weight than full ones. Compare these four examples:

But its power lies in James's capacity to reenergize an obsolete trope on behalf of literalizing the common sense that tells us that "an attack on architecture . . . is an attack on man."

But its power lies in James's capacity to reenergize an obsolete trope on behalf of literalizing the common sense that tells us that "an attack on architecture . . . is an attack on man," as Georges Bataille once put it.

But its power lies in James's capacity to reenergize an obsolete trope on behalf of literalizing the common sense that tells us that, as Georges Bataille wrote in a short essay on "Architecture" published in his *Critical Dictionary*, "an attack on architecture . . . is an attack on man."

But its power lies in James's capacity to reenergize an obsolete trope on behalf of literalizing common sense. "An attack on architecture... is an attack on man," Georges Bataille wrote.

The difference between the second and third sentences has to do with the amount of information that surrounds the citation. In the second instance the potential disruption caused by Bataille's appearance is mitigated by the phrase "once put it," which makes this rhetorical situation more

casual by pretending that the enunciation of the quoted material was itself actually casual (Bataille “put it” this way; he didn’t “state” or “assert” it). You can also mitigate the force of an appearance by removing, in certain cases, the quoted person’s first name. As for the last sentence, if it feels incomplete—as though it needs another clause after “wrote”—it’s because citation in which the quotation dominates the grammar and structure of a sentence (what I call a “full quote”) establishes a metalinguistic expectation for transition. Here we would want Brown to resolve that tension by returning us to James, with something like this:

But its power lies in James’s capacity to reenergize an obsolete trope on behalf of literalizing common sense. “An attack on architecture . . . is an attack on man,” Georges Bataille *once wrote, in a meditation that James would have loved, had he lived to read it.*

If you try to imagine diminishing that further by removing Bataille’s first name, you realize that it won’t work; the resulting sentence feels imbalanced. If you need to mitigate something that much, just cite it partially.

By contrast, if you want someone to pay attention to something, quote it fully. Doing so signals that you also will be paying attention to it. As with the fourth example above, a full citation, especially when coupled with a full name, will create the expectation of some kind of transition. You can use that to your advantage by beginning a new paragraph with a full name, book title, and/or partial quote from someone who hasn’t been mentioned in the previous few pages:

. . . [paragraph ends with this sentence]: These two Chinas are constructed, then, from two incompatible epistemologies: science and romance.

[new paragraph begins]: Jonathan Spence’s *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* leavens its treatment of the Jesuit polymath’s extraordinary adventures in the Middle Kingdom with a series of meditations on the state of neo-Confucian thought in the Ming dynasty.

Here the somewhat abrupt beginning (notice that this transition does not belong to any of the standard types, uses no transition words, etc.) actually serves as a marker of a shift in topic; it “pops” up out of the ordinary flow of the text because it breaks the expectation of continuity. You’ll remember that Jameson did something like this in the cognitive mapping transition we looked at earlier. If, like Jameson, you want to bring this back around to the topic you’ve been covering, you would return us to the words “science” and “romance” in the second or third sentence of the paragraph as a way of signaling the resumption of continuity. Otherwise, you could simply continue along with Spence and neo-Confucian thought for a few paragraphs. In that case you would be using the somewhat jarring shift to Spence as a metalinguistic marker of a section change; essentially you would be telling the reader that the last sentence of the previous paragraph was a 5 for its section, and that the opening with Spence is the 4 for a new one.

Beginning a paragraph with someone’s name or quoting someone in a full sentence is thus a way of assuring a certain prominence, either structural (you’re doing it to start a new section) or thematic (you’re doing it because the person’s work is important to your argument). And so it would make a certain kind of sense at this point for me to say that if you *really* want someone to pay attention to something, you should put it in a block quote. But the dirty secret of block quotes, which Timothy Billings first pointed out to me, is that most readers don’t actually read them. Really! That means that you *must* follow any block quotation with a short summary or reading of the material you’ve just quoted, while making sure that the reader doesn’t notice that you’re repeating yourself. In many cases you will want to re-quote material from the block, using it to draw your reader’s attention to the specific passages that will matter to you, as we see Lisa Siraganian doing here:

Due to its rigidity and its space precisions, [the typewriter] can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses . . . which he intends. . . . For the first time he can, without the convention of rime and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work. (*OPr* 245)

According to [Olson's] logic, the typewriter permits the composing poet to mark out his "breathing spaces" with a mechanical device instead of relying on the ancient literary conventions of "rime and meter" or the new and awkward convention of spelling out each phoneme as spoken by the poet. Just as . . . [she continues] (Siraganian 149)

Alternatively, you can use Franco Moretti's trick of simply repeating or reworking the last phrase of the quotation:

[a long block quote that ends like this:] The aesthetic sphere is perhaps the most appropriate to reflect overall changes of mental climate.

Overall changes of the mental climate: the five, six shifts in the British novelistic field between 1740 and 1900. [note the lovely insertion of "the" here!]

[long quote that ends with] . . . We shall therefore speak of a *generation as an actuality* only where a concrete bond is created between members of a generation by their being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic destabilization.

A bond due to a process of dynamic destabilization; and anyone who was eighteen in 1968 understands. (Moretti 21)

Another neat trick, which I've only noticed recently, is to manage citation through extended paraphrase, as in this example from David Spurr:

Kafka often described his own writing in architectural terms. A notebook passage written in 1922, at a moment when his progress in writing *The Castle* was at a standstill, begins with the statement, "Das Schrieben versagt sich mir" (writing refuses itself to me). He then speaks of his writing as a process of construction (*aufbauen*) but in a way that also makes this a construction of the self. I want to construct

myself (*will ich mich dann aufbauen*), says Kafka, like someone who has an unsafe house and who wants to build a new one next to it by using the materials of the old house. But it is bad (*schlimm*) if while he is doing so his strength gives out, so that now instead of having an unsafe but fully built house, he has one that is half destroyed and another only half built, and so nothing (*Nachgelassene* 2:373). (Spurr 87–88)

Over the course of this paragraph, Spurr moves from a general summary of the citation he's about to give (the first sentence) to direct quotation (the second sentence) to paraphrase (from sentence three onward). What's especially interesting, however, is that way that by the final sentence we have no direct reference to Kafka at all. Rather Spurr has taken over Kafka's voice and the sentence technically reads as his own, though it in fact continues to reprise what Kafka says about house-building. We might think of this sequence as showing us how to move the narratological categories of direct discourse (speech within quotation marks), indirect discourse (speech marked by phrases like "said" or "declared," as in Spurr's third and fourth sentences), and free indirect discourse (in which the voice of the character/quotee merges with that of the narrator/author) into academic prose.

You will find another instance of this kind of academic free indirect discourse in the pages of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, which ventriloquizes Rabelais:

And what—Rabelais in effect goes on—did I mean to accomplish by this Prologue? That you, when you read all the pleasant titles of my writings (here follows a parade of grotesque book titles), will not suppose that there is nothing in them but jests and stuff for laughter and mockery. You must not so quickly draw conclusions from mere outward appearances. The habit does not make the monk. You must open the book and carefully consider what is in it; you will see that the contents are worth far more than the container promised, that the subjects are nowhere near so foolish as the title suggests. And even if, in the literal sense of the contents, you still find enough stuff for laughter of the sort that the title promises, you must not be satisfied with that: you must probe deeper. Have you ever seen a dog that has found a marrow bone? Then you must have observed how devoutly he guards it, how fervently he seizes

it, how prudently approaches it, with what affection he breaks it open,
how diligently he sucks it. (279–80)

This continues for another eleven lines. In the claim that “Rabelais in effect goes on”—placed so casually at the opening of the paragraph—Auerbach announces, and justifies, the atmospheric drama of his small, charming performance.

Citational Paratexts

I use “citational paratext” to refer to the material that surrounds and sets up the quotation—the person’s name, the title of a book, the adjectival and verbal descriptors (said, wrote, noted, casually remarked) that frame the quotation at its most basic level. As the examples above make clear, full names have more weight (and imply a more serious or heavy treatment) than last names; likewise famous names have more weight than obscure ones. Giving the title of a book in the paratext (“Céline Dion’s *My Life as a Party* argues that”) suggests a fuller forthcoming treatment than leaving the name out. Similarly you can ladder up and down the field of expectations with verbs that feel stronger (“argues that”), more neutral (“writes”), or weaker (“notes”).

The paratext’s grammatical structure thus also prepares the reader for a fuller or lighter treatment. “As Feuerbach noted” is lighter than “Feuerbach’s book on Christianity argues,” which is lighter in turn than this example, which splits paratext and quotation into two sentences: “Ludwig Feuerbach’s *Das Wesen des Christentums* (The Essence of Christianity) was the major philosophical event of that decade. There, Feuerbach’s claim that ‘the essential standpoint of religion is the practical or the subjective’ finds its fullest form in chapter 19,” and so on. The surrounding material says to the reader: pay attention; this is central to the argument.

Opening and Closing with Quotations

The danger with either one of these is that you’ll forfeit your opportunity to locate the reader specifically in your project. Especially when closing,

this means taking extra care to manage the quotation into a relation to your work, as in this example from *On Literary Worlds*:

It achieves one limit in what Spinoza called the “common notions” that constitute the ground and goal of reason, which govern not only the emotions but indeed all aspects of everyday life, where they form, Gilles Deleuze notes, “a mathematics of the real or the concrete,” a quasi-biological “natural geometry that allows us to comprehend the unity of composition of all of Nature and the modes of variation of that unity.” (107–8)

The lines from Deleuze align perfectly with the book’s argument; I’ve essentially outsourced the conclusion of this paragraph to Deleuze. This allows me to simultaneously close the reading of Spinoza and to provide authoritative support for it.

As for opening with quotations, what works for anecdotal introductions (where the paragraph acts as the 1 in a truncated U) or summative transitions is more complicated elsewhere, because full quotations get in the way of making promises to the reader or doing the necessary transitional work. That said, it’s worth making a distinction between quotations from primary and secondary sources. Compare these two possible openings:

Gilles Deleuze writes that Spinoza’s “natural geometry . . . allows us to comprehend the unity of composition of all of Nature and the modes of variation of that unity.”

Joyce writes, “He would only make himself ridiculous by quoting poetry to them which they could not understand.”

While it’s easy enough to imagine the general thrust and shape of the paragraph that follows the Deleuze example, guessing at the paragraph that completes the Joyce one is a good deal harder. You could improve things by adding transitional material, at which point you turn the full quote into a partial one:

This same combination of shame and desire appears when Joyce writes, in “The Dead,” that Gabriel Conroy “would only make himself ridiculous by quoting poetry to them which they could not understand.”

Here you can not only imagine the rest of the paragraph; you can pretty much know the shape of the preceding one, and guess at the general place of a paragraph like this one inside a section, or an essay.

Quoting from Other Languages

Unless you’re going specifically to address the syntax, grammar, or diction of the original source—really if you’re doing any kind of close reading—you can leave the original-language sentences out of things entirely. If you are reading closely, however, be sure to include, via partial or full quotation, the pieces of the original you need to make your case. Know that, especially if you’re working in a language that is foreign to you, doing partial close readings of original material within the context of a broader discussion is one easy way to signal your linguistic and cultural iceberg—especially crucial for graduate students and younger scholars, who have not established their *bona fides*.

Credit Where Credit’s Due

Is it possible to quote too much? Too little? Yes on both counts. How do you strike a rhetorical balance between a forceful, original representation of your own work and the necessary work of icebergging, background-giving, and ass-covering that accompanies citational practice?

Among other things you will notice that the more famous someone is, the less he or she quotes from secondary material by contemporary critics. At the same time, the relative famousness of the primary material inclines substantially as careers increase. This kind of peer-matching allows authors to signal their own intellectual heft and worth, which is reflected by the people they engage with. In the very thin air of the very famous, this means

that you will be (when you get there) quoting almost entirely from the Kants and Hegels of the world, and making references to living critics only when offering noblesse oblige acknowledgments of the “excellent” work of some younger scholar or engaging in contentious criticism of a near-peer.

Citational peer-matching also reflects and rhetorically produces (the effect of) writerly poise. Understanding how to handle the work of others means learning how to manage references to maximize the force of your own prose, avoiding too many defensive footnotes, and losing the instinct to protect yourself with references to authority figures, allowing your ideas to stand more bravely on their own. That’s what makes good, convincing writerly authority: writing in full confidence that the parts of your work that belong most fully to you can stand, supported, by the set of references and arguments that you have left on the page.

What does this mean for young writers? The lesson is not, “Stop quoting other folks and start quoting Kant, so that you can pretend to be awesome.” It is rather to develop rhetorical confidence when and how you can, and to write within its emotional circumference.

The crucial stage in which you develop this confidence happens between the dissertation and the first book. A long time ago Rey Chow, who had very generously read my entire dissertation (despite not being a member of my committee), wrote in response to an e-mail I sent her about turning it into a book that I should probably let it sit for a couple years, as the manuscript still showed many of the signs of my being a graduate student writer. The confidence I would develop as I furthered my career, she said, would allow me to see and get rid of those moments of excessive defensiveness, and to cut down on the various places where I showed too much iceberg, or too much work. I spent a couple weeks being offended—whatever was wrong with the dissertation, I thought, had nothing to do with my having written it as a graduate student! I was wrong, as I realized three years later when I revised the manuscript, and Rey was right.

The confidence gap between dissertation and first book, or rather, the reason that the dissertation evinces far less citational and rhetorical confidence than a good piece of professional writing, stems from the fact that the dissertation is written by someone who has never written one before, and who is therefore at some fundamental level unsure of whether s/he can do it. This is one source of the felt differences between the Dissertation

(as genre) and a book. You will have to work to mitigate it as much as you can during the process of getting to that first book contract.

Ideally, you could compensate by writing the dissertation with a confidence you couldn't reasonably feel. This would entail recognizing, ideally by reading first books, what citational and rhetorical confidence *look and sound like*, and imitating them. But in practice I've found that this is really almost too much to ask from my students (as it certainly was too much to ask from me). Accordingly you will almost certainly have to go back and revise the entire work "upward" once you have finished it the first time around. Think of it as a necessary consequence of your social and emotional development as a writer, and recognize it as part of the writing process. Your revised dissertation should be the first thing you write *as someone who can write a dissertation*. Until you finish one, however, everything you write is instead written by someone who's not yet sure he or she can write a dissertation, and the difference will show.

Let me say one more thing. Though confidence is a good thing, the rhetorical performance of confidence through citational practice, when it comes to things like peer-matching or acknowledging the impact of others on your work, can be somewhat dishonest. I don't want to become someone who only quotes my amazing dead peers or whatever "lucky" young person I've decided to bestow my grace upon; I want my prose to continue to register the enormous impact communities of readers and writers, friends and strangers, have on me and my ideas. As a result I am trying in my more recent work to do a more explicit job of acknowledging where others have made a difference, either in conversation or in writing, to the sentences I put on the page, even when I know that it would be just as easy (and more conventionally confident) to leave them out. Citing generously can also be, I think, a kind of confidence, less rhetorical yet more genuinely self-assured than the alternative, because it doesn't need to assert over and over in the text my own citational worthiness, or pretend that I somehow did all this thinking or working all by myself. I didn't. My goal is to figure out how to cite in ways that acknowledge and integrate this truth into my writing while continuing to generate rhetorical strength and pleasure for the reader. I'm not necessarily advising you to try the same—as you can tell, I'm not quite sure how to do it myself—but I am telling you this because I want you to see at least one more way to think about the rhetoric of citational practice.