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The Role of Sources

What *is* a source? Almost any record of experience *can* be one, if it can be consulted by others: a painting or video clip or letter, a radio broadcast or blog entry, a review from a defunct magazine or statistics from a weather balloon. It becomes a live source, however, only when it becomes a source *of* something for somebody, when it plays a particular role in a particular scholar's work.

Writing with sources doesn't mean dropping them impressively into your paper, but engaging with them in a way that puts them to work for you. It means—and this is the central point of the book—taking charge. This chapter gives some basic options for doing this—for employing a source as information, opinion, concept, and comparison—by defining your stance toward its implications. The chapter then suggests that sources will work for you most effectively if they are reliable and you can be counted upon to cite them reliably, so your reader can proceed through your argument with trust. Acknowledging your sources fairly, therefore, boosts both your self-respect and your persuasiveness.

1.1 Sources of What?

A source usually provides a paper with one of two things: (1) it provides *factual data* to interpret and use as evidence, or (2) it provides *ideas about data*, to build upon or dissent from. A distinction is sometimes made on this basis between “primary” and “secondary” sources (see Box A). More specifically, a source of factual data usually provides one of the following:

- *exact text* of a written, spoken, or visual composition (such as that provided in a published edition or on an audio or video recording);
- *statistics or measurements* (such as those tabulated or graphed in a research article);
- a *summary record* of an experience (such as that given in an ethnographic report or eyewitness testimony);
- *information* (such as that assembled in a biography or a textbook).

When a source provides a paper with ideas, it is often providing one of the following:

- a particular *claim* made by another writer about the topic you are addressing, along with the reasoning that supports the claim; or
- a general *concept*—a term, theory, or approach—that has appeared in discussion of other topics and that you apply to your own.

Either facts or ideas, finally, may be brought into a paper in the role of a *comparative case*, which illuminates the main case under consideration by similarity or contrast.

But to make use of a source in any of these ways, a writer must define a stance toward it. The three basic stances you can take toward a source are *yes*, *no*, and *sort of*. You can affirm or accept it, and say to it, “Yes, and so. . . .” You can reject or disagree, and say to it, “No, rather. . . .” Or you can qualify or modify the source, and say to it, “Yes, but . . . ,” “Yes, except . . . ,” or “Yes, if. . . .”

Your stance toward a source of factual data will often be one of acceptance, although you may call into question the completeness or accuracy of provided facts; your stance toward sources of ideas will vary. All scholars, in making their contribution to the larger understanding of a subject, accept and build on the work of others, but they often discover where their contribution lies through reasoned disagreement with and qualification of that work.

A student writer, Jeff, having done much reading for a term paper on the Civil War, has sketched out the following proposal to organize his thoughts. *Italicized* words suggest what a source will be a source of; **CAPITALIZED** words suggest the stance that Jeff will take toward it:

The *claim* of many historians that the North won the war with greater manpower and resources is true, **BUT** such a large event has many contributing causes. Linn and others have *proposed* that Lincoln's leadership was crucial. I will **SUPPORT** this *view* **BUT** argue that a particularly influential and underestimated aspect of that leadership was his skill at crafting memorable speeches on key occasions to give immediacy to abstract ideals.

As the italicized words indicate, some of the articles that Jeff has read will provide this argument with claims (*proposals, views*) about why the North won. Toward these claims, as the capitalized words suggest, Jeff's stance in his paper will be "Yes, but." He won't try, wisely, to refute outright a scholarly consensus about material resources, but rather will qualify the importance claimed for them. Likewise, Jeff will modify the claims made for the importance of Lincoln's leadership by focusing on a specific aspect that he thinks deserves more notice.

These moves of qualifying and modifying will provide the motive for Jeff's paper. In the rest of his proposal, again, *italicized* words indicate what his sources will be sources of, and **CAPITALIZED** words indicate the stance Jeff will take toward them:

I first **ACKNOWLEDGE** the importance of the North's material resources in the outcome of the war, citing statistical **data**. **BUT** I then give **examples** of cases where inspiring leadership influenced military outcomes in the face of resources. Referring especially to the **example** of Churchill's galvanizing speeches in WWII, I invoke Simmons's **USEFUL notion** of "rhetorical turning points." I **compare** Lincoln's situation to Churchill's and note the **fact** that he **TOO** at key points in a war came up with striking and stirring phrases to unify his audience.

I then analyze the **details** of several Lincoln speeches to show how he creates "moral vividness" (in the linguist Denby's **APT term**) by finding the right metaphors for the occasion. I trace the effect of his words by analyzing the **report** of the speeches in subsequent newspaper accounts. I **contrast** these speeches with speeches given by the Southern leader Jefferson Davis that, in a similar situation, do **NOT** have the same effect.

To **REFUTE** a possible objection to my argument, I address the **claim** implied in several popular accounts of Lincoln's life that his skill at speaking was not crafted responding to a particular situation but a natural product of his simple and direct personality. I **compare** the **texts** of early speeches and speeches in draft form to the **QUITE DIFFERENT** speeches Lincoln later gave, to show that he worked deliberately to create his effects. I **DRAW UPON evidence** of his letters and conversations to show that he was aware of the historic work that his speeches had to do.

Some of the works that Jeff has read will provide his paper with factual data, as indicated by the words *report*, *details*, *texts*, *evidence*, and *fact*. They will document the fact that Lincoln did give speeches at key junctures, what exactly Lincoln said and wrote, what concerns were on his mind at the time, and what impact the speeches had. Accepting the accuracy of these sources, Jeff's stance will be "Yes, and so." He will say "Yes, and so" also to the applicability of certain general concepts: Simmons's *useful notion* and Denby's *apt term*. And finally, some of Jeff's sources will provide comparative cases. He accepts the fundamental comparability of Churchill's situation to Lincoln's, saying "Yes, and so." He denies the comparability of Davis's speeches to Lincoln's ("No, rather") and of Lincoln's drafts with his delivered speeches; and he will use the latter contrast to refute the claim that Lincoln's speeches emerged naturally from a homespun character.¹

These source roles are common in scholarly writing of all kinds and to all kinds of student assignments. Shorter assignments may invite you to work with only one of these source roles. You may be asked to analyze a piece of complex textual data (e.g., argument, poem, novel, film), to agree or disagree with a given claim, to apply a general theory to a particular case, or to compare two works or how two theories apply to a case.

Longer assignments, for which you may be required to define your own issue and find your own sources, expect you to use those sources in whatever ways are required to make a

1. Writing out this kind of source plan can be useful. It's just a proposal, but writing it forces Jeff to bring his sources into a purposeful order, based on his own thinking, and allows him to move forward. His plan may turn out to be too ambitious: he may find he lacks enough information to attribute a precise impact to speeches. Rather than taking on directly the large issue of what won the war, he may end up focusing (as good papers often do) on the workings of one or two primary documents—speeches and letters—in the *context* of the large issue. But because he has sketched a plan in advance, the difficulties will become apparent early—to Jeff himself or to others with whom he shares his plan (see section 3.4 #9).

persuasive case for your way of looking at the material. Since you will be relatively new to the field in question and can't possibly know all the scholarship, that way of looking isn't expected to be completely new, but it is expected that you'll put sources together in your own way, or use them to say something of your own, not just repeat them.

IA) "PRIMARY" AND "SECONDARY" SOURCES

Sources called "primary" generally appear in papers as sources of uninterpreted factual data, and those called "secondary" as sources of interpretive ideas; but keep in mind two cautions.

First, although a source may be categorized as primary or secondary as it sits on a shelf or in a database, it can often be used as primary in one situation and secondary in another. An article that offers a new interpretation of *Hamlet* would be a secondary source if you were writing a paper on the meaning of that play; if you were writing about a new style in writing literary criticism, the same article would be primary data for you to analyze and use as evidence.

Second, the use of the terms *primary* and *secondary* differs across disciplines. Usage in the humanities and fields primarily studying texts follows the basic distinction above. In the empirical sciences, however, *primary sources* are research articles that provide new data but also offer an interpretation of that data. A *secondary source* is an article that summarizes and reviews data from previous research articles, and may or may not offer new interpretations. Because interpretations change rapidly as more data is collected, however, research articles in the sciences do tend to be cited by other papers more often for their results than for their interpretations.

1.2 Citing Reliable Sources

The persuasiveness of a scholarly paper depends on a persuasive deployment of sources in clear roles, but it also depends on the reliability of the sources being deployed. Suppose Jeff's sources for his paper on Lincoln had turned out to be these:

- for the prevailing view of what won the war: a Confederate War re-enactors website and a student report posted on a personal website;
- for the facts of Lincoln's life and speaking occasions: websites of the Honest Abe Society, a Pennsylvania Battlefield Tours website, and a Wikipedia article;
- for early drafts of Lincoln's speeches: a typed handout from Jeff's high school debate class;
- for Davis's speeches: Internet excerpts from an 1880 edition edited by Davis's cousin;
- for his account of Churchill and historical turning points: a summary of Simmons's book in *Time* magazine, a page called "Speaking to Win" on leadership .com, and a year-old blog.

These sources, neither written nor checked by authorities in the field, out-of-date in some cases and impossible to consult in other cases, are likely to be inaccurate or at best incomplete in their accounts. And they will be variously influenced by regional bias, by the profit motive, and by a need to be brief and breezy for a popular audience.

A scholarly reader of Jeff's argument would feel let down. Scholarly readers are students or teachers of a subject who seek to understand it and to base their understanding on strong demonstrations. They expect scholarly writers, even writers relatively new to the topic, to be similarly serious seekers. They expect them at least to use the time and the resources at their disposal *as* scholars to make the strongest case they can. This means taking the time to find and use sources that can be

trusted to provide full, accurate, and unbiased material and thus provide a stable ground for demonstration. The paper imagined above suggests no serious effort in this regard, but only a quick Google search.

It isn't always easy to know, when you're new to a scholarly field, which sources are serious. But learning to assess the source of one's information, ideas, and attitudes is part of an education in critical thinking. This assessing habit has become all the more useful now that so much information, and so many ideas and implicit attitudes, are being assembled, packaged, and repackaged on the Internet.

You can take your initial cue, in assessing sources, from the kinds of sources that are assigned as readings in your classes:

- standard, up-to-date editions of texts (the editions used in current articles in the field, whose bibliographies can also be used to determine which books and articles are currently important);
- scholarly articles—not from popular magazines but from journals whose contents have been assessed by scholars in the field, which therefore reflect ideas that the field takes seriously and that handle sources carefully;
- compilations of data—historical, biographical, and statistical—that reflect the current state of knowledge in a field.

Sources such as these, which can be trusted to provide accurately the information and ideas they offer to provide, are readily available to members of a scholarly community (see Box B). And their notes and references are better starting points for finding other sources than a Google search.

It's not the case that anything written for a popular audience, rather than an academic one, should be distrusted. Because such works are often both lively *and* reliable, they do appear on college syllabi. Nor is it always unacceptable, when working on a paper, to see what a general web search turns up. Even professors do this—Google a topic, for example, and

visit Wikipedia—as a first pass or to get basic or tangential information.

Their actual papers, however, do not depend on the result of casual searches, and neither should you. Doing so increases your risk not only of plagiarizing (see Chapter 3), but also of making factual errors. A general Google search (as opposed to one in Google Scholar, say) brings before you as many unreliable sources as reliable ones and puts you in the position of having to tell them apart in short order, which you may not yet know enough about the field to do. The fact that a website gets many hits or has multiple links is no guarantee that its information is reliable.

[B] ASSESSING INTERNET SOURCES

The best way to locate reliable sources is to go through a website of a scholarly library that gives you access to databases, indices, texts of abstracts and journals, collections of statistics, maps, paintings and photographs, and many other resources, often organized by field. Electronic sources available through these library portals are chosen for scholarly authority and reliability. Instructions linked to the library portal page show you how to first find the sources best suited for your search and then how to best search them for the information you want.

Generally, use websites and other non-journal and nonbook materials from the Internet only to supplement other sources. When you do use them,

- Give priority to those that list their sources (so you can verify the information) or at least list an advisory board of professionals who vet the material.
- If the site doesn't list its sources but still seems serious (i.e., shows no breeziness, carelessness, or bias,

and isn't a commercial [.com] site), check out the author's professional position and what else he or she has written, and whether the site has a respectable institutional base or is an outgrowth of a long-standing professional organization. You can also directly e-mail the author about the status of a particular piece of information—or post a query.

- Don't use as a source a site that gives no author or supervisory editor.
- When the text on a site is subject to change or erasure, and thus may not be consultable by other readers, try to find a more stable source for the information. If you must use it, either print out the text or have the author send it to you as a personal communication—which you can then cite as such and attach to your paper as an appendix.

If you include non-journal Internet sources in your paper and you have, or think your reader may have, concerns about their reliability or verifiability, include an explanatory note (see section 2.5).

1.3 Citing Sources Reliably

However reliable your sources may be, your reader must be able to *see* that they're reliable and trust that you are acknowledging them reliably—that you are reliably making clear what comes from you and what comes from your sources. You show this by citing, making a notation in your paper that refers to publication information you provide elsewhere (common methods are described in Chapter 4).

But what constitutes reliability in citing? When should you cite—and why? You should cite on the following occasions:

(a) *Whenever you use factual material—e.g., data, information, testimony, or a report—that you found in a source.* You need to make clear to your readers *who* gathered the information and *where* to find its original form. Even if these matters are common knowledge in the field, if *your* knowledge of them isn't firsthand, your readers need to know where your version of the facts came from.

(b) *Whenever you use ideas—e.g., claims, interpretations, conclusions, or lines of reasoning—arrived at by another person,* so your readers know that you are summarizing thoughts formulated by someone else, whose authority your citation invokes, and whose formulations readers can consult and check against your summary.

(c) *Whenever you use a special concept, term, or theory that you found in a source.*

(d) *Whenever you make use of a source passage's distinctive structure, organizing strategy, or method,* such as the way an argument is divided into distinct parts, sections, or kinds; the way a distinction is made between two aspects of a problem; or a new procedure for studying some phenomenon (in a text, in the laboratory, or in the field) that was developed by a particular person or group. Citing tells your readers that the strategy or method isn't yours and allows them to consult its original context.

(e) *Whenever you quote verbatim.* When you cite a passage of two or more words in a row, or even a single word (a characterization or label, for example) that is distinctive or striking. Your readers need to be able to verify the accuracy and context of your quotation, and to credit the author of the source for crafting the exact formulation. Words you use verbatim from a source must be put in quotation marks, even if you use only two or three words; it's not enough simply to cite. (If you go on to use the quoted word or phrase repeatedly in your paper, as part of your analytic vocabulary, you don't need to cite it each subsequent time; however, you do need to attribute the terms at the outset.)

You should cite for all of these occasions, even in situations that may seem to you nonstandard. The rules apply, that is, to

- **all uses of sources:** including summaries and paraphrases, even where the source provides only “background” information to your argument (such as historical context or a survey of previous work done);
- **all types of assignments:** including problem sets, computer programs, lab and other reports, collaborative projects, and take-home exams (the fact that your instructor may recognize your use of a course text doesn’t change the need to acknowledge it);
- **all types of sources and media:** including numbers, images, graphs and charts, oral communications, films and videos; media including Internet and databases, class sourcebooks and class texts, and lectures.²

Finally, although you aren’t required to mention the help you have received informally, acknowledging such help is a generous and honest gesture and a good habit to develop (see Box C).

1.4 Why Cite?

Why cite so scrupulously? The consequences of discovered plagiarism (see section 3.1) are to be avoided, obviously, but doesn’t frequent citation weaken a paper by making you seem less thoughtful and too dependent on others? Yes, if you find yourself citing sources for almost everything in your paper or even for entire paragraphs, you have a problem. You may be citing “common knowledge” (see Box D) or citing inefficiently (see Box O); or, more likely, you’re giving too much rehash of

2. A lecture is a carefully constructed presentation by an authority in the field, and may itself draw on other authorities; thus, you should cite if you use a distinctive idea, phrase, or piece of information from a lecture. Some instructors may want you to regard their lectures, given for the purposes of their class only, as common knowledge not to be cited. Ask about this before incorporating lecture material.

(C) ACKNOWLEDGING UNCITED SOURCES

Whenever you write a paper of more than a few pages, you draw on many influences: not only sources you can cite as sources of something definite, but also less immediate, less definite sources, such as the lessons of former teachers, conversations or e-mails with friends, class discussions, or an inspiring book you read over the summer. When you have benefited substantially from ideas in sources like these that won't appear in your list of references, you should acknowledge them in a footnote or endnote (see section 2.5). Doing so shows you to be both generous and intellectually self-aware.

Remember, however, that your sources may themselves be using phrases and ideas from their reading or lectures. If you write a paper that depends *heavily* on an idea you heard in conversation with someone, you should check with that person about the source of the idea. Also be aware that no instructor will appreciate your incorporating his or her ideas from conversation verbatim into your paper, but will rather expect you to express the ideas in your own way and to develop them.

other people's ideas and need to generate more of your own—you need to step beyond your sources. But once you have a case to make, careful citing is at once a service, a moral obligation, and an argumentative advantage.

Your citation says several things to your readers. For one, it says, *"Here is where I found this idea, these words, or this information. Here you can verify the summary of the idea I am giving you or find the full context for the words I have paraphrased or quoted—in case you wish to check them or pursue the matter yourself."* Your citation allows your readers to find in a source what you have found and to make use of it themselves. Such readers are

particularly grateful to have it made clear, moreover, exactly what in your paper comes from the source and what comes from you.

Your citation also says, *"This person deserves the credit for gathering these materials together or for coming up with these thoughts or words; I hereby acknowledge my indebtedness."* Saying this is only fair to the author in question. Life is short, and he or she has spent many precious hours and days working out the ideas and words that you are casually perusing, assuming that he or she would be fairly credited for them. If you don't credit the author for this work, you implicitly credit yourself for it. If you credit vaguely or sloppily, you create confusion in the minds of others as to what the scholar has accomplished, probably in the process making the accomplishment seem less than it is.

Citing is only fair, also, to the community of students and teachers of which you are a part. It is only fair to other students in your class who fairly acknowledge any help they get from sources. It is only fair to your instructors, who agree to take your ideas seriously—even when they are uninformed and fragmentary—so long as you take the scholarly process seriously by taking yourself seriously as a thinker and as a potential source for other thinkers. When you pretend to have thought or written something that you haven't, you aren't honoring the bargain, and you are treating the process as a game.

Being helpful and fair in your citing also makes your argument stronger. When you analyze data or text from a source, your citation says, *"This scholar has collected the material I'm working with (as you can verify); it's a reliable basis for my conclusions."* When you support or build on a source's idea, it says, *"These learned scholars have found this to be so; it's not just my idiosyncratic opinion or blithe assumption."* When you challenge an idea, it says, *"This learned scholar has this view, as you can verify for yourself: I am not taking on a fool, or creating a straw man."* Citing not only gets you credit for having read these scholars; it also makes your own contribution stand out against the contributions of others—others whose company elevates you.

Reliable citing strengthens your paper, finally, by manifesting intellectual character. It establishes you as not just honest but also helpful, open and generous, serious, careful, and confident enough in your own thinking and reading, and in the intellectual process, to give credit where it is due—to acknowledge other views. Intermittent, casual, sloppy, or vague citing raises suspicion and makes your readers skeptical; ready and consistent citing puts your readers in a generous state of mind, willing to notice and give *you* full credit for the thinking you have done.

IDJ "COMMON KNOWLEDGE"

Unless you are closely studying it, you don't need to cite a phrase like "all the world's a stage" or "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." These are common locutions, known to all educated readers. Nor do you need to cite information that is either familiar to educated readers or easily available in many general sources (such as encyclopedias, dictionaries, and basic textbooks). The date of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, the distance to Saturn, the structure of the American Congress, the date of birth of the discoverer of DNA, the fact that Sigmund Freud developed such ideas as the unconscious and the Oedipus complex—such information, in its basic form, is widely accepted and not based on a particular interpretation or point of view; it counts as common knowledge. In the paper excerpted on p. 23, Jennie doesn't need to cite her passing references to the notion of "oral fixation" (line 6) or the fact that gentlemen used to have an after-dinner cigar separate from the ladies (lines 40–41).

The line between common and uncommon knowledge isn't always clear, but it is your responsibility to take care that an assumption of common knowledge doesn't lead you into plagiarism. If Jennie had gone on

to say that the after-dinner cigar ritual occurred even in matriarchal societies—an unfamiliar idea brought to light by the work of certain scholars—she would have needed to cite a source, both to show that the idea has a solid basis and to credit those scholars. If Jennie’s argument had mentioned particular aspects of Freud’s fixation theory, details that aren’t familiar to most readers, she would have needed to cite Freud (or the source for her account of his theory). She would have needed to cite in this paper written for her ethics class, even though the details of Freud’s theory *had* been common knowledge in the psychology seminar she took the previous semester. Ideas that are common knowledge in one academic field are often not in other fields. When in doubt on this score, ask—or cite anyway, to be safe.

Note, finally, that when you draw a *great deal* of information from any single source, you should cite that source even if the information is common knowledge, since the source (and its particular way of organizing the information) has made a significant contribution to your paper.

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