Now that you’ve just summarized or paraphrased or directly quoted a source, is there anything else you need to do with that source? Well, it turns out there is. There are some standard ways of using sources that let your readers know this material is from other texts rather than original ideas from your own brain. Following these guidelines also allows us, your readers, to locate those sources if we are interested in the topic and would like to know more about what they say.

Giving credit to the sources you used creating a text is important (and useful!) for several reasons.

- It adds to your own credibility as an author by showing you have done appropriate research on your topic and approached your work ethically.
- It gives credit to the original author and their work for the ideas you found to be useful, and in giving them credit it helps you avoid unintentionally plagiarizing their work.
- It gives your readers additional resources (already curated by you in your research process!) that they can go to if
they want to read further your topic.

What Does It Mean to Credit or Cite Your Sources?

For college-level work, this generally means two things: in-text or parenthetical citation and a “Works Cited” or “References” page. What these two things look like will be a little different for different types of classes (for example, it’s likely your writing class will use MLA—Modern Language Association—format, while a psychology class is more likely to use APA—American Psychological Association—format). The specific details required and the order in which they appear changes a little between different formats, but practicing one of them will give you a general idea of what most of them are looking for. All of the information we are looking at here is specific to MLA, which is the format you will use for your writing classes (and some other humanities classes).

Citing: Identifying In-Text Sources

Once you have brought source material into your writing (via quotation, summary, or paraphrase), your next task is to cite or identify it. This is essential because giving credit to the creator of the source material helps you avoid plagiarism. Identifying your sources also helps your reader understand which written content is from a source and which represents your ideas.

When you cite or identify source materials, you make it absolutely clear that the material was taken from a source. Note that if you don’t do that, your reader is left to assume the words are yours—and since that isn’t true, you will have committed plagiarism.

In-Text Citation

Every time you use an idea or language from a source in your text (so every time you summarize, paraphrase, or directly quote material from a source), you will want to add an in-text citation. Sometimes you can accomplish this simply by mentioning the author or title of a source in the body of your writing, but other times you’ll handle in-text citation differently, with a parenthetical citation. Parenthetical means that the citation appears in parentheses in the text of your essay.

A starting point for parenthetical citations is that they include the author’s last name and the page number where the borrowed information came from. For example, let’s say I’m using material from an article written by Lisa Smith. It’s in a physical magazine and spans pages 38-42. If, on page 41, she says something like, “While most studies have shown that Expo dry erase markers have superior lasting power, erasability, and color saturation than other brands on the market, their higher cost is a concern for some consumers,” I might incorporate that into a paper like this:

By most measurable standards, Expo markers are clearly the favored option (Smith 41).

However, you don’t always need both components (last name and page number) in the parenthetical citation. If I introduced the source material in the sentence above a little differently, introducing the author before delivering the material, I wouldn’t need to repeat the author’s name in that same sentence in the parenthetical citation. In that case, my sentence would look something like this: According to Lisa Smith, Expo markers are clearly the favored option by most
measurable standards (41).

In this section, we’ll discuss three ways to cite or identify written source materials in your own writing.

1. Introduce the Author and/or the Title of the Source

By introducing the author or the material, you make it clear to the reader that what you’re talking about is from a source. Here’s an example of a quotation that is identified by introducing the author and the title of source (which are highlighted):

In the article, “Grooming Poodles for Fun and Profit,” Jonas Fogbottom explains, “Poodle grooming is a labor of love. It takes years of practice to be good at it, but once learned, it’s a fun and worthwhile career.”

Here’s an example of a paraphrase that is identified in the same way:

In the article, “Grooming Poodles for Fun and Profit,” Jonas Fogbottom says that although it takes a long time to become a skilled poodle groomer, it’s well worth the effort and leads to a good career.

Note that, in the example above, (1) if there are no page numbers to cite and (2) if the name of the author is signaled in the phrase that introduces the bit of source material, then there is no need for the parenthetical citation. This is an example of a situation where mentioning the author by name is the only in-text citation you’ll need. And sometimes, if the name of the author is unknown, then you might just mention the title of the article instead. It will be up to you, as a writer, to choose which method works best for your given situation.

The first time that you mention a source in your writing, you should always introduce the speaker and, if possible, the title of the source as well. Note that the speaker is the person responsible for stating the information that you’re citing and that this is not always the author of the text. For example, an author of an article might quote someone else, and you might quote or paraphrase that person.

Use the speaker’s full name (e.g. “According to Jonas Fogbottom . . .”) the first time you introduce them; if you mention them again in the paper, use their last name only (e.g. “Fogbottom goes on to discuss . . .”).

2. Use Linking or Attributive Language

Using linking language (sometimes called attributive language or signal phrases) simply means using words that show the reader you are still talking about a source that you just mentioned.

For example, you might use linking language that looks something like this:

- The author also explains . . .
- Fogbottom continues . . .
- The article goes on to say . . .
- The data set also demonstrates . . .

By using this kind of language, you make it clear to the reader that you’re still talking about a source. And while you’ll
use this type of language throughout any researched essay whether you’re also using parenthetical citations or not, as we mentioned above, sometimes this linking language will be all you need for in-text citation.

Let’s look back at the last Fogbottom example from above, and imagine you wanted to add two more sentences from the same source. The linking language is highlighted:

   In the article, “Grooming Poodles for Fun and Profit,” Jonas Fogbottom says that although it takes a long time to become a skilled poodle groomer, it’s well worth the effort and leads to a good career. Fogbottom goes on to explain how one is trained in the art of dog and poodle grooming. The article also gives a set of resources for people who want to know more about a dog grooming career.

Using the linking language makes it absolutely clear to your reader that you are still talking about a source.

3. Use a Parenthetical Citation

A parenthetical citation is a citation enclosed within parentheses.

ProTip

Whatever comes first in the Works Cited citation is what will go into the parentheses in a parenthetical citation. Most often that item is an author’s last name, but sometimes it’s a title or abbreviated title of an article or other type of text. This is another good reason for starting by creating a Works Cited entry the moment you begin working with a source.

The classic parenthetical citation includes the author’s name and, if there is one, a page number. To learn more about parenthetical citation and see some examples, see the Purdue OWL article on “MLA In-Text Citations: The Basics” (available from owl.english.purdue.edu).

Here’s an example:

   (Fogbottom 16)

If there are two authors, list both (with a page number, if available):

   (Smith and Jones 24)

If there are three or more authors, list the first author only and add “et al.”* (with a page number, if available):

   (Smith et al. 62)

*“et al” means “and others.” If a text or source has three or more authors, MLA style has us just list the first one with *et al.*

But my source doesn't have page numbers!
If you are using an electronic source or another kind of source with no page numbers, just leave the page number out:

(Fogbottom)

If you’re quoting or paraphrasing someone who was cited by the author of one of your sources, then that’s handled a bit differently. For example, what if you quote Smith, but you found that quote in the article by Fogbottom. In this case, you should introduce the speaker (Smith) as described above, and then cite the source for the quote, like this:

(qtd. in Fogbottom)

But my source doesn’t have an author!

This happens sometimes. Many useful documents, like government publications, organizational reports, and surveys, don’t list their authors. On the other hand, sometimes no clearly listed author can be a red flag that a source is not entirely trustworthy or is not researched well enough to be a reliable source for you.

If you encounter a source with no author, do look for other indicators that it is a good (or poor) source—who published it, does it have an appropriate list of references, is it current information, is it unbiased?

If you determine that this source is an appropriate source to use, then, when you create your in-text citation for it, you will simply use the title of the source (article, chapter, graph, film, etc.) in the place where you would have used the author’s name. If the title is long, you should abbreviate by listing the first one or two words of it (with a page number, if available).

Let’s imagine you’re working with a newspaper article entitled, “What’s New in Technology,” enclosed in quotation marks to indicate that this is an article title, and with no known author. Here’s what that would look in a parenthetical citation:

(“What’s New” B6)

If there is no author and you’re working with an electronic article, use the first one or two words in your parenthetical citation, again, enclosed in quotation marks. Let’s imagine you’re working with a web article entitled, “Pie Baking for Fun and Profit” and with no author. Here’s what that would look in a parenthetical citation:

(“Pie Baking”)

The parenthetical citation should be added at the end of the sentence that contains the source material. Let’s go back to the Fogbottom example and see how a parenthetical citation would work:

“Poodle grooming is a labor of love. It takes years of practice to be good at it, but once learned, it’s a fun and worthwhile career” (Fogbottom).

Here’s what it would look like if we used it with a paraphrase instead of a quotation:

Although it takes a long time to become a skilled poodle groomer, it’s well worth the effort and leads to a good career (Fogbottom).
Note that the citation is placed at the end of the sentence; the period comes after the parentheses. Misplacing the period is one of the most common formatting errors made by students.

Using parenthetical citation makes it crystal clear that a sentence comes from source material. This is, by far, the easiest way to cite or identify your source materials, too.

If using parenthetical citations is easy, why would we bother with using introduction or linking language to identify sources?

Good question! There would be nothing wrong with only using parenthetical citations all the way through your writing—it would absolutely do the job of citing the material. But, it wouldn’t read smoothly and would feel somewhat rough because every time a parenthetical citation popped up, the reader would be “stopped” in place for a moment. Using a combination of introduction, linking language, and parenthetical citation, as needed, makes the writing smoother and easier to read. It also integrates the source material with the writer’s ideas. We call this synthesis, and it’s part of the craft of writing.

Works Cited Entries

At the end of texts that have drawn from existing sources, you will often find a Works Cited page. This page gives more information than the parenthetical citations do about what kinds of sources were referenced in this work and where they can be found if the reader would like to know more about them. These entries all follow a specific and consistent format so that it is easy for readers to find the information they are looking for and so the shape and type of that information is consistent no matter who is writing the entries.

Until recently, the MLA required a slightly different format for every type of source—an entry for a Youtube video required certain information that was different from an entry for a book that was different from an entry for an online article. The most recent version of MLA, though—MLA 8—has simplified this so there is just one format rather than many.

You can learn how to create works cited entries in MLA 8 format, and see an example, in the “Creating a Works Cited Page” appendix to this text.