4.2.2: Annoying Ways People Use Sources

Annoying Ways People Use Sources

Read this chapter and take note of how sources can be used poorly. How can you avoid this in your own writing?

How Slow Driving Is Like Sloppy Writing

I hate slow drivers. When I am driving in the fast lane, maintaining the speed limit exactly, and I find myself behind someone who thinks the fast lane is for people who drive ten miles per hour below the speed limit, I get an annoyed feeling in my chest like hot water filling a heavy bucket. I wave my arms around and yell, "What . . . ? But, hey. . . oh come on!" There are at least two explanations for why some slow drivers fail to move out of the way:

1. They do not know that the generally accepted practice of highway driving in the U.S. is to move to the right if an upcoming car wants to pass.
2. They know the guidelines but do not care.

But here is the thing: writers can forget that their readers are sometimes just as annoyed at writing that fails to follow conventions as drivers are when stuck behind a car that fails to move over. In other words, there is something similar between these two people: the knowledgeable driver who thinks, "I thought all drivers knew that the left lane is for the fastest cars", and the reader who thinks, "I thought all writers knew that outside sources should be introduced, punctuated, and cited according to a set of standards".

One day, you may discover that something you have written has just been read by a reader who, unfortunately, was annoyed at some of the ways you integrated sources. She was reading along and then suddenly exclaimed, "What . . . ? But, hey . . . oh come on!" If you are lucky, this reader will try to imagine why you typed things the way you did, giving
you the benefit of the doubt. But sometimes you will be slotted into positions that might not really be accurate. When this frustrated reader walks away from your work, trying to figure out, say, why you used so many quotations, or why you kept starting and ending paragraphs with them, she may come to the same conclusions I do about slow drivers:

1. You do not know the generally accepted practices of using sources (especially in academic writing) in the United States. or,
2. You know the guidelines but do not care.

And it will be a lot harder for readers to take you seriously if they think you are ignorant or rude.

This judgment, of course, will often be unfair. These readers might completely ignore the merits of your insightful, stylistically beautiful, or revolutionarily important language – just as my anger at another driver makes me fail to admire his custom paint job. But readers and writers do not always see eye to eye on the same text. In fact, some things I write about in this essay will only bother your pickiest readers (some teachers, some editors, some snobby friends), while many other readers might zoom past how you use sources without blinking.

But in my experience, I find that teachers do a disservice when we fail to alert students to the kind of things that some readers might be annoyed at – however illogical these things sometimes seem. People are often unreasonably picky, and writers have to deal with that – which they do by trying to anticipate and preemptively fix whatever might annoy a broad range of readers. Plus, the more effectively you anticipate that pickiness, the more likely it is that readers will interpret your quotations and paraphrases in the way you want them to – critically or acceptingly, depending on your writing context.

It helps me to remember that the conventions of writing have a fundamentally rhetorical nature. That is, I follow different conventions depending on the purpose and audience of my writing, because I know that I will come across differently to different people depending on how well I follow the conventions expected in any particular writing space. In a blog, I cite a source by hyperlinking; in an academic essay, I use a parenthetical citation that refers to a list of references at the end of the essay.

One of the fundamental ideas of rhetoric is that speakers/writers/composers shape what they say/write/create based on what they want it to do, where they are publishing it, and what they know about their audience/readers. And those decisions include nitty-gritty things like introducing quotations and citing paraphrases clearly: not everyone in the entire world approaches these things the same way, but when I strategically learn the expectations of my U.S. academic audience, what I really want to say comes across smoothly, without little annoying blips in my readers' experience.

Notice that I am not saying that there is a particular right or wrong way to use conventions in my writing – if the modern U.S. academic system had evolved from a primarily African or Asian or Latin American cultural consciousness instead of a European one, conventions for writing would probably be very different. That is why they are conventions and not rules.

The Annoyances

Because I am not here to tell you rules, decrees, or laws, it makes sense to call my classifications annoyances. In the examples that follow, I wrote all of the annoying examples myself, but all the examples I use of good writing come from actual student papers in first year composition classes at my university; I have their permission to quote them.
Armadillo Roadkill: Dropping in a Quotation Without Introducing It First

Everyone in the car hears it: buh-BUMP. The driver insists to the passengers, "But that armadillo – I did not see it! It just came out of nowhere!"

Sadly, a poorly introduced quotation can lead readers to a similar exclamation: "It just came out of nowhere!" And though readers probably will not experience the same level of grief and regret when surprised by a quotation as opposed to an armadillo, I submit that there is a kinship between the experiences: both involve a normal, pleasant activity (driving; reading) stopped suddenly short by an unexpected barrier (a sudden armadillo; a sudden quotation).

Here is an example of what I am talking about:

We should all be prepared with a backup plan if a zombie invasion occurs. "Unlike its human counterparts, an army of zombies is completely independent of support" (Brooks 155). Preparations should be made in the following areas. . . .

Did you notice how the quotation is dropped in without any kind of warning? (Buh-BUMP.)

The Fix: The easiest way to effectively massage in quotations is by purposefully returning to each one in your draft to see if you set the stage for your readers – often, by signaling that a quote is about to come, stating who the quote came from, and showing how your readers should interpret it. In the above example, that could be done by introducing the quotation with something like this (new text bolded):

We should all be prepared with a backup plan if a zombie invasion occurs. Max Brooks suggests a number of ways to prepare for zombies' particular traits, though he underestimates the ability of humans to survive in harsh environments. For example, he writes, "Unlike its human counterparts, an army of zombies is completely independent of support" (155). His shortsightedness could have a number of consequences. . . .

In this version, I know a quotation is coming ("For example"), I know it is going to be written by Max Brooks, and I know I am being asked to read the quote rather skeptically ("he underestimates"). The sentence with the quotation itself also now begins with a "tag" that eases us into it ("he writes").

Here is an actual example from Alexsandra. Notice the way she builds up to the quotation and then explains it:

In the first two paragraphs, the author takes a defensive position when explaining the perception that the public has about scientists by saying that "there is anxiety that scientists lack both wisdom and social responsibility and are so motivated by ambition . . ." and "scientists are repeatedly referred to as 'playing God'" (Wolpert 345).

With this last sentence especially, his tone seems to demonstrate how he uses the ethos appeal to initially set a tone of someone that is tired of being misunderstood.

Alexsandra prepares us for the quotation, quotes, and then analyzes it. I love it. This is not a hard and fast rule – I have seen it broken by the best of writers, I admit – but it is a wise standard to hold yourself to unless you have a reason not to.
Dating Spider-Man: Starting or Ending a Paragraph with a Quotation

An annoyance that is closely connected to Armadillo Roadkill is the tendency writers sometimes have of starting or ending paragraphs with quotations. This is not technically wrong, and there are situations when the effect of surprise is what you are going for. But often, a paragraph-beginning or paragraph-closing quotation feels rushed, unexplained, disjointed.

It is like dating Spider-Man. You are walking along with him and he says something remarkably interesting – but then he tilts his head, hearing something far away, and suddenly shoots a web onto the nearest building and zooms away through the air. As if you had just read an interesting quotation dangling at the end of a paragraph, you wanted to hear more of his opinion, but it is too late – he is already moved on.

Later, he suddenly jumps off a balcony and is by your side again, and he starts talking about something you do not understand. You are confused because he just dropped in and expected you to understand the context of what was on his mind at that moment, much like when readers step into a paragraph that begins with a quotation. Here is an example:

[End of a preceding paragraph:] . . . Therefore, the evidence clearly suggests that we should be exceptionally careful about deciding when and where to rest.

"When taking a nap, always rest your elbow on your desk and keep your arm perpendicular to your desktop" (Piven and Borgenicht 98). After all, consider the following scenario. . . .

There is a perfectly good reason why this feels odd – which should feel familiar after reading about the Armadillo Roadkill annoyance above. When you got to the quotation in the second paragraph, you did not know what you were supposed to think about it; there was no guidance.

The Fix is the same: in the majority of situations, readers appreciate being guided to and led away from a quotation by the writer doing the quoting. Readers get a sense of pleasure from the safe flow of hearing how to read an upcoming quotation, reading it, and then being told one way to interpret it. Prepare, quote, analyze.

I mentioned above that there can be situations where starting a paragraph with a quotation can have a strong effect. Personally, I usually enjoy this most at the beginning of essays or the beginning of sections – like in this example from the very beginning of Jennifer’s essay:

"Nothing is ever simple: Racism and nobility can exist in the same man, hate and love in the same woman, fear and loyalty, compromise and idealism, all the yin-yang dichotomies that make the human species so utterly confounding, yet so utterly fascinating" (Hunter). The hypocrisy and complexity that Stephen Hunter from the Washington Post describes is the basis of the movie Crash (2004).

Instantly, her quotation hooks me. It does not feel thoughtless, like it would feel if I continued to be whisked to quotations without preparation throughout the essay. But please do not overdo it; any quotation that opens an essay or section ought to be integrally related to your topic (as is Jennifer’s), not just a cheap gimmick.

Uncle Barry and his Encyclopedia of Useless Information: Using too Many
Quotations in a Row

You probably know someone like this: a person (for me, my Uncle Barry) who constantly tries to impress me with how much he knows about just about everything. I might casually bring up something in the news ("Wow, these health care debates are getting really heated, aren't they?") and then find myself barraged by all of Uncle Barry's ideas on government-sponsored health care – which then drifts into a story about how his cousin Maxine died in an underfunded hospice center, which had a parking lot that he could have designed better, which reminds him of how good he is at fixing things, just like the garage door at my parents' house, which probably only needs a little... You get the idea. I might even think to myself, "Wait, I want to know more about that topic, but you are zooming on before you contextualize your information at all".

This is something like reading an essay that relies too much on quotations. Readers get the feeling that they are moving from one quotation to the next without ever quite getting to hear the real point of what the author wants to say, never getting any time to form an opinion about the claims. In fact, this often makes it sound as if the author has almost no authority at all. You may have been annoyed by paragraphs like this before:

Addressing this issue, David M. Potter comments, "Whether Seward meant this literally or not, it was in fact a singularly accurate forecast for territorial Kansas" (199). Of course, Potter's view is contested, even though he claims, "Soon, the Missourians began to perceive the advantages of operating without publicity" (200). Interestingly, "The election was bound to be irregular in any case" (201).

Wait – huh? This author feels like Uncle Barry to me: grabbing right and left for topics (or quotes) in an effort to sound authoritative.

The Fix is to return to each quotation and decide why it is there and then massage it in accordingly. If you just want to use a quote to cite a fact, then consider paraphrasing or summarizing the source material (which I find is usually harder than it sounds but is usually worth it for the smoothness my paragraph gains). But if you quoted because you want to draw attention to the source's particular phrasing, or if you want to respond to something you agree with or disagree with in the source, then consider taking the time to surround each quotation with guidance to your readers about what you want them to think about that quote.

In the following passage, I think Jessica demonstrates a balance between source and analysis well. Notice that she only uses a single quotation, even though she surely could have chosen more. But instead, Jessica relies on her instincts and remains the primary voice of authority in the passage:

Robin Toner's article, "Feminist Pitch by a Democrat named Obama", was written a week after the video became public and is partially a response to it. She writes, "The Obama campaign is, in some ways, subtly marketing its candidate as a post-feminist man, a generation beyond the gender conflicts of the boomers". Subtly is the key word. Obama is a passive character throughout the video, never directly addressing the camera. Rather, he is shown indirectly through speeches, intimate conversations with supporters and candid interaction with family. This creates a sense of intimacy, which in turn creates a feeling of trust.

Toner's response to the Obama video is like a diving board that Jessica bounces off of before she gets to the really interesting stuff: the pool (her own observations). A bunch of diving boards lined up without a pool (tons of quotes with
Am I in the Right Movie? Failing to Integrate a Quotation into the Grammar of the Preceding Sentence

When reading drafts of my writing, this is a common experience: I start to read a sentence that seems interesting and normal, with everything going just the way I expect it to. But then the unexpected happens: a quotation blurts itself into the sentence in a way that does not fit with the grammar that built up to quotation. It feels like sitting in a movie theater, everything going as expected, when suddenly the opening credits start for a movie I did not plan to see. Here are two examples of what I am talking about. Read them out loud, and you will see how suddenly wrong they feel.

1. Therefore, the author warns that a zombie's vision "are no different than those of a normal human" (Brooks 6).
2. Sheila Anne Barry advises that "Have you ever wondered what it is like to walk on a tightrope – many feet up in the air?" (50)

In the first example, the quoter's build-up to the quotation uses a singular subject – a zombie's vision – which, when paired with the quotation, is annoyingly matched with the plural verb are. It would be much less jolting to write, "a zombie's vision is," which makes the subject and verb agree. In the second example, the quoter builds up to the quotation with a third-person, declarative independent clause: Sheila Anne Barry advises. But then the quotation switches into second person – you – and unexpectedly asks a question – completely different from the expectation that was built up by the first part of the sentence.

The Fix is usually easy: you read your essay out loud to someone else, and if you stumble as you enter a quotation, there is probably something you can adjust in your lead-in sentence to make the two fit together well. Maybe you will need to choose a different subject to make it fit with the quote's verb (reader instead of readers; each instead of all), or maybe you will have to scrap what you first wrote and start over.

On occasion you will even feel the need to transparently modify the quotation by adding an [s] to one of its verbs, always being certain to use square brackets to show that you adjusted something in the quotation. Maybe you will even find a way to quote a shorter part of the quotation and squeeze it into the context of a sentence that is mostly your own, a trick that can have a positive effect on readers, who like smooth water slides more than they like bumpy slip-and-slides. Jennifer does this well in the following sentence, for example:

In Crash, no character was allowed to "escape his own hypocrisy" (Muller), and the film itself emphasized that the reason there is so much racial tension among strangers is because of the personal issues one cannot deal with alone.

She saw a phrase that she liked in Muller's article, so she found a way to work it in smoothly, without the need for a major break in her thought. Let's put ourselves in Jennifer's shoes for a moment: it is possible that she started drafting this sentence using the plural subject characters, writing "In Crash, no characters were allowed. . . ". But then, imagine she looked back at the quote from Muller and saw that it said "escape his own hypocrisy", which was a clue that she had to change the first part of her sentence to match the singular construction of the quote.
I Cannot Find the Stupid Link: No Connection Between the First Letter of a Parenthetical Citation and the First Letter of a Works Cited Entry

You have been in this situation: you are on a website that seems like it might be interesting and you want to learn more about it. But the home page does not tell you much, so you look for an "About Us" or "More Information" or "FAQ" link. But no matter where you search – Top of page? Bottom? Left menu? – you cannot find the stupid link. This is usually the fault of web designers, who do not always take the time to test their sites as much as they should with actual users. The communication failure here is simple: you are used to finding certain kinds of basic information in the places people usually put it. If it is not there, you are annoyed.

Similarly, a reader might see a citation and have a quick internal question about it: What journal was this published in? When was it published? Is this an article I could find online to skim myself? This author has a sexy last name – I wonder what his first name is? Just like when you look for a link to more information, this reader has a simple, quick question that he or she expects to answer easily.

And the most basic way for readers to answer those questions (when they are reading a work written in APA or MLA style) is (1) to look at the information in the citation, and (2) skim the references or works cited section alphabetically, looking for the first letter in the citation. There is an assumption that the first letter of a citation will be the letter to look for in the list of works cited.

In short, the following may annoy readers who want to quickly learn more about the citation:

[Essay Text:] A respected guide on the subject suggests, "If possible, always take the high ground and hold it" (The Zombie Survival Guide 135).


The reader may wonder when The Zombie Survival Guide was published and flip back to the works cited page, but the parenthetical citation sends her straight to the Z's in the works cited list (because initial A's and The's are ignored when alphabetizing). However, the complete works cited entry is actually with the B's (where it belongs).

The Fix is to make sure that the first word of the works cited entry is the word you use in your in-text citation, every time. If the works cited entry starts with Brooks, use (Brooks) in the essay text.

Citations not including last names may seem to complicate this advice, but they all follow the same basic concept. For instance, you might have:

- A citation that only lists a title. For instance, your citation might read ("Gray Wolf General Information"). In this case, the assumption is that the citation can be found under the G section of the works cited page. Leah cites her paraphrase of a source with no author in the following way, indicating that I should head to the G's if I want to learn more about her source:

Alaska is the only refuge that is left for the wolves in the United States, and once that is gone, they will more than likely become extinct in this country ("Gray Wolf General Information").
• A citation that only lists a page number. Maybe the citation simply says (25). That implies that somewhere in the surrounding text, the essay writer must have made it stupendously clear what name or title to look up in the works cited list. This happens a lot, since it is common to introduce a quotation by naming the person it came from, in which case it would be repetitive to name that author again in the citation.

• A quotation without a citation at all. This happens when you cite a work that is both A) from a web page that does not number the pages or paragraphs and B) is named in the text surrounding the quotation. Readers will assume that the author is named nearby. Stephanie wisely leaves off any citation in the example below, where it is already clear that I should head to the O’s on the works cited page to find information about this source, a web page written by Opotow:

To further this point, Opotow notes, "Do not imagine you will be unscathed by the methods you use. The end may justify the means. . . . But there is a price to pay, and the price does tend to be oneself".

I Swear I Did Some Research: Dropping in a Citation Without Making it Clear What Information Came from That Source

Let’s look in-depth at this potentially annoying passage from a hypothetical student paper:

It is possible that a multidisciplinary approach to understanding the universe will open new doors of understanding. If theories from sociology, communication, and philosophy joined with physics, the possibilities would be boundless. This would inspire new research, much like in the 1970s when scientists changed their focus from grand-scale theories of the universe to the small concerns of quantum physics (Hawking 51).

In at least two ways, this is stellar material. First, the author is actually voicing a point of view; she sounds knowledgeable, strong. Second, and more to the point of this chapter, the author includes a citation, showing that she knows that ethical citation standards ask authors to cite paraphrases and summaries – not just quotations.

But on the other hand, which of these three sentences, exactly, came from Hawking’s book? Did Hawking claim that physics experts should join up with folks in other academic disciplines, or is that the student writer? In other words, at which point does the author’s point of view meld into material taken specifically from Hawking?

I recognize that there often are not clean answers to a question like that. What we read and what we know sometimes meld together so unnoticeably that we do not know which ideas and pieces of information are "ours" and which are not. Discussing "patchwriting", a term used to describe writing that blends words and phrases from sources with words and phrases we came up with ourselves, scholar Rebecca Moore Howard writes, "When I believe I am not patchwriting, I am simply doing it so expertly that the seams are no longer visible – or I am doing it so unwittingly that I cannot cite my sources" (91).

In other words, all the moves we make when writing came from somewhere else at some point, whether we realize it or not. Yikes. But remember our main purpose here: to not look annoying when using sources. And most of your instructors are not going to say, "I understand that I could not tell the difference between your ideas and your source's because we quite naturally patchwrite all the time. That's fine with me. Party on!" They are much more likely to imagine that you plopped in a few extra citations as a way of defensively saying, "I swear I did some research! See? Here is a citation right here! Doesn't that prove I worked really hard?"
The Fix: Write the sentences preceding the citation with *specific words and phrases that will tell readers what information came from where.* Like this (bolded words are new):

It is possible that a multidisciplinary approach to understanding the universe will open new doors of understanding. I believe that if theories from sociology, communication, and philosophy joined with physics, the possibilities would be boundless. This would inspire new research, much like the changes Stephen Hawking describes happening in the 1970s when scientists changed their focus from grand-scale theories of the universe to the small concerns of quantum physics (51).

Perhaps these additions could still use some stylistic editing for wordiness and flow, but the source-related job is done: readers know exactly which claims the essay writer is making and which ones Hawking made in his book. The last sentence and only the last sentence summarizes the ideas Hawking describes on page 51 of his book.

One warning: you will find that scholars in some disciplines (especially in the sciences and social sciences) use citations in the way I just warned you to avoid. You might see sentences like this one, from page 64 of Glenn Gordon Smith, Ana T. Torres-Ayala, and Allen J. Heindel's article in the *Journal of Distance Education:*

Some researchers have suggested "curriculum" as a key element in the design of web-based courses (Berge, 1998; Driscoll, 1998; Meyen, Tangen, & Lian, 1999; Wiens & Gunter, 1998).

Whoa – that is a lot of citations. Remember how the writer of my earlier example cited Stephen Hawking because she summarized his ideas? Well, a number of essays describing the results of experiments, like this one, use citations with a different purpose, citing previous studies whose general conclusions support the study described in this new paper, like building blocks.

It is like saying to your potentially skeptical readers, "Look, you might be wondering if I am a quack. But I can prove I am not! See, all these other people published in similar areas! Are you going to pick fights with all of them too?" You might have noticed as well that these citations are in APA format, reflecting the standards of the social sciences journal this passage was published in. Well, in this kind of context APA's requirement to cite the year of a study makes a lot of sense too – after all, the older a study, the less likely it is to still be relevant.

**Conclusion: Use Your Turn Signals**

You may have guessed the biggest weakness in an essay like this: what is annoying varies from person to person, with some readers happily skimming past awkward introductions to quotations without a blink, while others see a paragraph-opening quotation as something to complain about on Facebook. All I have given you here – all I *can* give you unless I actually get to know you and your various writing contexts – are the basics that will apply in a number of academic writing contexts.

Think of these as signals to your readers about your intentions, much as wise drivers rely on their turn signals to communicate their intentions to other drivers. In some cases when driving, signaling is an almost artistic decision, relying on the gut reaction of the driver to interpret what is best in times when the law does not mandate use one way or the other. I hope your writing is full of similar signals. Now if I could only convince the guy driving in front of me to use *his* blinker. . . .
Discussion

1. Because so many of these guidelines depend on the writer's purpose, publication space, and audience, it can be difficult to know when to follow them strictly and when to bend them. What are some specific writing situations where a writer is justified to bend the standards of how to incorporate sources?

2. Choose one of the annoyances. Then, look through a number of different pieces of writing from different genres and collect two examples of writers who followed your chosen guideline perfectly and two who did not. For each source you found, jot a sentence or two describing the context of that source and why you think its writer did or did not follow the guideline.

3. Rank the annoyances in order of most annoying to least annoying, pretending that you are a college professor. Now, rank them from the point of view of a newspaper editor, a popular blogger, and another college student. What changes did you make in your rankings?

Works Cited


