



ON-CITE CONSTRUCTION: PROPERLY USING CITATION TO BUILD A SOUND, CRITICAL ESSAY

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Are you a writer who sees the world concretely but thinks in metaphor? Well, I am. For example, I'll declare that writing a critical essay is a lot like building a house. The process of imagining your ideas, organizing an argument, and then putting pen to paper has much in common with envisioning a structure, designing a building, and then hammering nail into beam.

A house needs a strong foundation to stand fast and not shudder during storms, or not tremble during an earthquake; similarly, your essay needs sturdy and scholarly textual support to shore up your assertions and reinforce your ideas, or not buckle under the weight of a critical reader's opposing viewpoint or your faculty's devil's advocacy. Decorate your structure with all the *bon mot* bay windows and *parfaite idée* parquet floors you like, but trust me: If a house's foundation is creaky, the walls will fold and the roof may cave in, and if your essay's main thesis points are insufficiently reinforced, your line of reasoning will weaken and your carefully thought-through and earnestly argued hypothesis may fall flat.

Now let's build your house.

So how can you, an aspiring scholarly writer, construct an essay with a strong and resolute foundation? It's easy: Find persuasive primary and secondary material to support your assertions and give credit where it's due. In other words, say some really compelling things and defend them by telling us who else champions your claims. A home buyer will want to inspect the foundation, walk on the floors, and tap on the walls to ensure that the house is solid and habitable, so don't just suggest to the reader that your ideas are sound—prove it.

There are three cases for which you'll need to tell the reader from where your supportive information is taken, or whose words you've borrowed, so that you do not inadvertently plagiarize another's words: when you *summarize*, when you *paraphrase*, and when you *quote directly*. But first let's take a small but necessary stroll out into the garden of misappropriation.

What is plagiarism? First, if you use a writer's exact words and do not set them aside in your paragraph with quotation marks and explain whose words they are, that's plagiarism. And for someone attempting to be scholarly, it's not cool. Second, if you borrow their ideas and rewrite them in language that closely resembles the original syntactical construction but fail to let the reader know, *that's* plagiarism, too. Still not cool. Last, even if you borrow a writer's idea but completely recast it in your own language—enough so that the germ of the original idea remains, but the syntactical structure is all your own—*that's* plagiarism, too! And *triple* uncool!

So take care with what textual support you choose and how you use it. As a construction consultant, I offer this advice: If you think your writing contains the idea of another writer, cite the source! Although textual support is very important to the sturdiness of your essay, your faculty most likely will care more about your original ideas and method of argument. You're the architect of your essay, so it's *your* original blueprint and solid framing that should more impress the reader. Follow me as we step back inside the door.

Now the three varied shades of citation.

Summarizing can reduce the meaning of an original paragraph to perhaps one concise sentence; what you omit and exactly how you condense is up to you and your good sense. *Paraphrasing* keeps the original meaning and approximate length of the original text but alters some of the language for the purposes of brevity and clarity, or perhaps to better fit your argument and style. *Quoting directly* entails repeating the original author's words precisely as they appear, placing them within quotation marks, and inserting them within a grammatically correct sentence of your own. As when you're manually fitting doors and windows into walls, precision is everything.

Both APA and MLA methods of citation primarily use *in-text citation*, in which the information about the source or quoted material is placed within the sentence or at its end (APA), or after the quotation and always at the end of the sentence (MLA). Chicago style uses either one of two forms of citation: *footnotes*, in which the information about the cited material is placed at the bottom of a page containing the source; or *endnotes*, in which the information is collected at the end of a chapter or in a *Notes* section after the entire work. Much in the way a county's building codes will dictate the requisite building materials, your particular field of study will determine which citation style you employ.

A direct quote can never stand alone, but must be led into with an introductory phrase that usually identifies the author, their status or significance or affiliation, the source, sometimes the publication year, and the general essence of the cited material. Typically, after your lead-in phrases and before the quoted lines, you'll use a variation of the word "says" ("claims," "notes," "posits," "explains the following," etc.), and then the word "that," or the punctuation of a comma or a colon. After the quotation, do not forget to discuss the quotation, tying its relevance into your essay's larger argument or that paragraph's smaller claim. Building a house is hard work and may make you ravenously hungry. Aptly, in some academic circles, this technique of framing the quotation is known as preparing the "quote sandwich."

See this simple example from an essay I am currently writing about French cooking that uses MLA citation:

When the timid, budding cook-cum-chef decides to attempt *Le Cassoulet de Castelnaudary* on his own, he cannot go wrong in heeding the words of Elizabeth David. This culinary master of French cooking, and renowned author of the 1951 culinary classic *French Country Cooking*, clearly explains the process for beginning the goose-and-pork stock: “Slice the onions and cut the bacon into squares and melt them together in a pan, add the crushed garlic, the tomatoes, seasoning and herbs, and pour over the stock and let it simmer for 20 minutes” (94). Such clear, direct, and orderly instruction is necessary for the up-and-coming chef to feel confident and in control of his ingredients and technique. You’ll feel the *joie de vivre* of being French in no time!

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A few things to note about the above paragraph: First comes the introductory material: the reason for the citation, the author from which the writer is citing, her status and accomplishment, and the essence of what follows between the quotation marks. Note the “says” word—“explains” in this case—and then some discussion of the quotation and how it elucidates your paragraph’s mini-thesis. (In MLA style, the present tense of the “says” word is used; when following APA or Chicago style, the past tense of the “said” word is used.)

How much citation is enough? The length of your paper is an important consideration. Often, a few quotations per page is adequate—too few and your thesis will feel unconfirmed; too many and there won’t be any room for you to set up and argue your thesis. Remember, your house’s foundation is usually not visible when you step back and admire the finished home, but once you walk in and take a tour, you’ll know it’s there.

From what types of sources should you draw your textual support or quotations? Ask your faculty (or consult your main reader or audience). Often, your faculty will want you to include a healthy amount of primary sources, typically material from print books and original documents. You can supplement that support with secondary-source selections from popular magazines, online sites, and other less formally evaluated sources. Articles from peer-reviewed scholarly journals and sociological studies also provide immense corroboration for the main arguments of your critical essay. A properly framed house is held together by both screws *and* nails, and a first-rate carpenter knows precisely when to use each.

Which sources are the most compelling and provide the best support? Of most scholarly weight are primary sources, those that are most like jurisprudential “evidence”: original documents such as fiction, poetry, films, personal essays or memoirs, letters, legal documents, newspaper events, recorded conversations, speeches, or works of art. Next in credibility are secondary sources, those that are in some way dependent upon or comment upon a variety of primary sources: encyclopedia entries, magazine articles, art or film critiques, newspaper articles, critical essays, or peer-reviewed scholarly studies. (Sometimes the same source can function as a primary source in one essay and as a secondary source in another, depending on the context in which you use it. If you are ever in doubt, you can ask one of Evergreen’s reference librarians.) None of your textual “evidence” really offers

irrefutable *proof* of your thesis; what you'll have is more akin to an abundance of circumstantial evidence. But taken as a whole, the pieces of cited testimony you offer the reader will help you build a case that will favor your argument. And the better *your* sources are, and the more persuasively you can argue your interpretation of the evidence, the stronger your case will be.

Beware the pitfalls of hiring outside contractors to work on your house! Online citation engines such as *Son of Citation*, *KnightCite*, or *Citation Monkey* will claim that they will do your work for you, but be wary: they may throw most of the textual information into the right spaces, but these crutches for the weak academic cannot match the sharp eyes and heightened acumen of the careful research writer. Good craftspeople know their tools intimately and take pride in them. And good scholars, through repetition and due diligence, will commit to memory the basic templates for the most commonly used citations, and they'll use a basic set of five to ten citation types so often that they cannot help but absorb the correct formats through a sort of intellectual osmosis.

Thinking intently in a house with this many rooms can be stifling—let's step outside again for some fresh air.

Remember the reason that scholars carefully cite their sources: The academic community values the importance of acknowledging the art, studies, and experiences of those who came before them. Referencing the works of others is a way for the present scholar to engage with the past in order to create sound ideas for the future. In this way, the act of citation is at its heart a valuable and collaborative art. My best advice to you is this: When you're conducting research, transcribe with care. Honor those thinkers and writers who provide you with your source material. Pay close attention to its origins. Practice using their ideas and words as support for your original ideas. Cite respectfully with honesty and precision. Be all the scholar you can be.

Voila! How exciting! Your house now stands deftly built, its foundation strong and its walls exact. You're now ready to welcome readers into your home, invite them into your living room, and sit down with them and share your ideas.

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For further design ideas and humorous musings on citation, please see the following: Michael Radelich and Bridget Flanagan, "Why We Cite." *Inkwell*, Volume 3 (2008): pp. 71-83; and Bridget Flanagan, "What My Teacher Never Told Me About Citation." *Inkwell*, Volume 4 (2009): pp. 32-35.

WORKS CITED

David, Elizabeth. *French Country Cooking*. (1951): 94. Rpt. in *Elizabeth David Classics*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980. Print.