

They Say/I Say

A User's Guide

Nearly all of the work that Davidson students will be asked to do as writers across the College will involve them in making use of the work of others. The question student writers are typically faced with (posed in one way or another) is: “What have others said about X, and how do you respond?” *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* is built on a dual premise: 1) intellectual writers construct their texts as responses to the work of others, and 2) the implicit and explicit writerly moves that constitute those responses are learned behaviors, a necessary repertoire for academic writers.¹ The following terms and concepts from the book will help writers become more acutely aware of their responsibilities as readers and writers of academic prose.

writerly moves

Preface (xxi)

For Graff & Birkenstein, a writerly *move* is one among a variety of possible actions a writer creates in order to accomplish a specific rhetorical goal. Defining a term is a writerly move, as is providing a piece of evidence. When you differentiate one thing from another, you're making a writerly move. If you acknowledge an objection to your claim, you are making a move, and claim-making itself constitutes an important writerly move. When a writer composes a sentence or group of interrelated sentences that readers recognize as typical action in analysis or argument, Graff & Birkenstein will call this a move. The most important moves taught in the book include:

- summarizing what someone else says
- framing a quotation in your own words
- indicating the view that the writer is responding to
- making the shift from a source's view to the writer's own view
- offering evidence for that view
- entertaining and answering counterarguments
- explaining what's at stake

Often, these moves are offered as *templates*, which outline the essence of the move in skeletal fashion.

careful listening, critical reading

Introduction
(1-15)

Graff & Birkenstein embrace an ethic of deliberation: “the underlying structure of effective academic writing—and of responsible public discourse—resides not just in stating your own ideas but in listening closely to others around us, summarizing their views in a way that they will recognize, and responding with our own ideas in kind” (3). In order to use the work of others as a launching point for your own ideas, you must be able to read with both understanding and a measure of criticality.

Critical reading isn't the same as critiquing or criticizing another's position. Critical reading involves a more nuanced and sophisticated approach than full-on “criticism” typically implies. Often, your role is not to dismantle another's work, but rather to suggest what might powerfully be added to its conclusions, or to extend one of its points in a new direction, or to call into question an aspect of its analysis. Popular writing—especially some contemporary political discourses—may figure response as binary: either you agree or disagree with what's been said. But academic writing, though full of lively debates, depends upon more subtle forms of pressure applied to what's been said.

motivating context

Chapter 1
(19-29)

Graff & Birkenstein highlight the following moves writers typically make at the start of their essays, where the positions, views, and ideas of others provide the contrast to the position, view, or idea the writer will go on to offer:

¹ Graff, Gerald and Cathy Birkenstein. *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*. 2nd Ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2010.

Appendix 1 offers examples of these moves in the work of professional writers.

- **acknowledge a standard view:** *It is often said that _____. Many people assume that _____.*
- **articulate a view you no longer hold:** *In the past, I believed _____. While at times I accept _____, at other times, I call into question _____.*
- **point to something that the other implies or assumes:** *One implication of X's treatment of _____ is that _____. X apparently assumes that _____. X takes _____ for granted, with has several costs: _____, _____, and _____.*
- **map the territory of an ongoing debate:** *In discussions of X, one controversial issue has been _____. On the one hand, _____ argues _____. On the other hand, _____ contends _____. Others even maintain _____. My own view is _____.*
- **offer a proposition many agree with in order to highlight points where they will ultimately disagree:** *When it comes to the topic of _____, most of us will readily agree that _____. Where this agreement usually ends, however, is on the question of _____. Whereas some are convinced that _____, others maintain that _____.*

Typically offered in the early part of a paper, the motivating context sets the back story and background against which the writer's own position is understood. The motivating context either describes the gist of an intellectual debate which the writer joins by offering his/her new position, or reminds readers of a previous way of thinking or of understanding some phenomenon or issue that the writer will soon call into question.

Chapter 2 (30-41)

summarizing

Representing the gist of another's analysis or argument, with fairness and generosity, is a crucial writerly move. As Graff & Birkenstein remind us, the task of fair summary is made all the more difficult when you disagree with another's work, and may inadvertently collapse important distinctions, substitute a cultural cliché for a problematic claim, or misrepresent another's key points so as to avoid repeating them. Readers will judge your ability to persuade them of a new or different position based partly upon how judiciously you represent the ideas of the other. As Graff & Birkenstein point out, "you will need to tell your readers enough about his or her argument so they can assess its merits on their own, independent of you" (33). But with that said, they also remind us that even the fairest summaries carry traces of the writer's own interests. What you will represent as important in another's work is a function of what you find to be noteworthy. This is to say that even the most judicious of summaries is in the hands of the summarizer, who will inflect the summary with his/her own interests.

Appendix 2 offers strategies for summarizing.

Lists of verbs for summary are found on 39-40.

Summaries are marked by verbs that name the kind of intellectual work that writers do. When you are summarizing, think about how best to represent another writer's project. Is she comparing, or contrasting, or differentiating various things? Is she correcting a previous finding or asserting a new perspective? Is he extending what someone else said previously, or offering a new concept? Is she redefining a key term or providing new evidence for consideration? Is he describing some phenomenon or placing it in a new context of understanding?

Chapter 3 (41-51)

framing quotations

When writers include terms, phrases, and passages from the work of others in their own texts, they are allowing the other to "speak for herself," and to provide direct evidence of what has been said. Quotations provide evidence that anchors a writer's commentary about another's analysis or argument. But left without explanation, quotations taken from others' work can seem to intrude upon the writing at hand, and can interrupt the flow of the discourse. To avoid the appearance that quotation have been plopped into the paper indiscriminately, writers must stitch others' terms, phrases, and passages into the fabric of their discourse. Graff & Birkenstein recommend that writers *frame* quotations, providing lead-in and follow-up sentences that situate the quoted material within the present occasion of writing.

Lists of verbs for introducing and explaining quotations are found on 46- 47.

Quotations woven into the fabric of your discourse should be treated as *exhibits*. When a painting is exhibited in a gallery, we sense that it has a particular place within the total exhibition. We sense that it is being offered to viewers as a particular example within some larger set of interests about art. When an attorney offers an exhibit within a courtroom she describes its importance and relevance in service to her argument about the case. When you exhibit a quotation, you do so for a reason: What use do you wish to make of this quoted term, phrase, or passage? What do you want readers to notice about its content, phrasing, or style? What do you find interesting or problematic about the way in which the other writer says what he/she says?

Framing quotations has another advantage. If you simply insert a quotation into your text (what Graff & Birkenstein call the “hit-and-run” tactic), readers will automatically infer not only that you approve of the remark, but also that you take whatever this writer says as gospel, simply by virtue of its having been uttered or published. In his book *Rewriting: How to Make Use of Texts*, Writing Studies scholar Joseph Harris identifies four reasons that writers quote from others’ texts. These include:

- **Illustrating:** When you look to other texts for examples of a point you want to make.
- **Authorizing:** When you invoke the expertise or status of another writer to support your thinking.
- **Borrowing:** When you draw on terms or ideas from other writers to use in thinking through your subject.
- **Extending:** When you put your own spin on the terms or concepts that you take from other texts.²

Notice, again, the emphasis here on *making use of* the work of others to help you to accomplish your own agenda. When you make it clear exactly how turning to another’s work helps you carry out your goal, you go a long way to insuring that you are using the sources, and they are not using you.

Chapter 4
(55-67)

modes of response

Graff & Birkenstein indicate three chief ways to respond to the work of others: agreeing, disagreeing, and being of two minds (both agreeing and disagreeing simultaneously). Each position in relation to the work of others must, of course, be accompanied by reasons that clearly mark out what specifically you agree or disagree with (you can agree or disagree with another’s analysis or argument as a whole or in parts), and speak to why you find another’s work helpful, generative, honest, insightful, troubling, limiting, problematic, etc. Though we are accustomed to the responders of public disagreements being dichotomized as either adherents or detractors, intellectual arguments often generate something other than pro-con responses. Responses to academic writing are often skeptical about some parts of the argument, but not dismissive of it altogether. Because intellectual arguments tend to be complicated, with complex positions articulated within a number of claims and sub claims, respondents often choose to praise or call into question parts rather than the whole. A stance composed of agreements and disagreements requires a writer to differentiate carefully between what she concedes and what she wishes to contend with.

Appendix 3
details four
ways in
which
writers
typically
make use of
the work of
others: as
background,
exhibits,
arguments,
and
methods.

We should remember that modes of response vary tremendously, depending upon your intellectual and/or experiential orientation toward a subject and its associated issues. In addition to configuring your response as agreement, disagreement, or a combination of both, your responses to another’s work may take these forms:

adding to what’s been said

You find another writer’s concepts, claims, and arguments useful, and suggest that they can profitably be extended to help explain new cases, phenomena, or examples at hand.

strengthening

You think that the writer you’re responding to is generally on the right track, and you would like to strengthen what he/she has said by clarifying the reasoning that’s been offered so far, or by suggesting new evidence to reinforce the claim, or demonstrating the argument’s renewed relevance to a case at hand. Strengthening can also come with remarks about the aptness of another writer’s key term, or key distinction, or stipulated definition.

questioning a key term

You find that the argument has promise, but recommend that one of its key terms be changed. For instance, you might find that someone’s theory is sound, but would benefit from substituting the term “culture” for the writers’ use of the term “society.” Of course, calling some terms into question may tend to disable the argument under consideration, especially when the term you are questioning is integral to the central claim.

questioning relevance

You find that the argument was useful in its moment, but circumstances have now changed such that the analysis is no longer relevant, or has outlived its usefulness because of changes in the phenomenon which it seeks to understand.

² Harris, Joseph. *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts*. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2006: 39.

Appendix 4
offers
techniques
for
recognizing
contradict-
ions between
what “they
say” and
what “you
say.”

questioning assumptions

You find that the claims and evidence rest on assumptions that are no longer foundational or generally taken for granted.

questioning evidence

You locate aspects of the evidence being offered that the writer seems to have missed or ignored. Or, you find that the interpretation of the evidence seems skewed or incomplete in the hands of the other.

questioning claims and conclusions

You find the evidence interesting and nicely analyzed, but worry about the claims they support or the conclusions the evidence yields.

voice markers

Chapter 5
(68-77)

Linguistically related to *metacommentary* (see below), voice markers help a writer differentiate what others have said from what he/she has to say. Voice markers come in two forms: **up-front**, whereby the writer first names the person or group associated with the particular perspective or claim under consideration (*X contends that _____*. *Sociologists have maintained that _____*. *My view, however, is quite different: _____*.) and **embedded**, whereby the writer identifies who is saying what without interruption (*X overlooks what I consider an important point about _____*. *My view is that what X insists is a _____ is in fact a _____*. *I wholeheartedly endorse what X calls _____*.)

planting a naysayer

Chapter 6
(78-91)

By including counter-arguments, counter-claims, and counter-evidence in their texts, writers show that they are aware of positions, perspectives, and points not their own, and realize that important issues will nearly always catalyze principled disagreements. Disagreement should be welcomed as a regular feature of intellectual life rather than derided or pretended away. Graff & Birkenstein recommend that writers regularly anticipate naysayers, and include what objections have been made or might well be made to their analysis, interpretation, or argument. Perhaps you have been taught that writers have four ways to deal with objections and counter-arguments: ignore them (at one's own peril); acknowledge them (to show you are aware of the territory of a particular disagreement); concede them (agreeing that they do have value); or refute them (dismantling their force as best you can).

establishing significance

Chapter 7
(92-101)

Though your work may seem interesting to you because of its subject, it will seem significant to others to the degree that it challenges standard thinking on the subject, calls into some question authoritative scholarship on the issue, or reframes a debate to consider a new perspective altogether. In other words, what you say must impinge on what they say (in whole or in parts) in some substantive fashion. Graff & Birkenstein offer templates for energizing the significance of your findings, which you can do by detailing which previous analyses and arguments stand to be effected, or by describing the benefits of your point of view. The fact is that no matter how wonderful your position may seem, its significance—to other readers, researchers, and their analyses—must be made explicit. And, you are the best one to argue for its virtues and value.

transitions and coherence

Chapter 8
(105-120)

The term *discourse* comes from the Latin term *discurre*, which means to run forward. Reading is a sequential activity; as readers move from sentence to sentence to sentence, meaning accumulates as the connections between statements become apparent. Graff & Birkenstein remind us of transitional words and phrases that have the functions of addition, exemplification, elaboration, comparison, contrast, cause and effect, concession, and conclusion. They make the important point that transitions such as “but,” “yet,” “nevertheless,” “besides,” “for example,” “in fact,” and “therefore” have special functions in argumentative discourse.

metacommentary

Sometimes called *metadiscourse*, metacommentary tells an audience how to interpret what a writer has already said or what he/she is about to say. Metacommentary helps readers pay attention to important points, or gives them translations of something difficult, or explains something differently—all for the sake of enhancing the reader’s understanding: *To put this another way*_____. *What X really means is*_____. *Ultimately, I am interested in*_____. *This is not to say*_____, *but rather*_____. *Take as an example*_____. *Above all*_____. *To take a case in point*_____. *As an example,*_____. *In short,*_____.

Appendix 1

Example A

It has sometimes been suggested that the conjugal understanding of marriage is based only on religious beliefs. This is false. Although the world's major religious traditions have historically understood marriage as a union of man and woman that is by nature apt for procreation and childrearing, this suggests merely that no one religion invented marriage. Instead, the demands of our common human nature have shaped (however imperfectly) all of our religious traditions to recognize this natural institution. As such, marriage is the type of social practice whose basic contours can be discerned by our common human reason, whatever religious background. We argue for enshrining the conjugal view of marriage, using arguments that require no appeal to religious authority.

Girgis, Sherif et al. "What Is Marriage?"

Example B

In 1957, when the first Russian satellite orbited the Earth, the reaction in the United States was that science education had better be improved lest the Soviet Union get ahead technologically and therefore militarily and economically also. Similar sentiments have been vented over the years almost without interruption. In the summer of 1986, editorials and articles commented on a new survey in such terms as "America's Scientific Illiterates." "Americans' Disdain of Science" described how science and scientists are portrayed in the media. In 1989 we read about "The Dismal State of Scientific Literacy" and that the "Past Decade Shows No Gain in U.S. Science Literacy." Sigma Xi, the long-established national society to promote scientific research, offered among its lectures for 1990 one asking, "Can American Schools Produce Scientifically Literate High School Graduates?"

The level of scientific literacy is low, the pundits are all agreed; and, they are agreed, that is bound to have serious consequences for the whole society. To do something about this indubitable and critical problem, we could join in Project 2061, which aims to improve the scientific literacy of future generations; or we could respond to a plea for funds "to help stem the flow of irrationalism currently sweeping America. . . .The national level of scientific literacy is only 5%," we are told, and "36% of the population believe that astrology is 'sort of' or 'very' scientific. . . .Is the U.S. in danger of losing its technological and scientific leadership among the world community?" And why is it that "74% of teenagers believe in angels, and 50% believe in ESP"?

Now I agree that misconceptions about science are rampant. But they are rampant among scientists as well as humanists and social scientists, among science writers as well as the general public. They are rampant even among those who purport to measure or survey scientific literacy. There are things drastically wrong with almost everything that has been said about the supposedly critical state of scientific illiteracy. The definitions of scientific literacy are worse than inadequate; the measure of literacy discriminate against the most literate; and predictions of the consequences of scientific illiteracy are not supported by the evidence.

Henry H. Bauer. *Scientific Literacy and the Myth of the Scientific Method*

Example C

Why must the Moderns resort to complicated forms in order to believe in others' naïve beliefs, or in knowledge without belief among themselves? Why must they act as if others believe in fetishes, while they seemingly practice the most austere anti-fetishism? Why not just admit that there is no such thing as fetishism—and no anti-fetishism either—and recognize the strange efficacy of these "action displacers" with which our lives are intimately bound up? The reason is that Moderns are strong

attached to the conviction that there is an essential difference between facts and fetishes. The goal of belief is neither to explain the mental state of fetishists nor to account for the naiveté of anti-fetishists. Belief depends on something completely different: on the distinction between knowledge and illusion, or rather, as we shall see in the following sections, on the separation between practical life—which does not make this distinction—and theoretical life, which maintains it.

Bruno Latour. *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*.

Example D

As her student almost a half-century ago, I found Hannah Arendt's philosophy largely inspiring, yet even then it seemed to me not quite adequate to deal with the material things and concrete practices contained in Pandora's casket. The good teacher imparts a satisfying explanation; the great teacher—as Arendt was—unsettles, bequeaths disquiet, invites argument. Arendt's difficulty in dealing with Pandora seemed to me, dimly then and more clearly now, to lie in the distinction she draws between *Animal laborens* and *Homo faber*. These are two images of people at work; they are austere images of the human condition, since the philosopher excludes pleasure, play, and culture.

Animal laborens is, as the name implies, the human being akin to a beast of burden, a drudge condemned to routine. Arendt enriched this image by imagining him or her absorbed in a task that shuts out the world, a state well exemplified by Oppenheimer's feeling that the atomic bomb as a "sweet" problem, or Eichmann's obsession with making the gas chambers more efficient. In the act of making it work, nothing else matters; *Animal laborens* takes the work as an end in itself.

By contrast, *Homo faber* is her image of men and women doing another kind of work, making a life in common. Again Arendt enriched an inherited idea. The Latin tag *Homo faber* means simply "man as maker." The phrase crops up in Renaissance writings on philosophy and the arts; Henri Bergson had, two generations before Arendt, applied it to psychology; she applied it to politics, and in a special way, *Homo faber* is the judge of material labor and patience. Thus, in her view, we human beings live in two dimensions. In one we make things; in this condition we are amoral, absorbed in a task. We also harbor another, higher way of life in which we stop producing and start discussing and judging together. Whereas *Animal laborens* is fixated in the question "How?" *Homo faber* asks "Why?"

This division seems to me false because it slights the practical man or woman at work. The human animal who is *Animal laborens* is capable of thinking; the discussions the producer holds may be mentally with materials rather than with other people; people working together certainly talk to one another about what they are doing. For Arendt, the mind engages once labor is done. Another, more balanced view is that thinking and feeling are contained within the process of making.

The sharp edge of this perhaps self-evident observation lies in its address to Pandora's box. Leaving the public to "sort out the problem" after the work is done means confronting people with usually irreversible facts on the ground. Engagement must start earlier, requires a fuller, better understanding of the process by which people go about producing things, a more materialistic engagement that that found among thinkers of Arendt's stripe. To cope with Pandora requires a more vigorous cultural materialism

Richard Sennett. *The Craftsman*.

Example E

The word "equality" is an essential marker in the lexicon of American political discourse. By most contemporary accounts it ranks with "liberty" and "property" as one of a troika of terms constituting the discursive boundaries of legitimate political behavior in America's democratic republic. Most U.S. citizens premise the establishment of "equality" as a central component of the American credo on the "self-evident" claim expressed in the Declaration of Independence, that "all men are

created equal.” According to the narrative of American history that emanates from this premise, the newly constituted nation did not immediately live up to the ideal of its founding principle. Gradually, however, the courageous efforts of northern, white abolitionists motivated the nation to affirm its egalitarian ideals, first in the Emancipation Proclamation, and shortly thereafter in the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution. This affirmation required a protracted and costly civil war, but that, too, found a hallowed place in the story of American equality, framed as a trial by combat that resolved the issue once and for all under the sanctioning gaze of an approving and egalitarian Christian God. In the twentieth century the story evolved into a tale concerning how the nation’s initial commitment to equality led almost as if by necessity to the extension of political rights to a variety of minority groups, including most notably women and blacks. The moral of this rather traditional story is clear: America’s distinction is its egalitarian commitment to treat all of its people the same, “regardless of religion, race, sex, or previous condition of servitude.” And more, underlying this moral is the conventional belief that the meaning of equality was established as an ideal, self-evident principle at the time of the nation’s founding.

Celeste Michelle Condit and I take these orthodoxies to task in *Crafting Equality: America’s Anglo-African Word*, arguing that the traditional rhetorical narrative of American equality is neither the most inclusive nor necessarily the most compelling account of the facts of the case. In its place we offer an alternate narrative. In our story the word “equality” is not a self-evident political idea, its meaning established and set in stone at the moment of the nation’s assertion of independence. Rather, it is a symbolic, rhetorical foundation of America’s collective identity, its meaning expanding and retracting in political usage as a result of the efforts of public advocates seeking to manage the tension between the nation’s abstract political commitments and its material needs and socio-political practices.

John Louis Lucaites. “The Irony of ‘Equality’ in Black Abolitionist Discourse”

Example F

In the early 1990s, the ways in which Anglo-American feminists talked about sex changed. Building from the observations of Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, an array of scholarship emerged that problematized previously unquestioned conceptual and cultural understandings of sex as a simple description of difference between two distinct bodies. Historian Thomas Laqueur, for example, argued that the contemporary notion of two incommensurable, biological sexes is a relatively new cultural invention, demonstrating that the familiar two-sex understanding of sexual difference is a product of a *rhetorical* shift in post-Enlightenment identity politics, and not a product of more accurate *scientific* descriptions. A few years earlier, Anne Fausto-Sterling, a biologist, maintained the existence of five biological senses, thus positing the model of two exclusive sexes as more normative than “natural.” Judith Butler went even further, “troubling” the sex-gender/nature-nurture divide by arguing that both biological sex differences and gender are performative categories of identity.

While the scholarly revolution in sex/gender theory has had its most profound impact on contemporary rhetorical studies, it can also speak productively to our understanding of historical rhetorics and of feminism itself. Feminist rhetorical history has already benefited from theoretical gestures that question, not assume, binary notions of sex/gender difference. However, feminist rhetoricians have yet to reflect in any significant way on feminism as a *participant* in the production of “sex,” operating thus far as if feminist theory speaks primarily as an *observer* of such production. Such a reflection would supplement current work on feminist movement rhetorical history and its role in gender production and deepen our understanding of the ways in which sex is produced in response to varying immediate and enduring rhetorical contexts.

Kristan Poirot. “(Un)Making Sex, Making Race: Nineteenth-Century Liberalism, Difference, and the Rhetoric of Elizabeth Cady Stanton

Example G

E-literacy—that’s the new virtue, the intellectual feat of the rising generation. Alarmists and traditionalists interpret it as ignorance and a-literacy, but the e-literacy fans retort, they only thus display their antiquarianism. In a June 2007 op-ed in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* entitled “With Prodigious Leaps, Children Move to the Technological Forefront,” President Jonathan Fanton of the MacArthur Foundation claims that “today’s digital youth are in the process of creating a new kind of literacy, which extends beyond the traditions of reading and writing into an evolving community of expression and problem-solving that is changing not only their world, but ours, as well.” Young people shirk books, maybe so, but not because they’re lazy and stupid. The twenty-first century economy requires rapid communications, faster transfers of info, the reasoning goes, and ambitious teens don’t have time to deliberate over a volume of Robert Frost or learn five new words a day. E-literacy derives not from bibliophobia, then, but from the miraculous and evolving advent of digital technology, the Information Age and the Electronic Word. The more young adults master the practices of digital life, the better they succeed. With the *American Freshman Survey* reporting in 2005 that 71 percent of students attend college “to be able to make more money,” e-literacy makes a lot more sense than book learning.

But however much the apologists proclaim the digital revolution and hail teens and 20-year-olds for forging ahead, they haven’t explained a critical paradox. If the young have acquired so much digital proficiency, and if digital technology exercises their intellectual faculties so well, then why haven’t knowledge and skill levels increased accordingly? As we’ve seen, wealth, cultural access, and education levels have climbed, but not intellectual outcomes. If the Information Age solicits quicker and savvier literacies, why do so many new entrants into college and work end up in remediation? Why do one-third of students who go straight to college out of high school drop out after one year? If their digital talents bring the universe of knowledge into their bedrooms, why don’t they handle knowledge questions better? A 2004 study from the National Commission on Writing surveyed business leaders and found that a significant portion of them complain of serious reading and writing problems among new employees, forcing corporate America to spend approximately \$3.1 billion annually on in-house literacy training. The American Political Science Association declared in 1998 that “current levels of political knowledge, political engagement, and political enthusiasm are so low as to threaten the vitality and stability of democratic politics in the United States, and few people would argue that the maturation level of the wired generation, the “digital natives,” has improved the climate. Digital habits have mushroomed, but reading scores remain flat, and measure of scientific, cultural, and civic knowledge linger at abysmal levels. Why?

Mark Bauerlein. *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future.*

Appendix 2

The Art of Summary

Each writer summarizes somewhat differently

It may seem that summary is among the least individualistic things you could do with another's text. After all, most of us have been taught that each piece of writing contains a main idea and a number of supporting ideas which together compose the essence of an argument. But, while it is true that a number of different careful readers will likely describe the overall workings of a text in a similar way, it is unlikely that their summaries will be identical. That's because each of us reads with more or less different interests which control what we notice (and what we tend not to see).

In addition, there will likely be variations in the language we use to describe the workings of any given text. Some may say that a writer is "urgent" in his argument; another will say that she is "insistent;" yet another may find her "committed" to her ideas. Each offers a slightly different take on the same document. It's important to remember, then, that summaries are what we might call *interested* readings of others' work. Summarizers attempt to *fairly* describe another writer's aims, methods, and materials, but this cannot be done in some neutral fashion, free from the summarizer's particular interests in the text being condensed into summary.

Five Questions for Writing Summaries

Writers who wish to summarize the work of others can use these five questions to guide their work:

1. What is this writer's project?
2. How does this writer's project compare with previous work on the subject?
3. What are this writer's materials and methods?
4. Which key terms, phrases, or passages might I represent in my summary?
5. What are this work's boundaries or limits?

① What is this writer's project?

In a complex or lengthy document, you will rarely find a writer exploring a single thesis, arguing a single claim, or posing a single question. Scholarly analyses and arguments often examine a set of related issues, pose a cluster of interrelated questions, or offer a central claim composed of several points. It is common for a scholarly writer to think through a complicated set of ideas or problems. As one Writing Studies scholar puts this: "Their books and essays offer not sharply defined positions so much as ways of talking about a subject. The questions we ask of such writing tend to draw on metaphors of movement and growth: What issues drive this essay? What lines of inquiry does it develop? To try to reduce this kind of open-ended text to a single main idea would almost certainly be to shortchange it."³ We can define another writer's project by asking: *What is the writer trying to do in this text?*

Scholarly documents accomplish various kinds of intellectual work. They differentiate, satisfy new curiosities, define ambiguous or contested terms, correct misconceptions, find exemptions that trouble previous explanations, bring forward previously-ignored cases for consideration, etc. As a summarizer, your role is to represent the essential intellectual activities that another

³ Joseph Harris. *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2006): 31.

writer engages in, to describe the gist of his or her efforts as a writer. Notice how summarizing takes place in these template sentences:

X begins with _____ and proceeds to consider _____ and _____.

The core issues that occupy X are _____ and _____.

X offers several complementary lines of inquiry, namely: _____ and _____.

I see X's overall project as _____.

② **How does the writer's project compare with previous work on the subject?**

Summarizers can also place another's work within a tradition of inquiry, or locate its project as comparable (or in contradistinction to) previous analyses, arguments, or reports. Even if you are not an expert in the subject being written about, you may be able to pick up clues from the work, since many writers explicitly locate their present argument within the context of previous arguments or otherwise differentiate their projects from previous work. At other times, it may be clear that the writer is breaking new ground, or taking on new questions. By locating the work within a larger context of investigations, you signal to your reader that you understand something about the subject and are interested in acknowledging various approaches. Notice how contextualizing operates in these template sentences:

Previous work on the subject has typically explored _____, but X takes up a different challenge: _____.

X distinguishes his project from early investigations, which generally have approached the subject as _____.

X's work fits within the tradition of _____ because it _____.

③ **What are this writer's methods and materials?**

You can demonstrate fair and generous summary of another's work by describing the materials from which a writer assembles his/her analysis or argument. You might detail the nature of the writer's research materials: Does he or she depend on surveys, statistics, archival documents, experiments, first-hand observations, personal encounters, ethnographies, etc.? You can also describe a writer's methods: Are they scientific, historiographic, or speculative? Does the writer deploy an identifiable form of analysis or interpretation? What sorts of connections does the writer make between her examples and her conclusions? What critical stance does the writer use in making sense of his evidence?

X makes use of _____ form of analysis in order to understand _____.

Judging from _____, X's method can best be described as _____.

④ **Which key terms, phrases, or passages might I represent in my summary?**

Though summarizers typically do not quote passages frequently or at great length, at times it is quite useful to represent the heart of an analysis or the gist of an argument by quoting a passage that makes use of a key term, key distinction or key idea. These template sentences each get at this tactic:

If there is a single term that is indispensable to X's investigation, it is "_____."

A cluster of related terms are offered throughout: "_____" and "_____" and "_____."

A constituent question is posed throughout: "_____."

At one point, X characterizes his/her overall project as "_____."

⑤ **What are the document's boundaries or limits?**

No document can accomplish everything. One way to recognize what another writer's work accomplishes is to recognize its limits, not so much as a way to take issue with its points or structure, but rather as a way to delineate its scope. Without boundaries, any project would

seem ill-conceived or amorphous. As a summarizer, you can describe what a work emphasizes or downplays, or what it focuses upon or decides not to attend to.

Rather than focus on _____, X is more interested in highlighting _____.

Readers shouldn't expect _____; instead, X treats _____ in depth, focusing on _____.

By focusing on _____ rather than _____, X is able carefully to investigate _____.

Appendix 3

BEAM: Making Effective Use of Research Materials

Quality Over Quantity

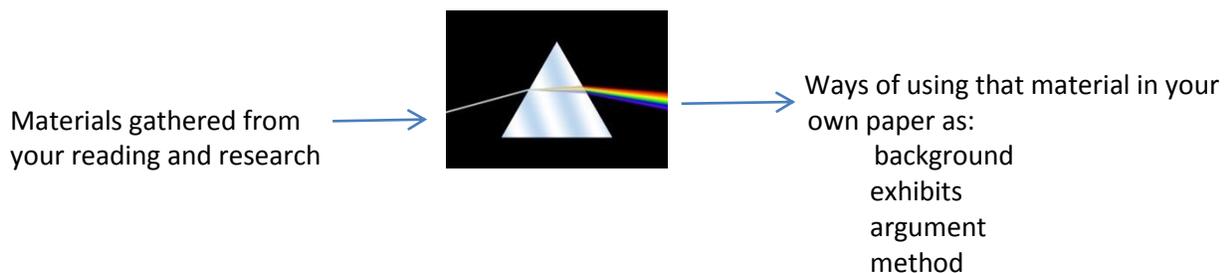
Effective research writing results from the quality rather than the mere quantity of the materials one discovers. The key factor isn't how many sources you have examined or how many notes you've developed from them, but rather how you make use of those materials in the context of your own writing. Readers will judge your research to be successful when they understand the particular way in which you *make use of* documents and sources to serve your own intellectual agenda: to help you respond to a question, or to help you to elucidate an interpretation you're interested in representing, or to provide evidence for a specific claim you make. If it appears that you are merely stitching together passages from your sources without demonstrating their relevance to a larger purpose, your paper will be judged poorly—as a mere report of information rather than as an argument or analysis that you control.

Making Use of Others' Work

Though your reading and research has no doubt seemed purpose-driven, guided by an important question or set of questions about your subject, and you have made note of passages from the sources and documents that interest you, when you begin to draft your paper, you will need to review your notes with a more critical and creative eye. You're about to build something from two kinds of materials: your own words and the work of others. Certain passages from others' texts will be awarded special status in your essay, while others will play a more secondary role, and still others will remain unused. It's not a good idea to force material from your notes into your writing simply to demonstrate that you've done a lot of research. Your professor will likely see this as padding, or as an example of a loss of writerly control on your part. Each and every term, phrase, passage, statistic, or image from another's work that you bring forward in your own essay should be evaluated according to its use within the context of your own project, which by nature is different from the project of the original writer from whom you are quoting.

Sources Refracted Through a Prism of Uses

Think of a prism refracting light from a source. Imagine that this prism is a special lens you have fashioned, a lens constructed of your own particular interests, motives, and intellectual agenda. The material you have recorded from your reading and library research must pass through this prism of interests before it gets represented in your own writing.



Many researchers find it useful to classify the materials they have gathered from their research as one of four kinds of source materials, classified according to how they will be used in the paper being

written. Writers should ask themselves: Does X source provide *background*, an *exhibit*, an *argument*, or a *method* of inquiry? In other words, will I use this material to contextualize information, or to exemplify some point, or to represent another's position on a contestable issue, or to indicate this writer's mode of analysis?

Background

These are materials that the writer accepts as fact, whether these facts are taken as general information or deployed as evidence to support the writer's own assertions. Writers regard these materials as authoritative and expect their readers to do the same. Writers will use this information to fill in the "backstory" of an issue or question or other subject being explored.

Exhibit

These are materials the writer offers for explication, analysis, or interpretation. The simple sort of exhibit is the example—a concrete instance offered to illustrate some more general claim or assertion. Richer examples require greater preparation by a writer as he/she analyzes or interprets them. Think of the way in which works of art are *exhibited* in a museum. They are carefully placed in a particular place and accompanied by contextualizing information, often in the form of a wall text. Or, think of the way in which a lawyer brings forward evidence in a trial. Such evidence becomes an *exhibit* when it is used to support a particular defense or a certain perspective the lawyer is arguing for. The evidence is admitted into evidence when it is deemed by the judge to be relevant to the case at hand. The passages you bring forward from texts you've read, or the statistics you wish to make use of in support of a claim, or any other examples you wish to circulate into your own text acquire exhibit status only when you demonstrate their relevance.

Argument

These are materials whose claims a writer affirms, disputes, refines, or extends in some way. Argument sources are those which mark out positions within a controversy, and typically include claims or assertions over which reasonable persons may choose to disagree. Argument sources represent the range of positions and counter positions that have been offered in response to some issue.

Method

These are materials from which a writer derives a governing concept or a manner of working. A method source can offer a set of key intellectual moves, lay out a particular procedure, or furnish a model. A writer may either adopt or adapt a method source's approach to analyze a new phenomenon or to address a new case or problem at hand. Writers are free to make use of another's method in part or in whole. At times, when writers apply another's method to the case at hand, they discover its previously unapparent limits. Another writer's analytic method may be useful for some things, but not others.

Appendix 4

Countering What's Been Said Before

Often, academics write in order to call into question or to disagree with previous claims, findings, and interpretations. Though there are times when you will be asked to simply report on what has been previously said, you will have many opportunities in college writing to “push back,” to frame an issue differently, to say something that stands in contrast to what’s been said before. In their handbook on academic research practices, *The Craft of Research*, Wayne Booth, Gregory Colomb, and Joseph Williams offer what they call a “taxonomy of contradictions” that describe various kinds of problems (and points of disagreement) writers typically identify in the work of others. As they explain it, the more substantive the disagreement, the more significant your response (and the more difficult your task in countering or refuting a claim). The following kinds of contradictions emerge when you find that what you have to say differs from what “they” have already said.

substantive contradictions

If you can show that a previous researcher has gotten something wrong, you can easily signal the significance of your argument. The more authoritative the mistake, the greater the significance of your correction. Three cases are most common:

- You find an error in a fact or computation.
- You have new facts that either qualify old facts or replace them.
- You find a mistake in reasoning and from the same facts come to a different conclusion.

feature contradictions

Other kinds of contradictions focus on more specific aspects of another’s analysis or argument.

category contradictions

It has often been claimed that certain religious groups are “cults” because of how they differ from mainstream churches, but if we look at those organizations from a historical perspective, it is not clear when a so-called “cult” become as “sect” or even a “religion.”

In this pattern, you claim that your argument contradicts the *categories* that others accept. Generally, you promise to show either that while others place something in a category, they should not, or that while others do not place something in a category, they should.

- *Though X seems to be an example of Y, it is not.*
- *Though X seems to include Y as an example, it does not.*
- *Though X and Y seem to be similar, they are different.*
- *Though X seems to be characteristic of Y, it is not.*

part-whole contradictions

In recent years, some have argued that athletics is only entertainment and therefore should have no place in higher education, but in fact it can be shown that without athletics, education would suffer.

This pattern is like the category contradiction, except you show that others have mistaken the relationship among the parts of something:

- *Though X seems to be an integral part of Y, it is not.*
- *Though X seems to have Y as an integral part, it does not.*

- *Though the parts of Y seem to be systematic, they are not.*
- *Though X seems to be general, it is only local.*

internal development contradictions

Recently, the media have been headlining rising crime, but in fact the overall crime rate has been falling for the last few years.

In this pattern, you claim that others have mistaken the origin, development, or history of your object of study.

- *Though X seems to be stable/rising/falling, it is not.*
- *Though X may seem to have originated in Y, it didn't.*
- *Though both X and Y may seem to have come from Z, X didn't.*
- *Though the sequence of development of X seems to be 1,2, and 3, it is not.*

external cause-effect contradictions

A new way to stop juveniles from becoming criminals is the "boot camp" concept. But evidence suggests that it does little good.

In this pattern, you claim that others have either failed to see causal relationships or seen them where they do not exist.

- *Though X seems not to be causally related to Y, it is.*
- *Though X seems to cause Y, both X and Y are caused by Z.*
- *Though X and Y seem to correlate, they do not.*
- *Though X seems to be sufficient to cause Y, it is not.*
- *Though X seems to cause Y, it also causes A, B, and C.*

value contradictions

In this pattern, you simply contradict received value judgments.

- *Though X seems to be good, it is not.*
- *Though X seems to be useful for Y, it is not.*

perspectival contradictions

Some contradictions run deeper. In the standard pattern of contradicting features, you reverse a widely-held supposition, but you do not change the terms of the discussion. In perspectival contradictions, you step outside of the parameters of the standard discussion to suggest that we must look at things in an entirely new way.

It has generally been assumed that advertising is best understood as a purely economic function, but in fact it has served as a laboratory for new art forms and styles.

- *We have generally discussed X in Y context, but there is a new context of understanding that at we should consider.*
- *We have generally seen X as explained by theory Y, but there is a new theory or a theory from another field that can be usefully applied to Y.*