

claiming agency

Are you using the source, or is the source using you?

Nearly all academic writers struggle at one time or another with the complexities of *influence*. Since most academic writing makes use of and responds to the work of others, the question of how to represent the influence of other thinkers on your own analysis or argument, to differentiate between what “they say” and what “you say,” to make room for your own agency as a thinker and not to appear as an obedient disciple of a theorist or other published writer is tricky.

It is likely that in most papers you write (especially in the humanities and social sciences) you will be asked at one time or another to apply a published theory to some case or context not accounted for in the original theorist’s work. You may find the source theorist’s concepts and analytic principles to have explanatory power when applied to the new context or case under scrutiny. In fact, you may be tempted to say to yourself: “I have found the missing key that unlocks all mysteries, the holy grail of understanding that simplifies my own role here. Let me now walk in the master’s shoes.”

But to do so jeopardizes your intellectual agency, your power to put the source to *your* use, to set the terms and boundaries of your reliance on that source. In your own writing, try to avoid an *absolutist* use of the source: “Griffin say X.” Period. The implication being that whatever Griffin has uttered is correct, absolutely authoritative, and right on. The least you can do is to differentiate between what Griffin was looking at when she made her assertion, and the case now at hand.

Consider this example, where the writer makes use of Griffin’s theory, but sets the conditions of its new application:

“Griffin finds ideological shaping to be automatic. Her insight comes from her observation of children’s lives, where educational development can be fairly easily discerned. If, however, we are observing adults as we are doing in the case at hand, Griffin’s general theory may apply, but we should account for certain variables across the adult lifespan that will modify Griffin’s claim.”

Notice that the writer doesn’t discredit Griffin, but rather wonders if her theory will hold across all contexts of application. Griffin retains her importance as an influential researcher, but new analysts may add to or build upon her work, as this writer will do in the remainder of her paper.

There are times, of course, when the assignment delimits your critical agency. You may be asked to compose a Marxist analysis or a Freudian interpretation of some object of study. At times, in order to learn a scholarly approach from the inside out, we walk in its author’s shoes, talk and behave as we expect he or she would. But even in those strict applications we’re aren’t mere ventriloquists. We decide what they will speak to and, not being them, approximate what we expect they would be thinking and saying.

Compare the following passages:

the source uses you

I recall my brother and I carefully winding red, white, and blue crepe paper in and out of the spokes of our small bikes, deciding exactly how the pattern would finally appear, occasionally standing back to admire our handiwork. We wanted our bikes to stand out in the neighborhood's Fourth of July parade as its band of children made its way around suburban streets. I had observed my mother earlier in the day making similarly delicate decisions about arranging the red, white, and blue carnations in the Uncle Sam vase on the picnic table. Griffin tells us: "[m]y first understandings came almost through osmosis, through what I saw around me, in the ways things were done, the way people spoke to one another, laughed, smiled, and dressed" (2). Like Griffin, I watched how traditions were carried out, eager to replicate the Fourth of July techniques that my elders simply knew. I suspect that many children are observant in this way.

you use the source

I recall my brother and I carefully winding red, white, and blue crepe paper in and out of the spokes of our small bikes, deciding exactly how the pattern would finally appear, occasionally standing back to admire our handiwork. We wanted our bikes to stand out in the neighborhood's Fourth of July parade as its band of children made its way around suburban streets. I had observed my mother earlier in the day making similarly delicate decisions about arranging the red, white, and blue carnations in the Uncle Sam vase on the picnic table. Griffin tells us: "[m]y first understandings came almost through osmosis, through what I saw around me, in the ways things were done, the way people spoke to one another, laughed, smiled, and dressed" (2). Although I honor her understanding of ideology as the sea of values in which we swim daily, almost unaware that we are suspended in its waters, my own experience subsuming social values can't be described as "osmotic." Instead, I was hyperaware of the special preparations made for patriotic holidays. In fact, as I look back now, I find that this was a quite common disposition for me. I didn't so much absorb the everyday as I imitated the special. Like Griffin, I was observant of the ideologically-laden world, but I was especially attracted to rituals where these values became apparent, obvious, and, in a sense, worshipped.

Review the following draft of an essay where the writer draws upon the work of two source writers: Susan Griffin and Robert Coles. What revisions might the writer make to his essay in order to represent his own agency someone who *makes use* of these sources to serve his own interests?

Democracy in Youth

① Gazing into the mirror and seeing the reflection staring back is a reminder of each lesson learned over the course of eighteen years. The early stages of one's life are critical in multiple capacities. Developing a sense of morality, curiosity and democracy are among the fundamental ideals carved in childhood and extended into adulthood. As demonstrated through Susan Griffin's essay *Liberty*, hardships endured in childhood can form a strong appreciation for democracy in one's future. This same concept of childhood and its influence on one's idea of democracy is affirmed in Robert Coles' piece *The Homeland*. While Griffin and Coles take different approaches in understanding the impact of parental influence on one's democratic ideals, they both realize the magnitude of values established by parents. Such a time is where "one gets one's bearings; where one takes in a part of the world, keeps another part at a distance, and learns how to use one's given attributes with some sense of achievement and satisfaction" (Coles 8). The homeland is a place of adaptation and growth where strong influence is placed on a child to be modeled in a certain way.

② I can relate to the above sentiments in the way I was brought up. Coming from a republican, semi-religious Catholic family, following a strict set of rules is imperative to everyday life. Diverging from such rules is frowned upon and leads to both discipline and disappointment. Griffin's family dynamic placed great power with her "maternal grandmother, who was the matriarch of our family, and my grandfather, who invariably deferred to her choices" (Griffin 23). Much like Griffin's family, my mother's parents, who we refer to as Poppy and Grammy, are the matriarch and patriarch who dictate the rules their children must follow. Subsequently, my mother became equivalent to Griffin's grandfather as she follows these rules and imposes these guidelines

on her children. Females in the family are not allowed to wear two-piece bathing suits until high school as to promote body conservation and respectability at a young age. Ear piercings are not allowed until the eighth grade as my Poppy believes this is the age children understand their bodies and what such manipulations mean. Just as Griffin experienced this type of parenting style with her grandmother, she came away with a “critical perspective regarding my grandmother’s regime” (34). Although Griffin valued the democratic home structure of her parents, she appreciated the stability her grandmother’s approach provided her. Similarly, I am able to appreciate the guidance provided by my family as I have an appreciation for my self-worth and the value of my body.

③ Just as Griffin provided multiple links between her childhood memories and her ideals of democracy, Coles studies this phenomenon among children by asking them questions regarding nationality. In the early stages of one’s life “we acquire a nationality, a membership in a community” (Coles 5). In middle school, I found my passion for running by joining the cross-country team in the fifth grade. I was most excited when I could lace up my shoes and run miles in the hot sun after school. I became so infatuated with this feeling that I asked my middle school teacher for more training opportunities. Excited to help me pursue this passion, he invited me to train with the high school team after school. During my eighth-grade year, I started training at the high school level and by the time I became a freshman, I was already adapted to the team and their training regimen. For four years, I labored tirelessly beside them celebrating in our victories and mourning in our losses. They became my family and I felt an extreme sense of loyalty to each person. From this experience, my ideas of democracy were carved in ways I could not have foreseen. I learned the talent each person on the team had to give and the importance of valuing each member. In doing so, the collective whole became better. Similarly, in a democracy, each person has a vital role to play whether they are a governor, politician, or teacher. Each has

something important to provide which leads me to believe the government should treat each individual as important as the next.

④ Coming from a divorced family, I grew up in a less traditional setting. My parents separated when I was seven years old leaving my brother and I in joint custody between the two households. Each household varied greatly in the way it functioned. My father's approach to parenting is much like Griffin's own father in teaching her the "necessary precursor for independent thought" (Griffin 20). I learned the importance of having my own ideas and developing a pattern of thought separate from that of my parents. My father rarely uses the words no and if he does, it is always followed with an explanation. My mother takes the exact opposite approach in her parenting style. While her method is not oppressive, it does invoke more tradition and discipline. While I feel appreciative for the lessons I experienced in youth, this sometimes accelerated the pace at which I grew up. Often times I played the role of mediator attempting to balance the needs and wants of both parties. When communication fell short between the two, I was the go-to messenger. This role of peacekeeper created my strongest sense of democracy. As Griffin learned from an early age, "If I have the right to want something you do not want, you too must have the right to want what I do not want" (Griffin 20). When emotions such as anger and distrust come into a relationship, people tend to only care about their own needs disregarding those of the other individual. I learned from a young age the detriment such emotions can cause to those affected by the choices of two quarreling individuals. Putting aside emotion and realizing the needs of both people is imperative to preserving democracy. The ability to accept people's differences and still find common ground is where most problems occur within a democracy. This concept is something I believe to be evident from the nature of my upbringing.

⑤ Childhood is filled with beautiful laughter and smiles. These memories are brought into adulthood happily but often accompanied by difficult experiences. The challenging aspect of

growing up seems to carve one's core values about democracy more so than the blissful ones. Just as Griffin suffered hardships in her own family dynamic, she came out "infinitely stronger" (Griffin 34). I am grateful for every moment of my childhood and for the person those experiences created. I am a strong, self sufficient individual who appreciates all opportunities life has to give. Even more importantly, I value democracy and realize the important role I have to play in changing it; a role I am excited to continue developing.