

# Incorporating sources in academic writing

## Combining your ideas with those of other writers

Most university writing tasks require you to draw on a range of academic sources to support your claims, arguments and ideas. The balance between your thoughts and words expressed in **your voice** and those of **other authors** is important to get right. Many students find this process of incorporating other sources or 'voices' into their writing difficult. This flyer provides guidance and strategies to better manage this process.

### Balance between 'voices'

The question of how much of your voice you need to include in a written assignment depends on a number of factors such as your level of study (i.e. Undergraduate or Graduate), the subject or topic you are writing about and the type of writing you are expected to produce (i.e. essay, report, review etc.). A general guideline is that your voice should be the predominant one in your writing, i.e. more than fifty percent of your work should be your thoughts and ideas about the topic you are writing about or probably a little more if you are a Graduate student.

#### *Your own voice should be the predominant one in your writing*

When writing an argument-based essay, your voice should probably be strongest in the introduction and conclusion, but note that it needs to be present in all sections of your work. As a general rule, other voices may predominate in the body of your work (to provide evidence to support your ideas), but your voice must also be there at the same time to manage them.

### Choosing how you will use ideas from a source

There are two main ways you can incorporate another author's ideas or information into your work; through **direct quotation** (transferring exact words) and **indirect reporting** (such as paraphrases and summaries):

Example:

**DIRECT QUOTATION:** *In discussing the importance of teaching study skills, Jordan (1997, p8) states that "study skills are not something acquired instinctively."*

**PARAPHRASE:** *As students do not obtain study skills automatically, it is very important to teach them these skills (Jordan, 1997).*

**SUMMARY:** *It is important to teach study skills to students (Jordan, 1997).*

Note that the words taken directly from Jordan's text are enclosed in quotation marks ("..."). This is essential whenever an author's exact words are used. Even when the words are altered – for example, in a paraphrase or summary – the original source must be acknowledged.

Try to be flexible about how you take information from other sources. Some students tend to spend too much time and effort paraphrasing material into their work when a quick and direct summary could be more effective.

### Structuring work that includes a mixture of voices

It is wise to plan for a structure that includes both your voice and the voices of 'experts' in the same paragraph. A 'sandwich-style' structure is common practice in academic writing as it incorporates your voice strongly at the beginning and end of the paragraph and 'other voices' in the middle to provide support and evidence for your views.

Example:

**Traditional handwritten letters provide eyewitness accounts of historical events. In more contemporary times, however, email communication has largely taken over this function from letter writing.** *Chang (as cited in Smith, 2012, p1) notes that people born in the 1990s onwards "tend to favour Skype and Messenger and are adept at expressing themselves in phrases of 70 characters or less on Twitter." It could therefore be argued that email has been merely a transition medium from letters to web-based and other more immediate forms of communication (Smith, 2012).*

**KEY:** *Writer's voice introducing & analysing topic also using the ideas of Smith; Other voice (Chang) providing evidence / supporting detail*

## Academic Skills

## Keeping your voice strong in longer texts

In longer texts, for example essays over 2000 words, it is easy to lose your voice amongst all the other voices you have gathered together to provide support for your ideas. Some suggestions for maintaining a strong and authoritative voice in longer assignments include:

- Keep your voice in the first position of every paragraph. Don't give away this 'prime spot' even if the rest of the paragraph is dominated by another writer.
- Include transition paragraphs written entirely in your voice where you remind the reader of your thesis statement and preview the next section.
- Avoid the 'catalogue' approach where you provide a list of what other people think about your topic. It is better to quickly summarise their views and then go on to what YOU think about it.

## The key role of reporting verbs

When introducing other voices into your text, you should choose a **precise** reporting verb to highlight what particular contribution an author or theorist has made to the topic under discussion. Effective use of reporting verbs can strengthen your argument and give the reader an idea of your attitude to the material you are presenting.

Some reporting verbs are neutral. These verbs mean 'say' but do not provide any additional evaluative 'flavour' and should be kept a minimum in most academic writing.

- *Describes, states, explains, adds, remarks etc.*

Example:

Chang **states** that other forms of electronic communication and not email are the natural successors to letter-writing.

Here, Chang simply provides an opinion, i.e. there is no interpretation of that statement.

Some reporting verbs mean 'say' but add some **interpretation** or **evaluation** through the choice of verb

- *Argues, disputes, concedes, speculates etc.*

Example:

Chang **disputes** the idea that email is the natural successor to letter-writing.

Here, through the writer's use of the specific verb 'disputes', we feel the strength of Chang's view.

## HOT TIP: Avoid weak reporting verbs / phrases

Avoid verbs which don't add anything significant to your discussion such as 'say' and 'mention'. The phrase 'according to' is also generally overused by students and can lead to a more descriptive writing style. During editing, highlight all the reporting verbs / phrases you have used in your writing and change the ones that are weak and / or repetitive.

## Reporting words to make writing more evaluative and precise

There are more than 300 reporting verbs in English. This means that there are always several choices when reporting the ideas of others in your writing. Try to increase and refine your academic vocabulary using these alternative words:

VERB	ALTERNATIVES
show	demonstrate, establish
persuade	assure, convince, satisfy
argue	reason, discuss, debate, consider
propose	advance, propound, suggest
advise	suggest, recommend, advocate, exhort, encourage, urge
believe	hold, profess (the view that ...)
emphasise	accentuate, stress, underscore
support	uphold, advocate
state	express, comment, remark, declare, articulate, describe, instruct, inform, report
examine	analyse, discuss, explore, investigate, scrutinise
evaluate	appraise, assess
hypothesise	speculate, postulate
claim	allege, assert, affirm, contend, maintain
disagree	dispute, refute, contradict, object, dissent
reject	refute, repudiate, remonstrate (against), discard, dismiss, disclaim

## Works cited

'Smith, K. (2012) 'Communication: past, present and forever' *University of Melbourne Voice*, 8(3), 1.

## Further resources

*Voice in Academic Writing* (2011). Academic Skills, The University of Melbourne.