**WHY We Use Research Source Material and WHY We Provide Documentation**

**Why Cite?**

* When you cite a research source, you show how your voice enters into an intellectual conversation and you demonstrate your link to the community within which you work. Working with sources can inspire your own ideas and enrich them, and your citation of these sources is the visible trace of that recognition.

**Why Do We Use Research Source Material?**

* ***To Become a More Mature Thinker:*** When writing an essay, it can sometimes feel as if you’re including quotations merely to back up your argument or to fulfill a requirement to use a certain number of research sources. Each of these motives can lead you to drop sources into a pre-established argument, with little authentic interplay between the sources’ ideas and your own. Although it may sometimes feel like an exercise to document and cite, using sources in your writing is not an end in itself, not a skill to learn in isolation. Instead, most instructors ask you to use research material because they know that your own thinking will be enhanced when you consult the ideas of previous writers on a topic. Seen from this perspective, research sources can help you develop and strengthen your ideas as early as the brainstorming and drafting stages. Think of yourself as having a conversation with your research sources; when you move back and forth between your own thinking and what your research sources have to say, you push your ideas further than you would by going it alone. The resulting essay should give your audience the sense that you are joining an ongoing conversation, that you respect other thinkers, and that you are adding something new to the conversation.

If there’s one fundamental misunderstanding that many student writers have about acknowledging sources, it is that doing so lessens the impact of the writer’s own contributions. In nearly every case, the effect is actually the opposite: it is when you clearly credit source material that your own thinking becomes most visible. Academic scholarship, at its core, is about the interplay of ideas. The best research is not, in this sense, wholly original, but rather it develops from previous discoveries. In assessing his accomplishments, Isaac Newton once wrote to a friend: “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants” (Newton, in fact, was incorporating an idea voiced by Bernard of Chartres in the 12th century). Incorporating other people’s ideas into your writing allows you to ‘stand on their shoulders’ as you explore your topic.

* ***To Recreate a Sense of Lively Debate and to Establish Intellectual Context:*** You may be used to relying on sources primarily for information, but essays that engage with claims or ideas about a subject—as well as introducing relevant information—allows you to join the conversation on the liveliest terms. When you do incorporate sources, it can be tempting to use only quotations that support your own ideas. While it can be helpful to refer to writers with whom you agree, sometimes the most effective sources are those from which you differ. Introducing claims and concepts from sources and acknowledging thoughtful dissent puts your ideas in a dynamic and contested framework. By showing that knowledge is dynamic, you reveal that there is something worth debating or analyzing further.

Your source material also conveys information about the intellectual context of your research. Although the content of a quotation is what is most important, the very sources of the ideas or information you use will help an educated reader understand the implications of your argument. When you establish this context for your ideas, you create a space in which your reader can think in a new way about an established or pre-existing problem or question.

* ***To Give Credit Where Credit is Due:*** Most students are familiar with this reason for citing source material: just as you want credit for your writing and ideas, other writers deserve credit for their work. For one thing, recognition is often the only or the primary reward for scholarship. However, more importantly, giving credit allows you to claim your own contributions. The very project of a university education consists of joining an ongoing conversation about ideas that began in Antiquity. You cannot participate in this exchange if you are not clear about how other voices have influenced your own. It takes most people many years to develop a rich and complex voice in conversation with research sources. However, you can begin to develop this voice by always marking the boundaries between the research source and your reflections on it.
* ***To Lead Us to Further Research:*** Academics conceive of scholarship as an ongoing and collaborative enterprise. Rather than try to invent a field from scratch, we read what others have discovered and try to build on or extend it in our own work. One scholar’s sources can therefore be an invaluable contribution to another’s research. So, while an audience reads your work looking for your original ideas, they also want help knowing how to pursue related questions. In this way, acknowledging your sources greatly enhances the value of your writing, as it shows readers where they might look to test, explore, and extend your conclusions.