

Academic Paper Writing Guidelines Weaving Info from More than One Source

Too often when we read student papers and thesis drafts, we note that they have located a source, opened it to a page, and typed everything in from that page. It may even be duly cited (Author, Year, p. x), but excessive amounts of text are entered from one source for one or two or three pages, and then the students obviously opened another source (also cited, as Author, Year, p. y) and the next page or two comes from that source.

Though this may be a necessary first step of locating information and gathering it, it does not constitute academic writing. The paper or thesis writer's views cannot be found, but only a collection of extensive quotations from other sources. The general convention is that varied sources can be used, but in-text citations should not exceed 40 words. Therefore the task is to identify from all those wonderful source paragraphs, which 25 words or so best sums up that original author's view. That can be quoted, saying that author X argued/summed up/pointed out this position, and stating "His idea and wonderfully selected summary statement..." (Author X, Year, p. x). But then you should immediately weave in another author's agreement, like "scholar Y also agrees, noting "You should like my idea on this too because it is very theoretical" (Author Y, Year, p. x). However, many other authors may have a different view (e.g., A, Year; B, Year, C, Year), among them Author D, who argues, "the only way to make sense of my work is to read every work" (Author D, Year, p. x). This also belongs in your overview. You may find it helpful to devise a visual map of the research literature. Various forms of this are suggested by Creswell (*Research Design*, Part I.2): "One could be a hierarchical structure, with a top-down presentation of the literature, ending at the bottom with the proposed study. Another might be similar to a flowchart in which the reader understands the literature as unfolding from left to right with the farthest right-hand section advancing a proposed study. A third model might be a series of circles, with each circle representing a body of literature."

The point is, you need to weave in sources from various places, adding your own logic and organizing the content with those of similar views, then treating those with different views and approaches. MA or PhD theses are not just listings of nice ideas copied in from one author after another or one book or article after another. They must show originality in comparing and contrasting various scholars, selectively using the most relevant content of each source, some of which may be summarized, paraphrased, condensed, and then just a brief section that may be quoted. If a source has an absolutely fantastic quotation that is a paragraph or two (exceeding 40 words or 4 lines... the convention), then it is to be indented as separate text so that the reader clearly sees it is copied in:

This citation is considered to be so valuable that we want to print out all the words because they do such a good job summarizing the content and helps answer many of the questions that either I as the thesis writer or others that I have been pointing out have been raising. Therefore I indent it here, use no quotation marks, and put the reference outside the period. (Source, Year, p. x)

In fact, on rare occasions, the source text is so rich that another quote from the same or next page can be included, It looks a bit heavy for the reader to have a string of input source quotes, but sometimes it is justified because the content is just so good and definitive that it must be included. (Source, Year, p. x)

So to prepare for writing about topics, you will need to try to sort out the landscape, linking one group of scholars (Mr. X, Mrs. Y, Mr. Z and Mrs. T) who approach a topic from paradigm A in contrast to another group (Mr. C, Ms. D., and Mr. X) who argue for paradigm/approach B/assumption C, and perhaps still another (Mr. P, Ms. P) who have suggested a synthesis or developed a critique of previous approaches. Hopefully you get the idea that it is important to start now to document the names, theories, background fields, approaches, lines of inquiry (topics, sub-fields), method differentiation of key scholars (and their own development over their publication years), and be able to link, compare, or contrast them regarding different levels of culture, different types or constructions of communication, different IC application areas or analysis frames. It is a big task, but a very rewarding one to help you launch this process that will continue throughout your hoped-for thesis or dissertation work.

So as you read, take notes in ways that will help you gain a good conceptual overview and awareness of the field in general. Then try to figure out whose work fits where. And slowly you can weave the

sources together. Now is the time to start working in a way that is no longer just a “book report,” copying or imitating ideas from one author after another.