

Using other people's ideas in your own writing

For most assignments, you are expected to make use of the “literature”; and in this context, that doesn't mean fiction, it means scholarly publications on the topic you are exploring. You will usually be assigned readings to do each week, often with lists of “further reading” to do if you have time. You are also expected, often, to find more readings for yourself, developing your research skills and your ability to judge what sources are most relevant and reliable for your purposes. It's in all these sources that you find the information, the views, the questions and debates that make up the published conversation around your topic. By considering these sources, and responding to what you find there, you are in a position to join this conversation. In marking your work, your lecturer will consider how far you have engaged with the recommended reading and, if applicable, how well you have succeeded in bringing other appropriate sources into your discussion.

How do you find suitable reading?

Usually, your subject lecturer will provide lists of “essential” and “further” readings, which you should consider central to your assignment, and use as a starting point if the assignment requires you to find more sources for yourself. You can go to the Library's website to train yourself in finding and evaluating sources both in print and online at the “Libskills” page: <http://latrobe.libguides.com/finding-information> . This includes a section on how to judge the relevance and reliability of sources that you find for yourself, at <http://latrobe.libguides.com/finding-information> .

One important point to bear in mind is that, in addition to catalogue and database searches, you can find very useful readings by noticing what sources are referred to in the readings your subject has recommended. If you follow references from one reading to another, you can be confident that they share a relevance because they are all in the same “conversation”. Have a look at this Example to see how this works.

Example:

In a Master's level subject called Community Planning, students read an article about a community development project in the rural area of Hertzog in South Africa (Nel, E., Binns, T., and Motteux, N. (2001). Community-based development, non-governmental organizations and social capital in post-apartheid South Africa. *Geografiska Annaler Series B: Human Geography*, 83(1), 3-13). The article begins, as most do, by sketching in the context of previously published discussion around the topic this article explores – in this case, issues in community development in poorer regions. As you read this introductory paragraph, notice how the authors reference these other sources.

Introduction

Developing countries are frequently confronted with serious internal and externally imposed constraints on the ability of governments to provide meaningful support for their populations at the grass-roots level. In consequence, from both theoretical and applied perspectives there is now wide-spread support for the notion of ‘bottom-up’ development which is variously referred to as ‘self-reliance’, ‘endogenous development’ and ‘local economic development’ (LED) (Stohr, 1981; Gooneratne and Mbilinyi, 1992; Stock, 1995). From a policy perspective, the concept of community-driven economic development has been endorsed by bodies such as the World Bank and the United Nations Centre for

Regional Development (Gooneratne and Mbilinyi, 1992; Stock, 1995). However, in reality, it would be unrealistic to anticipate that a multitude of community-based economic development endeavours can emerge spontaneously and sustain themselves indefinitely. Such factors as shortages of local capacity and resources, poor understanding of the broader economic environment and the frequently limited life-span of projects all play a part in ensuring that, other than for isolated success stories such as Machakos in Kenya (Tiffen et al., 1994), community self-reliance initiatives are “unlikely to achieve more than small sporadic victories for the disadvantaged majority” (Stock, 1995, p. 363). In most cases, as Burkey (1993) notes, there is a very defined role and place for limited external guidance and support: “Self-reliant participatory development processes normally require an external catalyst to facilitate the start of the process and to support the growth of the process in its early phases” (Burkey, 1993, p. 73). Within this context, the delicate balance between ensuring local control and involving limited, yet appropriate, external support and guidance needs to be carefully mediated. It is suggested that two of the key factors impinging on the success of such a scenario will be the role of local social capital (Buckland, 1998; Fine, 1999) and the appropriateness of external support, which in many cases is now provided by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) active in community development initiatives (Edwards and Hulme, 1996). In the absence of these inputs, it might be suggested that prospects for the widespread emergence of self-initiated, community-based projects will be limited and, where they do emerge, their long-term prognosis could be doubtful.

As you saw, the other sources to which these authors refer are given in brackets usually located at the end of the sentence that refers to one or more publications elsewhere. For each source, we are given just the author(s) and year of publication, and if the sentence quotes directly from the source, we are also told which page was quoted from. At the end of the article, in a list of references, we would find the rest of the information needed to track down each publication. (For example, the full reference for Stock (1995) is Stock, R. (1995): *Africa South of the Sahara: A Geographical Interpretation*. Guilford Press, New York.)

Now, how could you use this paragraph to find more reading? Which source(s) would you look for:

- If you wanted to know more about the concept of ‘bottom-up’ development?
- If you wanted to know what approach to community development is favoured by policy-makers?
- If you wanted to learn about a successful development project other than the one discussed in this article?
- If you wanted to explore issues involved in the role of NGOs?

How can you use the sources in constructing your own answer?

The sources themselves don’t usually provide the answer to your question. You’ll have to decide how the sources relate to each other, to the question you started with, and to your own ideas. You should also work out how the question you are addressing relates to the larger questions or concepts of the subject in which this assignment is set. When you have all that clear in your mind, you will be able to write an introduction that makes it clear to your reader as well. See the box for some possible ways this might look, depending on your question and your readings:

Try to structure your discussion as a contribution to a wider conversation that the subject has been introducing you to. The way you introduce your essay depends on the nature of the question and the sources; but some common possibilities are shown below:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic • Question • Context of a common view on the topic • How your essay relates to this view • Alternative sentences, depending on what that relationship is • Signposting how your discussion will proceed 	<p>This essay focusses on _____ and asks/ considers/ explores how/why/whether) _____ . It has been suggested (refs) that _____ . I / this essay will show/suggest/ argue that _____ . [Alternatives might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>We see this in _____</i> • <i>While there are good reasons for this view, there are also problems: _____</i> • <i>An examination of _____, however, does not support this view.</i> ▪ <i>While this view is illuminating in some ways, I will suggest that we need also to consider _____ .]</i> <p>I/it will look at/ draw on (whatever sources) / OR First I/it will _____ and then _____ (what you'll discuss in what order).</p>
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When you use sources in your writing, what does this look like?

Because your assignments ask you to use other writers' ideas and information in constructing your own discussion, you need to pay attention to how this is done in academic writing. When do you quote the words of a source, and when do you discuss its content in your own words? How do you show your reader where this material can be found? How do you show your reader where you are putting forward your own ideas? What do you do if you read similar ideas in more than one source? What do you do if you didn't read the original source but you found a discussion of that in some other source? Should you quote long passages, and if not, how can you condense the material you want to quote? What if the material you quote doesn't fit smoothly into your own sentence? You will have to deal with all these challenges, so it's a good idea to take those questions with you to your reading, and see how other scholars do it. Here, we can show you briefly what to do, and refer you to further guidance in the library.

To quote, or to use your own words?

Generally, your lecturers would prefer you to discuss the ideas from your reading in your own words, for various reasons.

- You show that you understand the ideas
- You can show how they relate to each other
- You can express ideas more briefly by summarising what you read.

Sometimes, though, there is a good reason to show your reader the original words from the source. The original wording may convey an attitude, or emotion, or a way of thinking that would not come through so clearly if you rephrased it. This is particularly likely when you are discussing "primary sources", that is, things said or written by people who were involved in the events you are looking at.

By quoting, you share with your reader the immediate experience of hearing from participants in these events. It is also necessary to quote directly when you want to comment on the way that something was expressed by its author. When you are writing about creative works, this happens often, because the words of the novel, play, poem, or film constitute the evidence for points that you are making. It may also happen when you are discussing the particular way that a scholar uses terms in putting forward some idea.

So, quote if there's a good reason to do so, and otherwise, use your own words.

How do you show your reader where this material can be found?

In both cases, whether you quote directly or use your own words, you need to show your reader where you read the ideas you are discussing. By referencing, you fulfil a responsibility to both your sources and your readers. You give credit to the authors of the sources you read, for the ideas and information that you found there. An author's writing is his/her "intellectual property": it belongs to that author, as it is the way that authors build their professional reputation. For this reason, unis take the obligation to reference sources very seriously, and if you neglect it you can be penalised for "plagiarism" – that is, reproducing somebody else's ideas or words without a reference. It's important to be aware of this requirement, and you can read about it in detail at <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/learning/integrity.html> with helpful advice also available at: <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/students/academic-integrity/referencing-help> . The University's official academic integrity policy document is available here: <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/policy/documents/academic-integrity-policy.pdf>

Most important, though, is that referencing keeps the scholarly conversation open as well as honest. You tell readers where they can go to look at the original sources you used, so they can decide whether they would have understood them in the way that you did; and if they want to know more about a source than they found in your essay, they can follow it up for themselves. (Sometimes international students are uncomfortable about Australian referencing practices, feeling that they may seem disrespectful of their readers. It may be that most educated people in your home country were familiar with the common sources of knowledge, and would not need to be reminded of where you learned your facts and ideas. It might even seem a little impolite to remind them, in this situation. But you will find that, in Australia, it is considered both polite and essential to do so.)

You do this by putting a reference in the sentence where you discuss a reading (as you saw in the extract from Nels, Binns, & Motteux , 2001, above), and by listing that reference again in the bibliography/reference list at the end of your assignment. If you are quoting, you put quotation marks around all the words that you have copied from the source, and a reference after them; if you are using your own words, you don't use quotation marks but you put a reference at the end of your sentence just the same.

Different disciplines require different styles of referencing. In all of these, references must be given in the body of the assignment and again in a list at the end. However, styles differ

- in the items of information that must be included (author, title, publisher, date, etc)
- in the order of those items

- in the punctuation that must be used between them
- and in the abbreviations that can be used.

Another difference is that some disciplines prefer to give full details of each publication in footnotes at the bottom (= “foot”) of the page, with each note matching a number in the text, while others prefer a short note in brackets in the text itself. We don’t give detailed instructions for each style here, because the library provides these on its page of “Referencing Style Guides” at <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/help/style-guides.php>. You need to find out from your lecturer or your subject LMS which style to use for each particular subject, and go to the library page to see how to use it. (Don’t just copy a style used in your readings, because it may not be the one that your subject requires.)

Should you quote long passages, and if not, how can you condense the material you want to quote? And what if the material you quote doesn’t fit smoothly into your own sentence?

Try to quote only as much as you need in order to illustrate the point you are making. If that runs to three lines or more, you should “block-indent” the whole quotation in from the margin (press “enter” at the beginning, so that it starts on a separate line; then select the text and use the “increase indent” icon on your toolbar to indent it). When you block-indent like this, remove the quotation marks from around the quotation, because the indentation is the signal to your reader that all of this is quoted. If you have not already noticed such block-indentation in the texts you read, have a look for some examples now. It’s good to be confident of how it should look, before you do it in your own work.

Mostly, however, you will be using your own words and integrating short pieces of quotation into your own sentences when you want to share with your reader some phrase that is, in itself, good evidence for the point you are making. For this purpose, select only what you need from the source. You can even shorten a quoted sentence, if it has material that you don’t need, as long as you put in dots (“ellipsis”) to show where you left something out. If the omitted material comes from just one sentence, leave three dots each time you leave something out (“blah blah blah ... blah”). But if you are putting together bits from more than one sentence, leave four dots. That fourth dot is the full stop that you have left out, along with the missing words! However, make sure that whatever remains makes sense, and that it fits smoothly together, ***and*** smoothly into your sentence. If repairs are necessary to make it fit, you can add word(s) or change the form of a word, putting the addition in square brackets.

What would this look like? We can make an example by condensing the first sentence after the heading, and the third sentence of the last paragraph above:

I advise you to “quote only as much as you need, to illustrate ... [your] point even shorten[ing] a quoted sentence ... as long as you put in dots ... where you left something out.”

How do you show your reader where you are putting forward your own ideas?

You may be wondering, at this point, whether there is any place in an assignment for your own ideas, and if so, how will your lecturer know that they are yours? This is a reasonable question, because most

of your ideas, in any assignment, will be your thoughts about the ideas of others that you have read. This may not seem very original, but after all, the point of studying at uni is to build on, and to challenge, the knowledge you bring with you. This is why you are given so much reading, and expected to discuss it in assignments. What is original about your work is

- the way you relate ideas and information from the sources to the question you have been asked;
- the way you explain the ideas, and your choice of examples and evidence;
- your testing of other people's ideas against evidence, and against the ideas of others;
- your judgement of the strengths and limitations of other people's thinking;
- your ability to ask questions arising out of your encounters with other people's ideas;
- your ability to apply the ideas of others in new contexts; and
- your ability to construct answers of your own.

Using sources in your writing is a bit like weaving: you use threads from various different places (including readings and your own experience), but the new pattern that you weave is your own.

Your lecturers will assume that they are reading your ideas if you have not given a reference to a source. This means that you do not need to preface your ideas with "In my opinion/ I think/ etc." However, when you draw on your own experience, it's wise to make that clear: for example, you might write "In my work at an aged care facility, the issue of restraint arose frequently, and staff were divided on best practice in this situation."

What do you do if you read similar ideas in more than one source?

You can make a reference that includes more than one source, separated by semicolons (;), when different readings discuss ideas in common. We saw several examples of this practice in the extract from Nels, Binns, & Motteux (2001), such as:

In consequence, from both theoretical and applied perspectives there is now wide-spread support for the notion of 'bottom-up' development which is variously referred to as 'self-reliance', 'endogenous development' and 'local economic development' (LED) (Stohr, 1981; Gooneratne and Mbilinyi, 1992; Stock, 1995). From a policy perspective, the concept of community-driven economic development has been endorsed by bodies such as the World Bank and the United Nations Centre for Regional Development (Gooneratne and Mbilinyi, 1992; Stock, 1995).

This is also possible in footnotes, and again, you separate each reference with a semicolon.

This method of grouping references enables you to show your wide reading on a topic, and your recognition of what concerns or perspectives are shared by various scholars, without having to report on each one separately (which gets repetitive if they all have similar things to say!).

What do you do if you didn't read the original source but you found a discussion of that in some other source?

You name the person who originally said or wrote the thing you want to refer to, but add the reference to where you read it:

The idea that the Bill of Rights was the “original contract” guaranteeing liberty can be traced back to debate in the House of Commons in 1690 (Grey 1769, cited in Miller 1992, p. 86).

Here, Grey called the Bill of Rights the “original contract”, but you didn’t read Grey’s 1769 publication where he said that. Instead, you read Miller’s 1992 publication, which referred to it. Note that in the reference list at the end of the assignment, you would give the full reference to Miller, but you would not give a reference to Grey.