Working with other writers’ words and ideas

Here are some conventions—that is, matters of format or style—and their rationales that apply when we discuss other writers’ work in our essays. Most of them are MLA style, that is, the style favored by the Modern Language Association, and used by scholars of language and literature. Stylistic conventions such as italicizing book titles are actually used more widely than that, but they are not universal: other scholarly fields and some publications, such as the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker*, have their own styles.

Make sure you format final versions of your work according to these conventions; you cannot get an A in the class if you ignore them!

1. Use italics or underlining for titles of books, movies, plays, artworks, and long poems—*The Odyssey*. Use quote marks for titles of essays, short stories and poems, and journal articles—“Cruising on the Ark of Taste.”

2. Give readers an author’s full name the first time you mention her or him; after that, use only the last name (the same is true for any public figure you write about). Use of the first name only denotes that you are personally acquainted with the writer.

3. If you repeatedly refer to a book, essay or article with a long title, it is acceptable to abbreviate the title on subsequent references—In “Cruising,” Pollan argues . . .

4. However, if you are only referring to one work by an author, it is conventional to use the author’s name—Pollan—more than the title of the text.

5. Use the present tense when discussing ideas in a text, be it a book published 20 years ago (or, for that matter, a poem by Shakespeare!) or a newspaper published this morning. For example,

   Schlosser points out that . . ., Pollan remarks, and so on.

   Exception:
   When you want to emphasize the “pastness” of remarks. For example,

   In 1990 Smith wrote that small family farms should be subsidized; today, however, he is more concerned with the way all farmers treat the resources they work with.”

6. Readers want to know who these people are that you’re quoting. In an essay such as Essay 2, where your main purpose is to explore your own idea, it’s usually sufficient to simply say “the writer, Joan Didion” or “essayist and farmer Wendell Berry,” unless you want to emphasize something about the writer’s experience.

7. However, in a strongly persuasive essay, or a heavily researched piece, such as our Essay 3, readers will want to know more about your sources. For example,

   According to Juliet Schor, Americans have gotten into the habit of overspending. In *The Overspent American*, Schor argues . . . Schor, who teaches sociology at Harvard and writes frequently on the topic of consumer culture, says . . .

   would be a good way to begin a discussion that incorporates Schor’s ideas.
Why? Much of what you’re working with in essays like our Essays II and III is other writers’ ideas and interpretations. For example, Wendell Berry develops a distinctive idea of “pleasure”; the term and the meanings related to it are important to an understanding of his ideas and can serve as a touchstone, or point of comparison, in discussing other writers’ ideas, or even other aspects of Berry’s work. If you talk about Berry’s idea of pleasure in your essays, you need both to explain it in Berry’s terms and to let us know what you think of it, how it is and isn’t useful—and we readers need to be able to distinguish between your ideas and Berry’s—between your ideas and those of any source in your paper.

The same is true for most of the sources you will be drawing on in your research essay: little of what you use will be pure data, as it would be in a lab report. Rather, the information you find is embedded in a discussion by a writer who has a particular area of expertise, particular interests and biases; or it is sponsored by a corporation, foundation, institute, governmental agency, publication or other organization that has its own interests and point of view. It is likewise important to understand, to the extent that you can, the contexts in which the writers of your source material are operating. For instance, to say that someone is “a writer” doesn’t tell us as much as saying that she is a professor of film studies, or a writer who specializes in gender issues, or a psychiatrist, or . . .

8. **Long quotes**: Sometimes our purposes are best served with a quotation that is several lines long—for example, when the information is densely packed or it takes several sentences for the source’s point to become clear. However, *lengthy quotes should be kept to a minimum*; when they dominate a paper, it appears that you aren’t making your own argument but just stringing together other people’s ideas.

**Note:**
Indent quotes that are 4 full lines or longer by double-tab’ing the text on the left. (The right margin is unchanged)

9. **Shorter quotes**: Often we want to quote a sentence or so, because we want our readers to hear something in a source’s own voice. A good way to bring sources’ voices into a paper without slowing the pace is to insert a quoted word or phrase within our own language—i.e., we don’t always need to quote whole sentences.

10. **Summary and paraphrase**: Particularly in research essays, much of our thinking and writing work involves summarizing information from one source and synthesizing information from several sources. *Summarizing accurately and gracefully is one of the most important writing skills you will need for both scholarly and professional work.*

11. **When we quote sources, we need to keep a few things in mind:**
- We need to use language that lets the reader know that we aren’t taking sources at face value: Berry argues, claims, asserts, considers; he assumes, recognizes, agrees, disagrees; or he explains, implies, wonders, wishes. Even words like “says,” “states,” “observes” and “remarks” let us know you aren’t simply taking an author’s words as fact, but are aware that they are his or her belief.
• When we quote a sentence or more, we usually need to reflect on the quote, to let readers know why we are bringing the quote to their attention: we don’t just drop the quotes onto the page like icing on top of a cake.

• We need to integrate quotes into our own sentences smoothly: the quoted material combined with our own language must form a syntactically correct whole. Sometimes we need to delete a word or couple of words, change a verb tense, or add explanatory language. To do this we use ellipsis and brackets. Thus if the logic of our sentence requires “forming” while our source’s language has “form,” we may write “form[ing]; or if our quote refers to “him,” “it” or “they,” we may need to tell readers what these words refer to: “they [Americans],” and so on.

• Citation: Whether we quote, paraphrase, or summarize, we must always credit sources. In scholarly work, that means a Works Cited (or References, or Bibliography) list at the end of your essay as well as in-text citations. There are many citation styles; each scholarly discipline has its own. Make sure to use the style your readers expect.

Notes:

• No one memorizes citation styles: you need to have the appropriate style guidelines handy when you are writing and editing your work.

• Work in progress: It’s not a good idea to “fill in citations at the end”—you risk leaving out citations, which can leave you open to charges of plagiarism. So as you write even your rough draft, make sure you note sources and page numbers as you go; you can format them correctly when you do your final edit.

• For more on Citation, see the Bedford-St. Martin’s Pocket Style Manual or other style manuals.

• Plagiarism is covered at length in the MIT Handbook on Academic Integrity. You are responsible for reading and understanding the material contained in this handbook!