

Using Sources Effectively

A source is any outside information that you have to seek out. Use sources to emphasize and support a point you've made, but let your own ideas, rather than research, drive your paper. Incorporating sources helps build credibility throughout your paper by showing that you have taken an academic look into the issues surrounding your topic. It is important to consider your audience when using sources: what information do they need? There are three ways to use sources effectively: summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting directly.

Note: Any time you use information from a source, you must cite that source to give the author credit for their ideas, even when you introduce the author or the article with a signal phrase so the reader knows where your source came from. Failing to do so is plagiarism, which is copying someone else's work and claiming it as your own. It is a serious offense that could result in failing a course or even expulsion from the university. (See our handout on plagiarism for more information)

This handout will use the following excerpt from Jonathan Oosting's article "Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder Pushes Vote on Federal Partnership for 'Obamacare' Health Exchange," Mlive, March 19, 2013, for examples:

Under a partnership model, federal the government would run the exchange itself while Michigan would be responsible for plan management, and customer assistance. The state would also be required to develop information technology infrastructure.

Snyder said that failure to approve the partnership would result in worse customer service for Michigan residents required to have health insurance.

Summarizing

What

Summarizing is necessary when you present an entire work or section of that work in a condensed form. It should provide a broad overview of all the material, as opposed to a single idea. A summary should have no more than half the words of the material being summarized.

When

Summarize when you don't need everything that the author has said, such as examples that don't directly apply to your topic or would take up too much space, when paraphrasing or quoting adds too much length to your text, or when you can say it "better" than the author or use it in a different way.

How

Give a brief overview of what you are summarizing. Summaries are not long, but the length depends on the importance of the source within your own paper. Ask yourself: How much space do you think you should allocate to your source material? At what point will your summary start distracting readers from your purpose?

Ex: An article written by Jonathan Oosting on Mlive discussed the potential partnership between the state of Michigan and the federal government to create a health exchange according to "Obamacare."

Paraphrasing

What

Paraphrasing is taking information from a source and putting it into your own words without changing the author's intended meaning. It is more detailed than a summary, focusing on a single idea which should be only slightly condensed. When you paraphrase, be sure to stay true to the source's idea but also do not just making small changes to the sentences.

When

You should paraphrase when the information presented by the author would be hard for the reader to understand or when you need to synthesize source material to demonstrate your understanding of what the author is saying.

How

Take the author's words and rewrite them in a way that makes sense to the reader. This may be as simple as rewording the idea so it doesn't lose its original meaning, or as complex as integrating the author's ideas with your own to create a new meaning. Remember: small changes to the original sentences are not enough to qualify as paraphrasing.

Ex: Oosting explains that the federal government and Michigan will work together to operate the exchange; the federal government will actually run the exchange, while the state will manage it.

Direct Quotes

What

A direct quote uses the author's exact words and is noted by using quotation marks (" "). Direct quotes are the most specific way to use sources. It is especially important to use signal phrases when directly quoting so your reader knows where the quote comes from.

When

You should use direct quotes when you cannot paraphrase without losing meaning or when the quote encompasses the main point of what you are trying to say.

How

Make sure you introduce the quote so that the audience knows it's coming, indicate who said the quote, and connect the quote to the rest of your paper.

Ex: According to the article, Governor Snyder said "that failure to approve the partnership would result in worse customer service for Michigan residents required to have health insurance." This indicates that the governor is concerned with Michigan's citizens rather than political agendas.