

General Guidelines for Incorporating Secondary Sources into Your Writing

These are guidelines, not rules. That said, you'd probably be better off treating them as rules. I don't always follow them, but I have the advantage of reading and writing academic prose for decades, so I understand the context of when something is or is not appropriate. You lack this context, and you also haven't read enough academic prose to really have an eye for what it looks like-- much less whether or not it is well done.

Introduce and provide credentials for the secondary source.

Introduce secondary authors by credential, then first and last name. Thereafter refer to them by last name. Example: "historian Fernand Braudel writes how..." or "existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre observes..." Only skip the credential if you're writing about someone who is incredibly well-known or influential-- the kind of people who most people would recognize by last name alone (Lincoln, Freud, Gandhi, Nietzsche, etc.)

Strike the right balance. Analyze the literary text, not the secondary source.

If you're using historical facts, don't turn your writing into a history lesson. If you're using a theoretical approach, don't spend more time with theory than the primary text.

Paraphrase of the secondary sources is almost always better than direct quotation.

You're not doing a close reading of the secondary source. Rather, you are doing a close reading of the primary text. For that reason, most of the time the exact words do not really matter when using secondary texts; instead it is the ideas that count. If you do use quotes, they should almost always be snippet quotes-- for when the secondary source uses a word or phrase that absolutely nails a concept.

A word of warning, though: you still have to use parenthetical references for paraphrase.

If you use direct quotation, do not paraphrase the quote immediately afterward.

High school students are conditioned to add commentary to any quote, but this is misguided when quoting from secondary sources. You are using the secondary source to illuminate something about the primary source (the literary text), which means that you are either pulling out facts or using a theoretical approach found in the secondary source. The analysis comes when you *use* the facts or theoretical approach *in terms of the primary text*. In contrast to quotes from literary sources, quotes from a secondary text are generally factual in nature and do not require you to make an inference. Thus, given this lack of things to say about a quote, do not add a "what this is basically saying" sentence after secondary source quotes-- as presumably the reader is able to decode words without your help. If the quote is so hard to understand that you have to explain what it means, you probably should be paraphrasing anyway.

You are responsible for contextualizing the secondary source.

Just like you set up a quote from a literary text, you might need to put an idea from a secondary source into context. Remember, you are teaching something to the reader as well as convincing them that you are right. Skipping steps or assuming that readers already know what you are talking about is doing neither of these things.