



Working with Sources and Writing About Literature

This handout offers students an introduction to how academic writers in a particular discipline work with the texts of other writers. We suggest that students new to writing in this academic field carefully review this introduction and discuss any questions it prompts with your instructor or with a writing specialist in the Hixon Writing Center.

Introduction

Working with sources is fundamental to writing in the field of literary study, which is, after all, a field that analyzes texts. While there is great variety to how literary scholars work with texts, we can discern some clear patterns that will be useful to understanding the field.

Types of Sources

Like their colleagues in history, scholars in literature use the terms “primary,” and “secondary” to categorize types of sources. Primary texts include novels, short stories, poems, and plays—the creative literary texts that scholars in the field seek to understand and explain. They might also include things like letters, newspaper articles, or other historical documents written by or about the authors of those creative works during the past. Secondary texts are scholarly books and articles published in academic journals.

Much novice student writing in literary studies may make exclusive use of primary texts. Literature scholars typically draw their evidence directly from the language of primary sources, its patterns and anomalies, and students are trained in this practice, called “close reading.” Close primary-text analysis is often the focus of an introductory course in literature, and students may not be asked to engage with secondary sources at all in those courses. More advanced students, however, may indeed be expected to locate and read secondary texts and enter the scholarly conversation about a particular issue, showing how their arguments relate to those previously made by scholars who wrote about similar issues. Alternately, students might read secondary texts that are theoretical in nature and be asked to apply certain theoretical lenses to their analyses of primary texts.

Bringing other texts into your writing

Literature scholars make ample use of quotation, paraphrase, and summary in their writing. It is not uncommon to see block quotes in this field, particularly of primary sources, though readers expect there to be very good justification for including a lengthy quote—close analysis of the passage as a whole must follow. Literary analyses also often incorporate multiple, shorter quotes from primary texts, allowing writers to prove that what they say they see in that other text is, in fact, there. Both the use of longer and shorter quotes from primary texts makes further analysis of the text possible, because the reader is given enough of the original to understand and assess the writer’s interpretation of it.

Scholars in this field are more likely to quote secondary literature than their peers in many other fields, and this is due to their valuing *how* something is said in addition to *what* is said. However, there always should be a logical reason to present a quote instead of paraphrase or summary. The choice of how to present a text should be based on what the writer really wants you

to see—the way something is said (quote), the building of an argument or progress of a plot (paraphrase), or the main idea (summary).

As is generally true throughout the humanities, when literature scholars integrate the work of other scholars into their writing, they generally introduce the author of that work to the reader, rather than relying solely on a parenthetical citation or footnote to attribute the source. Sometimes this happens very briefly, with the author simply being named in the sentence (e.g. Sanchez argues that...), but it is also common to see a writer offer a relatively lengthy introduction to another scholar's project if that project is of significance to her own. Here, we see that humanistic fields attach ideas very closely to the authors who develop them, using those authors' names as a shorthand way of invoking their theories and claims.

Citation practices

The most common style system in literature is Modern Language Association (MLA) style, and it uses parenthetical in-text citations that focus on author name and page numbers. A "works cited" page follows at the end of the paper. An unusual feature of the MLA works cited format is that the medium of each citation must be identified (e.g. print, web).

Chicago style is also commonly used in literature. It tends to be a preferred choice for longer works, like books and dissertations, but some student essays may also require this style. There are two types of Chicago style: Notes-Bibliography (NB) and Author-Date (AD). The former is likely to be used in literary studies. NB style uses footnotes or endnotes for in-text citation, and the full citation for each work appears in the note. (The citation appears in full the first time it is referenced, but repeated citations of the same work can use the term "ibid." to indicate citation of the same work as above.) A complete, alphabetized bibliography follows at the end of the paper. A common variant of Chicago style adapted for student use is called Turabian.

Links to detailed information about style systems can be found on the Hixon Writing Center website: <http://writing.caltech.edu/students/handouts>

What to look for in examples

Students new to literary studies can benefit from looking closely at models to learn how various genres of primary texts tend to be represented; there will be differences in how prose, poems, and plays are quoted, including in their formatting. Depending upon the type of point that is being made about the text, differing amounts of text will be offered. Students should also examine how writers integrate secondary sources to stage conversations among critics, among whom they are staking a claim of their own.