EIGHT STRATEGIES FOR USING SOURCES

Scholars use sources in academic writing as a means of entering a larger, preexisting conversation about their subject. As with a conversation you have in class or among friends, there are different strategies for injecting your voice. The way you position yourself in the discussion will depend on how the conversation has unfolded so far and what you hope to achieve by entering it. By describing eight ways of putting sources to work in your paper, this handout can help you better understand your specific purpose each time you bring another person's ideas to bear on your argument. Understanding your purpose for selecting certain sources will help you sharpen your ideas and express those ideas with greater precision.

1. Drawing battle lines

Present a pre-existing disagreement among scholars. This can be a debate that others have recognized, or it can be one you are identifying for the first time. Enter this debate by either choosing a side or proposing some middle position. The following example presents two competing scientific hypotheses:

> There are two main hypotheses for how Brightest Cluster Galaxies [BCGs] formed: monolithic collapse and hierarchical building (Collins et al. 2006). Under the monolithic collapse model, the stars in the BCG formed all together, so the ages and metallicities of the stellar populations across the galaxy are relatively uniform. Meanwhile, according to the hierarchical building model, the galaxy built up through a number of smaller galaxies merging together. In this model, the different regions of the galaxies have varying ages and metallicities, since they formed in different parts of the Universe at different times.[1]

Establishing this larger debate early in her paper allows the author to demonstrate her specific contribution to the field when she elaborates her findings later in the essay.

2. Picking a fight

Establish a stable position on your subject in order to challenge it later. This could be the view of a single major scholar, a position many scholars have agreed on, or even a buried assumption that most scholars simply take for granted. In the following example, the author seeks to revise the consensus interpretation of a work of literature:

> No scholar denies that Beckett has modeled the protagonist Krapp after a clown of some sort. When determining which type of clown, scholars rarely stray from the interpretation that Krapp is a mime (Bryden 360, Gruber 89, Levy 181). The fact that this reading perfectly explains Krapp's "self-mimetic" tape-listening, has kept scholars from realizing that it only explains so much about his story. No scholar seems to have considered it, but analyzing Krapp as a different kind of clown—a harlequin—opens a wellspring of insight into a greater portion of his situation.[2]

This author uses sources to demonstrate precisely why his interpretation is important. He doesn't just present a reading of the play; he corrects a common misreading and, in turn, reconstructs our broader understanding of the play. It is also worth noting how using sources sharpens the author's ideas. Introducing a context in which scholars are already talking about the protagonist as a clown pushes the author to propose what kind of clown and explore the broader significance of classifying Krapp as a harlequin.

3. Piggybacking
Back up one of your points by showing that another scholar has argued the same thing. You won't want to use this strategy for your thesis, because citing a source whose main claim is the same as yours suggests that your argument doesn't contribute anything new to the academic conversation. But for an argument in a smaller section of your paper, piggybacking on another scholar's ideas can help strengthen your case. Consider how the author of this example uses a source to bolster a claim she is making about Huck Finn's tendency to follow others:

> After years of experience dealing with Pap, his violent and overbearing father, Huck has learned that "the best way to get along with his kind of people is to let them have their own way" (131). So Huck's assent to Tom's proposal is not uncharacteristic by any means. Richard Hill notes that just as Huck deferred to Pap, the king, and the duke in order to prevent any conflict, so he does with Tom (499).[3]

Note that the author doesn't substitute the source's ideas for her own thinking. She uses and analyzes evidence from the text to make her case in addition to backing up that case by citing another scholar who has reached a similar conclusion.

4. Leapfrogging
Use previous research as a jumping-off point for asking a new, more far-reaching question. You leapfrog when you approach your paper with the mindset: "Now that we know what this source has shown us, what new question can we ask?" Consider how the author of this example uses previous experiments to propose a new study that builds on their results:

> Studying the extent and nature of octopus cognition offers a new angle by which we can examine the evolution of intelligence. Previous studies of octopus intelligence have focused mainly on learning capabilities through classical conditioning techniques (for review, see Boal 1996), whereas the research proposed herein will use the methodology of past studies of octopus cognition (e.g. Bierens de Haan 1949, Walker et al. 1970, Boal 1996) to study two inter-related characteristic markers of higher cognition. Specifically, the proposed study will seek to determine whether octopuses have the capacity for delay of gratification, and whether octopuses will use play as an effective self-distracting coping mechanism.[4]

Here the author proposes using the methodology of previous studies not to investigate octopus cognition (as those studies have done), but to study the more complex issue of octopus intelligence. Because she takes the methods and results of these previous studies to be correct, she can build them into a new study that pushes beyond them.

5. Matchmaking
Make new knowledge by placing previously unacquainted sources in conversation with each other. This strategy can take two different forms. Firstly, you can seek a new understanding of your subject by examining it through a theoretical lens (e.g. what Henri Bergson's theory of humor can show us about why a certain TikTok video is funny" is funny). Alternatively, you can bring ideas from one academic field to bear on another (e.g. what findings in psychology can show us about how individuals make economic choices). The author of this example turns to religious studies to shed new light on a literary text:

> Citing harsh portrayals of religious officials in the Canterbury Tales, scholars often conclude that the text is "fundamentally anti-religious"

> (Condren 75). These scholars' views, however, fail to consider Catholicism within its historical context. Religion scholar Gabriel Daly claims that because religions evolve over time, one must distinguish between the "Catholicism of Medieval times and Catholicism at its inception" (Daly 778). Theologian Richard McBrien takes this argument even further . . .[5]

This author argues that looking at The Canterbury Tales using the terms of literary analysis has limited scholars' perspective. He shakes up his subject by using knowledge from the field of religious history to provide a more complete understanding of the text's relationship with religion.

6. So what? So this.

Give context that shows why your subject is interesting or important. This context motivates your essay by showing how your subject thwarts expectations or departs from the status quo in a way that makes it worthy of deeper inquiry. Consider how the sources presented in the example below set up the author's argument that Margaret Cho and Carlos Mencia "introduce a new version of ethnic humor that does not promote a cultural hierarchy":

> Leon Rappoport further clarifies how stereotypes and ethnicity-based mockery embody the superiority theory by explaining that these disparaging jokes often employ "polar opposite adjectives...[so that] only [the] negative end of the pair is emphasized [and] the positive end always remains implicitly understood as characteristic of the 'superior' joke teller" (33). With these jokes, the overt debasement of immigrants simultaneously elevates the person making the joke. Consequently, the opposing adjectives suggest a hierarchy between the person who tells the joke and the people at the butt of the joke.[6]

Here the author cites sources who argue that traditional forms of ethnic humor rely on a cultural hierarchy. This context allows her to demonstrate the groundbreaking significance of her claim that the comedy of Cho and Mencia does away with these traditional hierarchies.

7. Defining keyterms

Use sources to define and illustrate key concepts you will use in your paper. Because scholars are experts in their fields, their definitions will be more detailed and more authoritative than those in standard dictionaries. Using sources to define keyterms can also make your ideas clearer by allowing you to illustrate abstract concepts with concrete examples, as this author does:

> The phenomenon of evil laughter is not new. Indeed, many instances of the "evil laughter" of "mockers" appear throughout the Holy Bible. Roger Poudrier highlights one passage that could easily apply to the villains in a popular action movie: "They laugh at my fall, they organize against me . . . If I fall they surround me . . . those who hate me for no reason. They open wide their mouth against me saying: Ha, ha!" (Ps 35:15-21; qtd. in Poudrier 23). The righteous narrator describes the mockers as people who attack him and his faith for no reason and laugh in a particularly immodest way. Roy Baumeister observes the same characteristic in cartoon programs of the 1980s, citing how "they . . . "[7]

To illustrate what he means by "evil laughter," this author cites examples from sources as diverse as the Bible and 1980s cartoons.

8. Changing the question

Argue that scholars of your subject have been taking the wrong approach or asking the wrong question. Changing the terms of a scholarly debate can be a useful way of resolving a stalemate or advancing a field whose results have grown stagnant. Essentially you are saying, "the traditional questions have only taken us so far, but approaching the subject in a new way can produce more far-reaching results." Consider how the following author seeks to reframe the standard approach to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*:

> [T]here has been a remarkable consensus about the terms which ought to be used to describe [*Pride and Prejudice*'s] antitheses. Again and again . . . we come upon some variation of the terms "individual" and "society." [quotes from three sources that read *Pride and Prejudice* in these terms] In the face of such a long-standing consensus of interpretation it may seem merely ingenious at this point in time to question either the essential validity or the usefulness of this description of the novel. But in at least two important respects it seems open to objection.[8]

This author does not reject the conclusions previous scholars have reached about the relationship between individual and society in *Pride and Prejudice*; he rejects the convention of analyzing the novel in these terms. In pointing out how he has changed the question, the author expands the scope of his essay. Its significance is not just factual but methodological.

Some of the strategies described in this handout are drawn from Mark Gaipa's "Breaking into the Conversation: How Students Can Acquire Authority in Their Writing," Pedagogy 4.3 (2004): 419---37.

[1] Hannah Alpert '15, "Determining the Ages, Metallicities, and Star Formation Rates of Brightest Cluster Galaxies." [2] Vincent Mitchell '16, "Beckett's Krapp as a Harlequin: Still a Clown of Cosmological Comedy."

[3] Bianca Yuh '12, "The Limited Potential of True Reform."

[4] Dakota McCoy '14, "Research Proposal: Do Octopuses Think Like Vertebrates? A New Comparative Test."

[5] Alex Goel '13, "Corruption and Purity: Chaucer's Portrayal of Catholicism in the Canterbury Tales."

[6] Wenjing Dai '14, "The Politics of Ethnic Humor."

[7] Spencer Katz '13, "Muahaha!: Defining Evil Laughter."

[8] James Sherry, "Pride and Prejudice: The Limits of Society," Studies in English Literature 19.4 (1979): 609---22.