

# Working with Critical Sources

It is a challenging task to integrate critical sources into your argument and into your prose. These tips should help:

## 1. Signal Phrases

Critical sources must be introduced with signal phrases; do NOT simply drop a quotation into your argument with no acknowledgement about where it's from.

Wrong way: Conrad offers an intriguing portrait of an unreliable narrator. "The question of who shall narrate the story or through whose eyes the reader shall see is one which every writer of the novel has had to face" (Leaska 159).

\*Here, the author has merely dropped the critic Leaska into the essay. Avoid doing this.

Correct way: Conrad carefully limits his readers' knowledge to the narrator's perspective. As critic Mitchell A. Leaska observes in his article "The Concept of Point of View," "The question of who shall narrate the story or through whose eyes the reader shall see is one which every writer of the novel has had to face" (159). Conrad, by choosing a limited and even ignorant opening narrator, restricts the point of view. . .

\*Here, the author has carefully introduced the critic and the quotation. Once you've introduced your source, subsequent quotations from the same source do not need to include the work's title or the author's full name in the signal phrase: e.g. As Leaska further observes, "The question does not seem to have been an especially vexing one to novelists of the past" (159).

## 2. Incorporating your source into your argument

There are two basic ways to use critical sources.

- a. You may use a critical source to offer definitions or to clarify a phenomenon you're describing in your essay. The example above uses a source in this way.
- b. It's almost always more interesting, however, if you can show how your argument will extend or change or disagree with or refine what previous critics have shown.

Here are two examples:

While Achebe makes a powerful argument concerning Conrad's racism, he gives insufficient attention to Conrad's powerful indictment of colonialism.

[or]: Achebe makes a powerful argument concerning Conrad's racism, but his critique might be extended further by exploring the racism of The Company in more detail.

\*You'll need, of course, to summarize the key elements of the source's argument in order for you to disagree/revise, etc. that source.

### **3. Stay honest to your source**

It is important not to misrepresent a source in your paper. You should avoid taking a small part of someone else's argument and suggesting that this argument represents the author's entire point. Likewise, if a source offers a point that would serve as a powerful rebuttal to one of your points, you'll need to explain to your reader why this rebuttal is not valid.

It's always a good idea to keep in mind how you might like to be treated by another critic. You would want your ideas to be fairly represented, even if someone disagreed with them.