Establishing Your Contribution to Existing Research

**Purpose:** Establishing your original research contribution in your discussion of existing literature constitutes more than just avoiding plagiarism, writing a literature review, or even providing evidence to support your claims. Giving the context of extant research is about engaging with ideas, collaborating in an intellectual community, and thinking critically about the theories and research practices of your field.

**Thinking About the Role of Sources**

Your primary purpose in writing original work, such as a journal article or a dissertation, is to make an original claim. However, your claim is shaped by the sources you use. Depending on your discipline, sources can include original ethnographic or scientific data, primary source documents (such as literature and archival documents), as well as secondary sources (such as peer-reviewed articles and scholarly books). The goal is to synthesize multiple sources to provide an original answer to your research question. Acknowledging other research showcases your intellectual engagement and makes your thinking process transparent for your reader.

**Checklist for Engaging Existing Research:**

Consider the following questions to determine whether or not you have effectively engaged your sources:

- Did I accurately represent the author’s main point or position in my summary or paraphrase?
- When mentioning a source, did I provide enough summary (or in the case of several sources, enough generalization) to connect other author’s work to my ideas? Did I show why I am using this source?
- If I included a direct quote, did I adequately frame it? Did I introduce it with a signal phrase (which indicates the tone of the original writing) and follow up with a discussion or analysis that tells my reader how it connects to my ideas?
- Similarly, did I include enough discussion around a figure or table to contextualize it, showing my reader how it connects to the ideas I’m developing in my paper?
- Did I make the connection between my ideas and my sources clear? For example:
  - Did I show how these sources support or strengthen my ideas?
Did I show how these sources compare and contrast with my ideas?
Does my summary of the source adequately match the critique of the source (i.e. if you are providing a counterargument to a source, did you summarize the part of the source’s argument that you counter)?

Ways to Engage Existing Research

**Generalize:** State whether or not you came to the same conclusion several other authors have come to.

**Summarize:** Explain the main point/primary idea of a work (book, article).

**Paraphrase:** Convey author’s ideas (within a work) in your own words or explain other researchers’ ideas in your own words.

**Quote:** Use another writer’s words exactly, using quotation marks. When using a direct quote (words as they appear exactly in the original text), always frame it by introducing it with a signal phrase. Follow your quote with a discussion or analysis that tells your reader how it connects to your ideas. In general, choose your quotes wisely. Summarize or paraphrase general information, and use quotes as specific evidence to back up or engage with your ideas. A quote should be used when the word choice is particularly evocative or specific.

Examples of Effective Engagement of Outside Research:
The example below illustrates how one might use summary to synthesize an existing work’s contribution to the field while also pointing out its limitations:

“Dunbar-Hall and Gibson’s work fills an important gap in the literature by providing a refreshing historical, social and political critique of a broad range of musical styles, Aboriginal performers, and contemporary issues...However, this discourse attempts neither to determine why the history appears to be male dominated nor examine the issue relating to the lack of access by women performers to the same economic resources, social power, and agency as men” (Barney 2008: 4,5)

Additional Resources

- Harvard Guide to Using Sources—this online guide has extensive annotated guides to incorporating sources.
- Yale University Writing Center—this short online essay expounds on the philosophy behind engaging sources.
- Wendy Belcher’s book *Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks* has a chapter on reviewing and incorporating related literature.