

## **Best Practices For Using Sources In College Papers**

**Quote when and if you must, but summarize most often.  
Cite everything, all the time; when in doubt, cite.**

In general, synthesize source material and your ideas by following the 5 steps below.

### **STEP 1: Summarize the source material.**

To summarize accurately, efficiently, and without worry of plagiarism, you must:

- ✍ Put the information into your own words; in general, “in your own words” means you should retain no more than 1-2 words in 10 from among the author’s original words.
- ✍ Relay the author’s ideas, and only the author’s ideas (save interpretation, commentary, or opinion until after the summarized material ends).
- ✍ Concentrate on the author’s main point, not colorful but irrelevant details.
- ✍ Alter the order of ideas a little, but preserve the author’s emphasis.

### **STEP 2: Mark at the start and highlight throughout a long summary.**

- ✍ Begin with a verbal marker like “Reports suggest”; this marks the start of the summarized material.
- ✍ In long summaries, mention the source’s author every 2-3 sentences, using a phrase like “Smith adds” or “she also claims.” This highlights the fact that these ideas belong to someone other than you, the writer of the college paper.

The following excerpt from a student paper demonstrates STEP 2 guidelines:

*Efficiency and efficacy in education are not synonymous. A lecture to 100 people is an efficient learning method, but not often an effective method. The limited human attention span is one reason; one key research study showed that most people listen effectively for only 20 minutes at a time. After that, their attention wanders. The authors also found several methods of refocusing attention, however, like question sessions (Rand and Simpson 24-25). While lectures can be an effective as well as an efficient method, one characteristic does not guarantee the other.*

### **STEP 3: Cite (document, reference) the source.**

Whether you quote or summarize, always give credit to the author when the summarized material ends:

- ✍ Use either an in-text citation or an endnote number, either one, in combination with a list of sources.
- ✍ Use either Modern Language Association (MLA), American Psychological Association (APA), or Chicago (Turabian) style, or whatever style your professor specifies (ask for a handout). OWL at Purdue ([owl.english.purdue.edu](http://owl.english.purdue.edu)) provides further information on citing and links to handouts.

**STEP 4: Synthesize sources with your own ideas.**

To synthesize (mix information source material with your own analysis and evaluation) well, follow these guidelines:

- ✍ Use source material to set up or support an argument; don't just list summarized source material.
- ✍ Interweave multiple sources with one another and with your own ideas.
- ✍ Always comment on or interpret quoted or summarized source material; you, the writer of the college paper, should "have the last word" in each paragraph, on each page, and in the paper.

**Example:**

*Efficiency and efficacy in education are not synonymous. A lecture to 100 people is an efficient learning method, but not necessarily an effective method. In a key research study in college education, researchers found that most people listen effectively for no more than twenty minutes at a time. After that, their attention wanders (Rand 24). My own experience of lectures confirms this finding; fifteen minutes into a lecture, I find myself daydreaming. In another study, researchers found that video-taped lectures have an even shorter attention span, around twelve minutes (Johnson and Brown 12). Despite such evidence, lecture remains a common teaching method in college, and video-taped and internet lectures have become. . .*

In this passage, the student states an argument in sentences 1 & 2, interweaves not just one (good) but two (better) sources to support that argument, and comments on source material after using it.

**STEP 5: When you synthesize, gracefully distinguish between summarized/quoted material and your own ideas.**

These methods are enhanced versions of the methods discussed in Step 2:

- ✍ When information about the author lends authority to the source material, use an introduction like "According to Dr. Joyce Smith, Director of the National Institutes of Health, doctors should. . ."
- ✍ If such extra information does not add authority to source support, use more simple verbal markers like "In one newspaper article" or "eyewitnesses disagreed."
- ✍ Sometimes weave summarized information into your own sentence, like this: "While I believe the Zebra mussel is here to stay, ecologists like Dr. John Doe disagree, and suggest. . ."

**ONE FINAL NOTE:**

When a professor says: "I don't want you to summarize," she does NOT mean "use lots of direct quotations." She means: "I want your paper to make an argument (or evaluation, or analysis), and I want you to use summarized source material to help support that argument" (see Step 4, above).

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