

# Chapter 5. Working with Sources

## Consistencies (and Differences) Between Source-Based Writing and Academic Essays

Research writing—or source-based writing—is often afforded its own chapter in textbooks like this, and sometimes even its own classes in colleges and universities. This is because research writing is often defined as its own genre or type of writing. While research writing certainly has features that may distinguish it from other kinds of academic writing, it is not all that different from the type of academic writing described in this textbook. Nor are the elements you would consider while engaged in source-based writing all that different from those you would consider while developing a multimodal project. Perhaps the greatest similarity among all of this kind of work—as it is defined in this textbook—is that it all requires mindful reading. While nowhere in the phrases *research writing* and *source-based writing* does *reading* come up, one cannot develop a research essay or project without reading the sources that will inform it. Moreover, reading these sources mindfully by applying the most relevant reading strategies is an important element of writing strong source-based papers. Because of this (and other) important similarities between source-based writing and what is called academic writing in the previous chapter, this chapter on research writing will mark the consistencies between these kinds of writing, as well as a few important differences worth addressing. Let's start with the similarities. Here is a list of ways that research writing is just like academic writing as it is described in the previous chapter:

1. Research writing is about inquiry. In source-based writing, the writer uses several sources to explore and discover ideas and subjects.
2. Research writing is about entering a scholarly conversation. The writer reads sources in order to position herself, via an argument, in relation to those authors (i.e. sources) who are involved in a conversation on a particular subject.
3. Sources that you find while conducting research may support but also challenge your argument; use those that challenge your argument to address naysayers and refine your thinking.
4. Research writing involves synthesizing your sources; academic arguments are like extended synthesis papers (see Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 for more on synthesis papers and academic arguments).

5. Research writing demands mindful reading. In order to use the sources in the ways mentioned in this chapter, a writer needs to mindfully read the sources by choosing the appropriate strategies and annotation practices to support the particular research project.

Some differences that separate source-based writing from academic writing include the following:

1. While all of the reading strategies listed in Chapter 2 are potentially useful in academic writing, the final strategy “Reading and Evaluating Online Sources” is of particular use to source-based writing because it demands that the reader evaluate the kinds of sources and the credibility of the sources she is considering.
2. Skimming (see Chapter 2 for more on skimming) can be an especially important reading strategy initially when determining whether a source is going to be useful.
3. Research-based writing might involve field research in which you are expected to conduct interviews or observe situations. These activities are less likely to be part of academic writing.
4. Avoiding plagiarism becomes especially important when working with sources.

This rest of this chapter will address the four differences, listed just above, to help prepare you for source-based writing.

## Reading Online Sources for Credibility

Although many of the reading strategies introduced in Chapter 2 can help you understand the content of online sources, the final reading strategy in that chapter outlines ways of reading online sources for their credibility, which means reading them to determine whether the sources can be trusted. The following questions (also included in Chapter 2) can help you determine whether the source meets your needs. Remember that you may use annotation as a tool for recording your answers to these questions directly on the text.

1. *Consider* the differences among these domains. What kind of website does the text appear on? Is it a .com, .org, .gov, .edu?
2. *Know*. Who is the author, organization, or company that sponsors the website? Search for more information once you have this information. If there is no author, try looking up the website at WHOIS, which provides this information: <https://whois.icann.org/en>
3. *Determine*, if you can, whether the piece is peer-reviewed, which means that it goes through an evaluation by other scholars in the field. If you are looking at a journal article, for example, notice the press that publishes the journal. Then search that press to find information about it.

4. *Look* to see if the text has a bibliography at the end. If so, what kinds of texts are cited?
5. *Consider* whether any sources are cited in the piece. If so, what kinds?

## The Role of Skimming in Source-Based Writing

Skimming, the second reading strategy described in Chapter 2, is rarely useful on its own and usually requires that the reader return for a closer, second reading. That's not necessarily the case when it comes to skimming sources for research writing. The exciting and also overwhelming aspect of research writing is that there are so many sources out there to read. The internet, your library's specialized databases, and print books offer so much information. When you are in the early stages of developing an argument for a source-based project or paper, you will need to determine which sources will be most useful. At this point in the process, it's not necessary to closely read each source and annotate it. You could end up wasting valuable time on many sources that will be of no use to you. Instead, you can start by skimming and annotating the sources in the ways described in Chapter 2. The following steps (which also appear on Chapter 2) can help you productively skim potential sources and make informed decisions about their uses to you. As you skim, you may want to annotate a piece by noting the elements in the following list and marking them as they appear in the text.

1. The elements you notice by “previewing” the piece, such as its title; author; introductory material (e.g. an abstract); and general design and structure (e.g. subject headings, graphics, and hyperlinks). See you if you can determine its genre, which means you decide what type of text it is.
2. The introduction since introductions often (although not always) describe the piece as a whole.
3. The first sentence of each paragraph since first sentences are usually topic sentences and can give you an overall sense of the subject of the paragraph.
4. The conclusion or the final paragraph of the piece since conclusions often (although not always) summarize a piece.

## Field Research in Source-Based Writing

Field research is research that takes the writer into the subject's field to conduct first-hand research as opposed to simply relying on research that others have completed. Field research often

includes observations and interviews. For example, if you are writing about daycare centers, you might visit a few centers and observe what goes on. If you are writing about how fast-food restaurants treat their employees, you might develop questionnaires for employees to complete and/or set up interviews with them. This sort of first-hand research may be done in conjunction with research that other scholars have conducted and published or it may be done on its own.

Although they may not seem relevant at first, the reading strategies in Chapter 2 are helpful with field research, too. For example, the same way you may read online sources for their credibility you should think about the credibility of the participants in the research you are conducting. How trustworthy are their perspectives? Are some more trustworthy than others? You may also consider the best reading strategies to use while reading over participants' answers to interview questions and questionnaires, as well as any transcripts you may have from your field research.

## Avoiding Plagiarism

You plagiarize when you use someone else's ideas, words, or visuals (e.g. graphs, cartoons, images, maps) but do not give them credit. **Plagiarism** may be intentional or unintentional, meaning that you may be aware you are plagiarizing (but still trying to get away with it) or be unaware that a summary you have written, for example, resembles the original too closely without proper citation.

There really is no reason to plagiarize ever, but particularly not when writing is defined as entering a conversation with others who have thought and written about a subject, as it is in this textbook. You are expected, in other words, to consult and to use what other scholars have said about a subject; there is no reason to hide the fact that you have consulted others. Conceiving of writing as entering a conversation *depends* upon your using what others have said to help you develop your own ideas. This is precisely what professional scholars do. They engage, respond, and think alongside other scholars and use each other's ideas to develop their own. Examples of this kind of work come more easily when we think about the sciences: certain discoveries could not have been made if earlier scientists didn't lay the groundwork. But, the same is true in the humanities. Look at any piece of writing from a humanities scholar and you will see that they consistently quote other scholars in order to give those scholars credit for helping them develop their own ideas and think more complexly about a subject. By quoting these other scholars, they have avoided plagiarizing.

Avoiding plagiarism is crucial in all of your writing, but in source-based writing it can be a bit more difficult to avoid since you are juggling a bunch of different sources. You may have trouble keeping track of who said what or you may not know how to cite your sources correctly. There are online resources to help you with both, and your instructor will likely have other resources, as

well, to help you avoid plagiarizing. Refworks, EasyBib, and other online bibliographic management programs provide an online space to both save your references and develop correctly formatted citations for them. Of course, you will always want to compare the citations generated by these programs to the most up-to-date handbooks (e.g. the *MLA Handbook*) and online sources ([The Purdue OWL](#)) to be sure they are correct.

Your institution has a statement or code that describes how students are expected to conduct themselves, and these often include expectations about academic integrity. Take some time to research your own institution's statement about academic integrity so you understand the intricacies of how issues related to academic integrity, including plagiarism, are addressed on your specific campus.