Using Evidence Effectively in an Humanities Essay[1]

Writing an effective humanities essay involves the careful selection and explanation of evidence from the sources found during the research process.

Evidence for Humanities Assignments

Depending on the assignment, humanities students must back up their arguments using primary sources, secondary sources, or a combination.

Almost every humanities assignment requires the use of evidence. A book- or article review will usually just have one source of evidence—the item under review. A primary source analysis is a close study of a single primary source. When writing your exam essays, recall examples from your course and its readings to back up your arguments. Writers of research papers in classics typically make use of a combination of primary and secondary sources.

Scholars have developed conventions for how to include evidence effectively; the next section details how it should be done.

Summaries and Paraphrases

Whenever possible, in your own words present the evidence you have found. But remember, you must **always cite** the sources of summarized and paraphrased information.

- Summarize what you have read when the details of the original are not relevant to the argument. You might even summarize an entire article, chapter, or book.

- Paraphrase when you can state the details of the original source more clearly and concisely, and when the exact words are not relevant to the argument. Very often, you are looking for information about people, places, and events in the past. If the original source is difficult to understand, a paraphrase restates it more clearly. The paraphrase might be shorter, the same length, or longer than the original.

Warning: It is very easy to slip into plagiarism. A paraphrase that too closely resembles the original constitutes plagiarism.

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[1] This skills module was written by Dr. Marc Cels of Athabasca University. It has been adapted to fit the content of this course.

Integrating Paraphrases and Summaries

Summarized and paraphrased information can be woven into the argument of an essay. However, it can also be very effective to introduce and integrate paraphrases and summaries by noting the source of the information or interpretation. This shows your reader that you are able to follow and report on a scholarly "conversation." The following paragraph uses (fictional) scholarly articles as evidence. Notice how it is used and where the citation notes are placed. Because the exact words and details are not relevant, only summaries were needed.

> A third factor for the success of early Christianity was its accessibility. This group required little in the way of initiation rituals. Rather, joining the movement was primarily a matter of declared intention . Joan Paton's study of mystery cults argues that acceptance into the Christian community, unlike that into other groups, did not require a long, drawn out process or tests of physical endurance.[5] Moreover, as Chris Bishop notes, though baptism was a common practice among Christians, it was not always strictly required. [6] Indeed, the simplicity of the process involved in becoming a Christian, in addition to the religion's openness to men, women, children, free people and slaves, and its refusal to require initiation fees, paved the way for a massive influx of followers.

C. When to Use Direct Quotations

Direct quotations should be used sparingly and should be brief. Whenever possible, summarize or paraphrase sources in your own words.

Warning: Avoid cutting and pasting large blocks of text into your essay. Papers written this way are little more than a patchwork of quotations without showing any original thought and even less understanding.

There are three main justifications for including direct quotations:

- Include quotations when the exact words from the source are important evidence. This is more often the case with primary sources than with secondary sources. A quotation from a primary source can also reveal the tone or mood of a text which might be used as evidence.

- Include quotations when the original words express an important concept used in the argument. This is more common when reporting on how scholars have interpreted an event. Perhaps a scholar has coined a phrase or term that encapsulates a concept that you want to either use or criticize.

- Include quotations when the source says something in a striking way. Sometimes a scholar summarizes his or her observations in a pithy and

> memorable phrase or uses a very good analogy that is useful in your argument. Likewise, a short passage from a primary source might provide a focal point for your discussion.

Formatting a Quotation

Indicate where the quotation begins and ends. Do not change the font by bolding or italicizing the quotation. If the quotation is four lines or less, enclose the quoted material in quotations marks, "like this." A citation comes at the end of a quotation to indicate its source. If the quotation is five or more lines long, set it off as a block quotation, like this:

> Block quotations should be single-spaced and indented from the left margin ten spaces (or an extra tab space). Your word processor can easily indent a paragraph. Do not enclose block quotations in quotation marks or change the font. Use block quotations sparingly and only when the exact words of the passage are important to your discussion. If you have too many block quotations, it might be a sign that you have difficulty understanding the material enough to paraphrase or summarize it in your own words. Block quotations must also be scrupulously cited.

Use the exact words of the original source in your quotation. It is reasonable, however, to shorten a quotation and to alter it a little for clarity, but without changing the meaning. Shorten a quotation using an ellipsis mark (…) where original words have been omitted. If you need to change words to make the quotation agree with the grammar of your own text or to clarify words like "him" or "them," use square brackets to indicate the change to your reader, like this quote from Lynch's Early Christianity: a Brief History: "But he [Origen] is especially remembered for his intellectual achievements. [He became] the first to try in a systematic way to determine the words of the Old Testament, a massive task." [2]

Remember to integrate the quotation. Inexperienced writers often insert a quotation into their essay without any explanation or warning, but this is very ineffective and awkward. It is much better to introduce the quotation by alerting the reader that the quotation is about to begin. Explain the significance to the argument and its value as evidence. At the very least, this involves explaining who the author is:

> In his history of early Christianity, Joseph H. Lynch points out that the "Gnostic Christians generally claimed to have a *secret* religious knowledge," yet they argued that this knowledge could only be gained by certain experiences, believing that "It was not the kind of knowledge gained from studying books but rather a special kind of knowledge that arose out of a personal insight or out of a revelation that radically changed the recipient.'[3]

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[2] Lynch, Joseph H. *Early Christianity: a Brief History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. p.98.
[3] Ibid. p. 55.

In this example, introducing the quotation gives it the full authority of its expert author. The quotation is signaled by the words "points out" (other good verbs are asserts, concludes, holds, reasons, claims, etc.). Instead of giving a long quotation from Lynch, phrases from two nearby passages were woven into the text of the essay. Note that the quotation within the quotation appears between single quotation marks. The quote from Lynch is followed by a transition sentence that tells the reader what to expect in the next part of the essay's argument. The quotation is fully integrated into the paragraph and essay.

Summary: Examples of summaries, paraphrases, and quotations from Lynch's book on early Christianity

Lynch presents a coherent and detailed chronology of early Christianity and its development to a sub-sect of Judaism to its status as the force uniting an empire.	This summarizes a whole book.
As Lynch reminds us, Jesus and his earliest followers were Jews, and Christianity was, above all, an element that developed within Judaism.	This paraphrases a passage from chapter 4 (Jewish Christianity, p.38) of Lynch's book. It is clear from the wording where the paraphrase begins and ends.
Certainly Lynch seems to argue for a high degree of literacy when he writes "By the middle decades of the second century, many proto-orthodox Christians knew, read, and revered the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and the letters of Paul…."[3] As Joe Shmoe points out, however, statistics on ancient literacy do not exist, and it is impossible to know the degree to which the average person could access texts.[4]	This paragraph introduces and explains the significance of a quotation that has been shortened with an ellipsis mark (Chapter 5, p. 60). The quotation is followed up by an interpretation summarized from a (fictional) scholarly article.

Where to Get Help

Making the best use of evidence comes through effort and practice. When reading and researching, pay attention to how scholars use their evidence and look for models. Most writing guides for students have a section that goes into more detail on how to best use evidence to build a convincing argument and to avoid plagiarism.