# How do I use information from sources?

Using information from sources is essential in almost all assignments you will complete at university - essays, reports, as well as presentations, all require the use of sources. A few definitions to start with:

- a **source** is anything you get information from: websites, books, journal articles, lectures, YouTube videos, email correspondence, and so on are all sources of information.
- a **reference** is used to acknowledge where you got the information from. See the Referencing Guides for more information on this. Note that there are many different methods of referencing (e.g. APA, Harvard, Footnotes, Running Notes, OSCOLA) which are used in different subjects. Harvard is the most common at the University of Northampton, so all of the examples below use the Harvard Style, 5th edition, for the in-text references. Note that ALL methods of using information from sources rely on in-text referencing. Any information derived from sources needs referencing.

## Why use information from sources?

Using information from sources is very important because it demonstrates your learning. You're expected to use sources to find out new information for particular assignments, to demonstrate that you have learnt new information. Of course, most of the information will already be known to your tutors and the person reading or listening to your assignment or presentation. So what they really want to hear is your understanding and interpretation of the information - your take on it. The rest of this guide is going to focus on the different ways in which you can demonstrate your understanding and interpretation of information from sources.

Finding relevant, reliable, academic sources is an essential first step, and if you are finding this challenging, resources are available on the SkillsHub and you can also contact your Academic Librarian for help.

## How to use information:

There are many different ways to use information from sources, and you will need to use all of them at different times throughout your course work. This isn't a recipe (first do this, and then do this), but more of a buffet (take a little bit of one and a little bit of the other). Many will be used in combination, and they are not mutually exclusive.

## Summarising:

When you summarise something, you condense or reduce what a source says over several pages into a single sentence, by choosing the key ideas only. Put these into your own words.

> Keyes (2005, pp.539-541) distinguishes between the idea of mental well-being as an active presence, and the traditional view of the absence of mental health leading to mental illness.

Summaries are very useful when you have read an extensive or long source, of which only the main idea is relevant. You are likely to use a lot of summarising when you write essays for which you are expected to read quite widely.

You can use summary writing as a reading technique as well. Writing mini summaries as you read through a source like a textbook chapter can help you to review and consolidate what you are reading. This is also a great exam revision technique.

Practice your summarising by taking a section of a work which goes over a page or two - a subsection in a textbook, for example. Identify the main idea, two or three supporting points, and the most relevant or interesting example or piece of data. Write about these in your own words in 100 words. Then, reduce this to 50 words. Now you have an effective summary.

Remember that when using summaries in coursework, you will often be summarising for a particular purpose. So if you read one journal article and it is relevant for two assignments (a presentation and an essay, for instance, with similar topics but different purposes), you may express the main idea of the article differently to support a different point. For example, the summary above could also read:

> The view of mental health as the absence of mental illness is often criticised as inadequate (Keyes, 2005, pp.539-540).

Here, the comparison of the traditional view and the new view is left out, because it is Keyes' criticism which is important for this particular assignment. So remember that a summary doesn't have to capture everything about the idea in the source; it has to capture what is **relevant**. That is why summarising demonstrates your understanding: because you have read the entire source, selected what is relevant to the point, and condensed it in your own words.

**Quoting**:

In a quotation, you take the words exactly as they are from the source. Use quote marks to indicate where the phrases taken from the source begin and end.

> As Keyes (2005, p.539) states, "There exists no standard by which to measure, diagnose, and study the presence of mental health". This suggests that the diagnosis of mental illness is widely

> considered to be more important than the diagnosis of mental well-being.
>
> OR
>
> "There exists no standard by which to measure, diagnose, and study the presence of mental health" (Keyes, 2005, p.539) states. This suggests that the diagnosis of mental illness is widely considered to be more important than the diagnosis of mental well-being.

Quotations are probably the easiest way to use information from sources, and for this reason are often used too much. To use quotations well, however, is more difficult. Notice above that in this example there is a sentence following the quote which explains how the student understands and interprets the quote. This is essential whenever you use a direct quotation; you cannot let it 'speak for itself', but rather you need to integrate it into your assignment and show the reader why it is relevant. Also, you need to introduce the quote, often by using the author's name in the sentence and a verb like 'states', 'argues', 'suggests'. This is where you show your understanding: in selecting and choosing appropriate or powerful quotes, and in explaining them.

As a rough guideline, try to avoid quoting more than 10% of your word count in an assignment. And on slides or in a poster, try to avoid doing it at all, as it makes visuals look very cluttered. You can quote verbally, however, as long as you explain it. Try to avoid quoting at the beginning or end of a paragraph or section; use quotes as support instead, in the middle of paragraphs (see Paragraph Structure guide).

Exceptions: you may quote more extensively if your coursework involves lots of textual analysis, for example, analysis of poetry, legal articles, and so on. You will still need to interpret in these cases, though.

Aim to quote only those sentences or phrases which are so well put and well written, or precise in their meaning that they cannot be put in different words without losing something - either their power or their meaning. Sometimes authors hit on a turn of phrase or particular use of words that simply can't be altered without losing their power. In this case, quote away.

Very often you will be using quotes to follow on from a summary, paraphrase or synthesis, to add more information or illustrate the idea.

If you copy a direct quotation then you need to make sure it corresponds exactly with the original. The length of the quotation dictates whether or not you include it in the body of your text (see full Referencing guides for details).

**Paraphrasing**:

Put the ideas into your own words. This is almost the opposite of quotation, as when you paraphrase you try to communicate the meaning of the original text accurately, but in different words.

> As Keyes (2005, p.539) highlights, because mental health is understood to be the absence of illness, there is no fixed standard for evaluating positive mental health or wellbeing.
>
> OR
>
> There is no fixed standard for evaluating positive mental health or wellbeing because mental health is understood to be the absence of illness (Keyes, 2005, p.539).

The difference between paraphrase and summary is sometimes quite difficult to see, but in essence, you paraphrase when what you write is roughly the same length as the original text. It will often be a bit shorter, but not noticeably. When you summarise, it should be much shorter than the original. As you get more confident, don't worry about whether you are summarising or paraphrasing; expert writers and presenters typically use a blend of both.

To paraphrase effectively, follow a similar process to summarising. First, identify the main idea and important details. Take notes on these in your own words, or using symbols and abbreviations. Then put away the original and write a sentence or two from your notes **only**. Finally, compare your sentence to the original.

A good paraphrase will have different sentence structure, and different words (unless they are keywords with no appropriate synonyms with the same meaning). For example, this is the original quote:

> Keyes, 2005, p.539: "There exists no standard by which to measure, diagnose, and study the presence of mental health; science, by default, portrays mental health as the absence of psychopathology."

Compare this to the paraphrase: because mental health is understood to be the absence of illness, there is no fixed standard for evaluating positive mental health or wellbeing.

Here the two halves of the sentence have been put in reverse order, and different words have been used e.g. 'psychopathology' has been replaced with '(mental) illness'. Notice that some words have been simply left out instead of replaced, and some words e.g.

'mental' and 'standard' have not been changed at all, because they are keywords. If you are really struggling, you can follow these steps to write your paraphrase:

- underline the main ideas and change the order in which they are expressed
- consider which words or sections can be left out
- change all words except for the keywords
- modify the grammar where necessary

But this can be quite challenging, and lead to awkward sentences, so it is often easier simply to take notes, and write from your notes.

Note that effective paraphrasing is absolutely necessary to avoid charges of plagiarism. If your tutor has enabled the 'draft' or 'multiple submissions' function on Turnitin you MAY be able to use this to help you check your paraphrasing (ask before you submit something that is not your final work: some courses encourage this and others don't). If any words outside quotes are matching a source text that you have actually used, they should be paraphrased more fully, unless they are keywords or fixed phrases common in your subject.

**Synthesising**:

When you synthesise, you combine information from different sources. This can be by comparing and contrasting what two or more different authors say about the same idea, looking for agreement or disagreement, using one to add more information to another, or summarising from both together.

For example, here are two quotes from two different sources with similar arguments:

"Many individuals otherwise free of mental disorder do not feel healthy or function well" Keyes, 2005, p.540

"The list of causes of emotional distress is the reason I have rejected 'mental illness' altogether as a way of characterizing disturbance....most emotional distress is best understood as a rational response to sick societies" James, 2007, p.xx

And here are some different options for synthesis:

Summarising both together: People without a formally diagnosed mental illness may still not be 'well', but may experience emotional disturbance or upset (Keyes, 2005, p.540; James, 2007, p.xx).

> Comparing: Keyes (2005, p.540) and James (2007, p.xx) both argue that the concept of mental illness does not convey people's mental well-being adequately, as they may be free of disorder, but still upset or disturbed.
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> Using one to add more information: Keyes (2005, p.540) argues that the absence of mental illness cannot be equated with mental well-being, because, according to James (2007, p.xx), there are many people who experience emotional distress that does not qualify as a formal 'mental illness'.

Each of these is a potential way to synthesise; which one works better depends on the assignment, its aim, and what you are trying to say. As you can see, in order to synthesise effectively you need to use both paraphrasing and summary. Excellent analysis, whether in writing or in speaking, involves a great deal of synthesis, so this is something to try to aim for as much as possible. Try to summarise across several sources, and look for similarities and differences. Using a range of sources which all make the same point makes your argument stronger, because it shows that there is a wide basis of support.

The reason synthesis is a good way to show your understanding is that it shows that you can identify sources with similar arguments, or different points of view, and put them together to reach your own conclusion. The literal meaning of synthesis is in fact to create something new, e.g. to synthesise a chemical. So when you put together information from sources in different ways, you generate new conclusions and new insights. This is one of the ways that you can show your originality and individuality in your academic work.

**Commenting:**

After a paraphrase, a quote or a summary, explain what you think this idea means, why it is important and/or how it relates to your point. This should be your own interpretation and idea, and as such does not require a reference. If you are instead using someone else's interpretation, it DOES need a reference.

> Keyes (2005, p.539) distinguishes between the idea of mental well-being as an active presence, and the traditional view of the absence of mental health leading to mental illness. **This differentiation is key, because it allows research to focus on what makes people lead happier, more fulfilled lives.**

Add your own comments after you use support in the form of a paraphrase, quote or summary. You can use them after you synthesise too, but often you are doing a comment in the process of synthesising, so it's not always necessary.

Remember, any sentence without a reference will be considered to be your own interpretation, comment, insight or analysis. So when you read your work over, make sure that you check each unreferenced sentence to be sure that is the case. If you are not certain that it is your own take or twist on the information, you may need to incorporate a reference.

## Sources used:

Keyes, C. L. (2005). Mental illness and/or mental health? Investigating axioms of the complete state model of health. *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology*, **73**(3), 539.

James, O. (2007). *Affluenza: How to be successful and stay sane*. London: Random House.

## Further reading:

Bailey, S. (2006) *Academic writing: a handbook for international students.* London: Routledge. Note that certain chapters e.g. on paraphrasing will be useful for all students, not just international students.

Gillet, A. (n.d.) Academic writing: reporting - paraphrase, summary and synthesis. *UEFAP* [online]. Available from: http://www.uefap.com/writing/writfram.htm [Accessed 10th June 2015].

Jordan, R. R. (1999) *Academic writing course.* 3rd ed. London: Longman.