

Synthesizing Sources

Entering the Conversation

We all draw on the ideas of others as we develop our own positions, regardless of the topic. Whether you are explaining your opinion about an issue specific to your community (such as whether to allow skateboarding in public parks) or you are developing a position on a national or global issue (such as whether to change immigration policies), you should know as much as possible about the topic. Rather than make a quick response that reflects an opinion based only on what you already know, you'll want to research and read sources — what others have written. Then you can develop your own *informed* opinion, a measured response that considers multiple perspectives and possibilities. We call this process *synthesis*; it involves considering various viewpoints in an effort to create a new and more informed position.

Philosopher Kenneth Burke compared this process to showing up late to a party. There are a dozen different conversations going on. If you were to approach one group of people having a heated debate, you'd need to listen for a while to understand what the specific topic is, what has already been said, who is taking what side, and what they're not saying. Then, by either expanding on what others are saying, challenging what others are saying, or filling in a gap in their understanding, you would begin to enter the conversation and make your own contribution. And that's what synthesis is all about: entering the conversation that society is having about a topic. You enter the conversation by carefully reading and understanding multiple viewpoints and ideas surrounding an issue, examining your own ideas on the matter, and then synthesizing these perspectives into a more informed position than the one you began with.

When you're learning about a subject, look for reliable sources. Be aware of the *bias* that a source brings to the topic. Consider the speaker: What does he or she believe in? How might the speaker's position lead to personal gain? Don't look for a pro-and-con debate that represents only polarized views; look for a range of viewpoints. This might sound like a lot to keep in mind, but don't worry; you work with sources all the time. For instance, when you decide to buy a new smartphone, you gather information by exploring different sources. You might consult *Consumer Reports* and other technology magazines, compare prices and technical specs, ask friends for their opinions and experiences, and go to an electronics store to talk with experts. You might also read reviews online or use electronic forums as a quick source for many opinions. But you might choose not to ask a friend who has an old flip phone; nor would you

had to be diminished, accounted for, or forgiven; after that, the novel's special qualities had to be placed in the context first of other American novels (to their detriment) and then of world literature. The best bets here seemed to be Twain's style and the river setting, and the critics invested accordingly: Eliot, who had never read the novel as a boy, traded on his own childhood beside the big river, elevating Huck to the Boy, and the Mississippi to the River God, therein finding the sort of mythic resonance that he admired. Trilling liked the river god idea, too, though he didn't bother to capitalize it. He also thought that Twain, through Huck's lying, told truths, one of them being (I kid you not) that "something . . . had gone out of American life after the [Civil War], some simplicity, some innocence, some peace." What Twain himself was proudest of in the novel — his style — Trilling was glad to dub "not less than definitive in American literature. The prose of *Huckleberry Finn* established for written prose the virtues of American colloquial speech. . . . He is the master of the style that escapes the fixity of the printed page, that sounds in our ears with the immediacy of the heard voice, the very voice of unpretentious truth." The last requirement was some quality that would link Huck to other, though "lesser," American novels such as Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, that would possess some profound insight into the American character. Leslie Fiedler obligingly provided it when he read homoerotic attraction into the relationship between Huck and Jim, pointing out the similarity of this to such other white man–dark man friendships as those between Ishmael and Queequeg in *Moby-Dick* and Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook in James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*.

The canonization proceeded apace: great novel (Trilling, 1950), greatest novel (Eliot, 1950), world-class novel (Lauriat Lane Jr., 1955). Sensible naysayers, such as Leo Marx, were lost in the shuffle of propaganda. But, in fact, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has little to offer in the way of greatness. There is more to be learned about the American character *from* its canonization than *through* its canonization.

(1996)

The paragraphs here are the second and third paragraphs of Smiley's essay, in which she debunks the claim that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is the novel "all American literature grows out of." She establishes herself as well-read on the subject of Twain's novel by reviewing the literature about the novel before she embarks on her own claims that the "canonization" of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is more interesting as a comment on the American character than the book itself. She cites literary experts such as critics Leslie Fiedler and Lionel Trilling, as well as writers such as T. S. Eliot. She names the publications in which their commentary appeared — *Partisan Review*, *New York Times Book Review* — and both quotes and paraphrases the ideas of these writers. Smiley takes on the big names in American literature criticism, but her argument would be much weaker had she not acknowledged the praise of those who had, as she notes, elevated *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* into the "pantheon" of great American literature.

• **ACTIVITY** •

In the following passage from *A Level Playing Field: African American Athletes and the Republic of Sports*, Gerald L. Early discusses the complex character of Jackie Robinson, the first black athlete to play in major league baseball. What is the purpose of the sources Early chooses to include? How do they enhance or detract from his own voice? What is the purpose of each of the notes documenting the sources?

from *A Level Playing Field*

GERALD L. EARLY

But 1949 was also Robinson's year of liberation. According to Branch Rickey, known as the Mahatma by sportswriters, the Dodgers executive who signed Robinson and who pushed for integration: "For three years [that was the agreement] this boy was to turn the other cheek. He did, day after day, until he had no other to turn. They were both beat off. There were slight slip-ups on occasion in that first year in Montreal."¹

Robinson had agreed to ignore all slights, insults, and abuses that he endured on the playing field during his first three years as a professional ballplayer in the white leagues. This generated, naturally, a certain public sympathy, as Robinson did, indeed, endure much abuse, and he did not have a natural or an easy camaraderie with most of his white teammates. He became almost a perfect Gandhi-like figure of sacrifice and forbearance, and he created the paradigm for how integration was to proceed in the United States in the 1950s and early 1960s — the Noble Negro who, through his nobility, a mystical product of his American heritage of suffering but enduring devotion to the foundational principles of American life, legitimates white institutions as he integrates them. As the *New York Times* put it in 1950, "The going wasn't easy. Jackie Robinson met open or covert hostility with the spirit of a gallant gentleman. He kept his temper, he kept his poise and he played good baseball. Now he has won his battle. No fan threatens to riot, no player threatens to go on strike when Jackie Robinson, or any one of several Negroes, takes the field."² This is the Robinson that is always remembered when his career is reexamined today. He is almost always sentimentalized.

But it must be remembered that Robinson played major league baseball with the Dodgers for ten years, only two of which were under this agreement. (The agreement also included the year in Montreal.) So for most of his career as a big league ballplayer, Robinson did not act in any sort of self-sacrificing nonviolent way. He was a tough, almost chip-on-the-shoulder player, a

¹Branch Rickey, with Robert Riger, *The American Diamond: A Documentary of the Game of Baseball* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1965), p. 46.

²"Jackie Robinson's New Honor," *New York Times*, December 8, 1950.

particularly aggressive athlete who usually took umbrage at the least slight or unfairness he felt on the field. He understood that high-performance sports were about intimidation, and he was not about to be intimidated.³

(2011)

Using Sources to Appeal to an Audience

If you were writing an in-class essay, would you take the time to put together a bibliography? Of course not. But you would prepare a bibliography for a formal research paper because that type of writing has a different purpose and the audience has different expectations. A writer must analyze the rhetorical situation in order to determine what is appropriate, even when it comes to sources and documentation. (See *The Rhetorical Triangle*, p. 3.)

Now let's consider a topic and examine how sources were used and identified for three different audiences. The following excerpts are from three pieces about indirect speech by the linguist and cognitive scientist Steven Pinker.

The first example is from an article in *Time* magazine written for a general audience of readers interested primarily in understanding the basics of Pinker's ideas.

from *Words Don't Mean What They Mean*

STEVEN PINKER

Why don't people just say what they mean? The reason is that conversational partners are not modems downloading information into each other's brains. People are very, very touchy about their relationships. Whenever you speak to someone, you are presuming the two of you have a certain degree of familiarity—which your words might alter. So every sentence has to do two things at once: convey a message and continue to negotiate that relationship.

The clearest example is ordinary politeness. When you are at a dinner party and want the salt, you don't blurt out, "Gimme the salt." Rather, you use what linguists call a whimperative, as in "Do you think you could pass the salt?" or "If you could pass the salt, that would be awesome."

Taken literally, these sentences are inane. The second is an overstatement, and the answer to the first is obvious. Fortunately, the hearer assumes that the speaker is rational and listens between the lines. Yes, your point is to request the salt, but you're doing it in such a way that first takes care to establish what linguists call "felicity conditions," or the prerequisites to making a sensible request. The

³In 1950, and the years to come, Jack battled with umpires over matters not simply of judgment but of ethics, in his growing belief that the umpires, all white, were abusing their power in order to put him in his place." See Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson*, p. 229; see also Jackie Robinson, "Now I Know Why They Boo Me!" *Look*, January 25, 1955, pp. 22–28.

underlying rationale is that the hearer not be given a command but simply be asked or advised about one of the necessary conditions for passing the salt. Your goal is to have your need satisfied without treating the listener as a flunky who can be bossed around at will.

(2007)

Note that there are no formal sources cited. The terms that are introduced—*whimperative* and *felicity conditions*—are more playful than technical, and Pinker makes no attempt to cite the academic origin of these terms or the other ideas in this article. He does not delve into the research that led to the conclusions he outlines. His goal in this brief article for the general reader is to inform and keep moving.

The audience for Pinker's book *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature* is interested in exploring his subject more deeply, and his use and citation of sources becomes correspondingly more extensive and formal.

from *The Stuff of Thought*

STEVEN PINKER

The double message conveyed with an implicature is nowhere put to greater use than in the commonest kind of indirect speech of all, politeness. Politeness in linguistics does not refer to social etiquette, like eating your peas without using your knife, but to the countless adjustments that speakers make to avoid the equally countless ways that their listeners might be put off. People are very, very touchy, and speakers go to great lengths not to step on their toes. In their magisterial work *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Use*, the anthropologists Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson . . . extended Grice's theory by showing how people all over the world use politeness to lubricate their social interactions.¹

Politeness Theory begins with Erving Goffman's observation that when people interact they constantly worry about maintaining a nebulous yet vital commodity called "face" (from the idiom "to save face").² Goffman defined face as a positive social value that a person claims for himself. Brown and Levinson divide it into positive face, the desire to be approved (specifically, that other people want for you what you want for yourself), and negative face, the desire to be unimpeded or autonomous. The terminology, though clumsy, points to a fundamental duality in social life, which has been discovered in many guises and goes by many names: solidarity and status, connection and autonomy, communion and agency, intimacy and power, communal sharing and authority ranking.³

(2007)

¹Brown & Levinson, 1987b. See also Brown, 1987; Brown & Gilman, 1972; Fraser, 1990; Green, 1996; Holtgraves, 2002.

²Goffman, 1967.

³Fiske, 1992; Fiske, 2004; Haslam, 2004; Holtgraves, 2002.

While this is not a scientific study, it is also not a brief and breezy article in a magazine with a very wide readership. The audience for a book of this sort has some interest in the topic—they have chosen to read a whole book on linguistics and cognition—and because of that Pinker feels comfortable not just summarizing the latest thinking in the field but introducing terminology common to research in linguistics and tracing the origins of concepts back to their academic roots. He also formally (and fully) cites his sources using extensive endnotes that appear at the back of the book.

Finally, take a look at the next selection from a scholarly article by Pinker in the academic journal *Intercultural Pragmatics*.

from *The Evolutionary Social Psychology of Off-Record Indirect Speech Acts*

STEVEN PINKER

The double message conveyed with an implicature is nowhere put to greater use than in the commonest kind of indirect speech, politeness. In their seminal work *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Use*, Brown and Levinson (1987b) extended Grice's theory by showing how people in many (perhaps all) cultures use politeness to lubricate their social interactions.

Politeness Theory begins with Goffman's (1967) observation that when people interact they constantly worry about maintaining a commodity called "face" (from the idiom "to save face"). Goffman defined face as a positive social value that a person claims for himself. Brown and Levinson divide it into positive face, the desire to be approved (specifically, that other people want for you what you want for yourself), and negative face, the desire to be unimpeded or autonomous. The terminology points to a fundamental duality in social life which goes by many names: solidarity and status, connection and autonomy, communion and agency, intimacy and power, communal sharing and authority ranking (Fiske 1992, 2004; Haslam 2004; Holtgraves 2002). Later we will see how these wants come from two of the three major social relations in human life.

Brown and Levinson argue that Grice's Cooperative Principle applies to the maintenance of face as well as to the communication of data. Conversationalists work together, each trying to maintain his own face and the face of his partner. The challenge is that most kinds of speech pose at least some threat to the face of the hearer. The mere act of initiating a conversation imposes a demand on the hearer's time and attention. Issuing an imperative challenges her status and autonomy. Making a request puts her in the position where she might have to refuse, earning her a reputation as stingy or selfish. Telling something to someone implies that she was ignorant of the fact in the first place. And then there are criticisms, boasts, interruptions, outbursts, the telling of bad news, and the broaching of divisive topics, all of which can injure the hearer's face directly.

At the same time, people have to get on with the business of life, and in doing so they have to convey requests and news and complaints. The solution is to make amends with politeness: the speaker sugarcoats his utterances with niceties that

reaffirm his concern for the hearer or that acknowledge her autonomy. Brown and Levinson call the stratagems positive and negative politeness, though better terms are sympathy and deference.

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(2007)

Notice that for this academic audience of researchers and scholars who bring a good deal of prior knowledge to the text, Pinker chooses other scholarly works as his sources and documents them thoroughly in a style that gives those sources more emphasis. Rather than just putting the citations at the back of the book, he embeds the source names throughout for direct reference and then includes a detailed works cited or list of references at the end of the article. Many of his readers, likely already familiar with these sources, will find Pinker's text more authoritative because he has included them.

As you can see, the type of evidence and the way it is documented depend on audience and situation. But what does all of this have to do with the writing you will be doing? The texts we have examined in this chapter were written by journalists, professors, and scholars; the sources they use and the ways they document them are appropriate for their audiences. In school, you have probably written essays for which you were required to use outside sources, sources that were assigned to you, or sources that were part of your classroom readings. Keep in mind that your goal in a synthesis essay is the same as that of professional writers: to use sources to support and illustrate your own ideas and to establish your credibility as a reasonable and informed writer. Whether your teacher wants you to make informal in-text citations or use formal in-text parenthetical documentation and an end-of-paper works cited list, you must document sources to give credit where credit is due.

• ACTIVITY •

To set themselves apart, columnists for print and online publications establish a viewpoint and style. The types of sources they use and the way they use them are part of that style. Using three columns by one writer, analyze the columnist's audience by examining the type of sources he or she uses. For your columnist, you might consider a political commentator from a national or local publication, a sportswriter, a movie or music reviewer, a professional blogger, or even an amateur blogger.

Conversation

Education: The Civil Rights Issue of Our Time?

In this section, we will walk you through the process of writing a synthesis essay: understanding the task, analyzing a series of readings, and writing an argument using them. Here is your prompt:

Declining test scores, low rankings of K–12 schools in comparison to their international counterparts, and mounting debt from college tuition are among the factors that have led to severe criticism of the U.S. education system from preschool through the university. In fact, many have described public education as “the civil rights issue of our time.” Using the text by Horace Mann and at least three other sources, write an essay explaining why you agree or disagree with this characterization of education.

What does this prompt direct you to do? It opens with a statement of fact about criticism being leveled at education in America. The second sentence introduces a viewpoint—that is, education is the civil rights issue of our time. What are “civil rights”? You might think immediately of the civil rights movement that fought for racial equality under the law—particularly during the 1960s. But here the term refers to the freedoms and rights granted to all citizens that make “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” a reality. Although education is not specifically mentioned in the Constitution, or in any of its amendments, every state has compulsory education laws requiring young people to attend school, and the Fourteenth Amendment states, “No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” Could equal protection be interpreted as requiring an equal quality of education? Could flaws in the educational system be interpreted as depriving a person of “life, liberty, or property”? In the third sentence of the prompt,