Practising academic integrity: Blending direct quotations into your writing

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Blending direct quotations into your writing: topping and tailing

Writing assignments involves using sources effectively by blending them into your writing. At a minimum, this involves inserting direct quotations into a sentence. However, blending direct quotations involves more than this. Blending direct quotations is sometimes called ‘topping’ and ‘tailing’ because it involves ‘weaving’ quotes into the rest of your writing before and after the direct quotation is presented.

Techniques for ‘topping’ direct quotations introduce the quotation before it is actually included in your writing. This helps to weave the direct quotation into your writing smoothly by:

- clearly showing the reader (marker) you have included others’ words in your writing
- providing a smooth reading path for the reader by naming the author and identifying the subject of the direct quotation
- including your judgement of the expertise of the author or the credibility of the source.
Techniques for ‘tailing’ direct quotations ‘unpack’ the quotation after it has been inserted into your writing. This helps to weave the direct quotation into the rest of the paragraph while also giving you the chance to demonstrate your understanding of the ideas, claims or examples contained in the quotation. Usually, this involves:

- explaining the meaning of the direct quotation
- evaluating the claims contained in the direct quotation
- applying the concepts or ideas offered in the direct quotation.

It is especially important to blend direct quotations into your writing because you are using others’ words.

Topping and tailing (introducing and unpacking) direct quotations will help you to blend others’ words and ideas with your own, in a way that:

- makes your writing clear and easy to read
- clearly shows where your work ends and another’s begins
- demonstrates your understanding
- adds your ideas and judgements.

Techniques for ‘topping’ (introducing) direct quotations

‘Topping’, or introducing direct quotations is an important part of academic writing. Topping techniques come before the direct quote is included, and help to ‘blend’ others’ words into your own writing.

There are four key techniques used to introduce direct quotations:

1. name the author
2. use a reporting verb
3. identify the expertise of the author, and/or the credibility the source
4. indicate the general subject of the direct quotation (what it is about).

Introducing direct quotations by naming the author

The most common technique used to introduce direct quotations involves naming the author of the quote. By naming the author before inserting the direct quotation into the sentence shows the reader (marker) you are using others’ words in your writing.
Examples

Example one: direct quotation without ‘topping’

New media forms have powerful potentials “new media has the potential to be used to generate new meanings, values, relationships, and personal identities” (Dodge & Brown, 2012, p. 21).

Example two: direct quotation with ‘topping’

Dodge and Brown (2012) say “new media has the potential to be used to generate new meanings, values, relationships, and personal identities” (p. 21).

The examples above show the way naming the author introduces the direct quotation and:

• clearly shows others’ words are being used
• improves sentence structure
• makes it easier for the reader to understand.

Introducing direct quotations by using a reporting verb

In academic writing reporting verbs are used to describe and report on others’ work. Reporting verbs can be used to characterize the source and the claims made by the author in the work. This means reporting verbs can be an effective way to demonstrate your understanding, and include in your judgements.

Commonly used reporting verbs:

state(s)..., contend(s)..., insist(s)..., discovered..., agree(s)..., report(s)..., maintain(s)..., theorize(s)..., argue(s)..., find(s)..., hypothesize(s)..., suggest(s)..., propose(s)..., reveal(s)..., explain(s)..., defines...., hypothesise...., discuss...., outline(s)...., reveal(s).

Detailed guidance about reporting verbs is provided in Related Quick Guides.

Examples

Example one

Dodge and Brown (2012) say “new media has the potential to be used to generate new meanings, values, relationships, and personal identities” (p. 21).
Example two

Dodge and Brown (2012) **insist** “new media has the potential to be used to generate new meanings, values, relationships, and personal identities” (p. 21).

In the second example (above), the verb ‘insist’ characterizes the author’s claims as being forcefully made, and biased (without balance or consideration for the possibility of alternative view).

Example three

Dodge and Brown (2012) **reveal** “new media has the potential to be used to generate new meanings, values, relationships, and personal identities” (p. 21).

In the third example (above), the verb ‘reveal’ characterizes the source as objective, and author claims as uncovering pre-existing phenomena.

In the last two examples the writer has used reporting verbs effectively to characterise and make judgements about the source, and the types of claims made by the authors.

**Carefully selecting reporting verbs can help you to:**

- introduce sources more effectively (blending them into your writing)
- demonstrate your understanding
- add in your judgements about sources and author claims.

**Introducing direct quotations by indicating the general subject of the quote (what it is about)**

Noting the general subject of a direct quotation is an important way to introduce and blend others’ words into your writing. Doing this ‘sets up’ the direct quotation for the reader, so they have a general idea about the subject of the quotation before reading it.

Example

Dodge and Brown (2012) **explore possible impacts of blogs, online gaming, and computer games**, contending “new media has the potential to be used to generate new meanings, values, relationships, and personal identities” (p. 21)
In this example (above) the writer indicates the **general subject** of the direct quotation in order to better blend others’ words. This technique works by moving from the **general** to the **specific**. The **general subject** of the direct quotation is noted, and then the **specific words** from the source are included.

**Introduce direct quotations by identifying the expertise of the author and/or credibility of the source**

When using a source for the **first time** in an assignment it is important to establish the **expertise of the author**, and the **relevance and credibility of the source**.

This can be done by identifying:

- the expertise of the author in regard to your topic,
- the credibility of the source.

**Examples**

**Example one**

In their study about Australian media consumption over the last decade, media theorists, Dodge and Brown (2012, p. 21) contend “new media has the potential to be used to generate new meanings, values, relationships, and personal identities”.

**Example two**

In their recent newspaper editorial, experienced media workers, Dodge and Brown (2012) contend “new media has the potential to be used to generate new meanings, values, relationships, and personal identities” (p. 21).

In both examples (above) the writer has:

- identified the expertise of the authors and
- provided a subtle judgement about the credibility of the source.

1. Media theorists and media workers have different types of expertise about new media and its potential. By clearly identifying the expertise of the authors of these imaginary sources, the writer indicates the nature and limits of author expertise.
2. By describing the type of source, the writer indicates its credibility. A scholarly study, reviewed by peers and based on rigorous research, is more credible than a newspaper editorial based on...
professional experience and personal opinion. Still, a newspaper editorial by experienced media workers has some credibility. Likewise, a credible scholarly study is still open to evaluation.

**Establishing the expertise of authors and the credibility of sources used in your assignments is important for two main reasons:**

1. Doing so shows the reader you have used expert opinion and credible sources in assignments can add to the quality and credibility to your writing.
2. Doing so establishes the expertise of an author, and the credibility of sources, demonstrates your understanding, and opens up space for you to evaluate sources and add in your judgements (when unpacking direct quotes).

**Techniques for ‘tailing’ (unpacking) direct quotations included in your writing**

When writing assignments at university it is your job to demonstrate your understanding. Often, assignments also require students to demonstrate critical thinking. Using others’ words (direct quotations) makes it harder to demonstrate your understanding and critical thinking. However, ‘tailing’ or ‘unpacking’ techniques can help overcome this challenge.

‘Unpacking’ a direct quotation involves explaining, evaluating, or applying it. Selecting relevant direct quotes from credible disciplinary sources is the first, crucial step. It is important never to assume the reader ‘gets’ the direct quote, or that its meaning is ‘so obvious’ it does not need unpacking. Treat direct quotations as a chance to further demonstrate your understanding to the reader (marker).

**Unpack direct quotations by:**

- explaining their meaning
- explaining their relevance to the point you are making in the paragraph
- applying (using) the ideas contained in the direct quotation to analyze an example, explain an issue, or solve a problem
- evaluating the ideas or claims contained in the direct quotation (to further develop your discussion).

Unpacking direct quotations blends the source into your writing in a way that adds **your ideas and judgements**. This is where you get to offer **your judgement** or **response** to the source.

Students often mistakenly feel it would be ‘too obvious’ to explain or evaluate direct quotations. Remember, academic writing tends to be an obvious, direct, and repetitive style of writing. Also, when writing assignments and exams it is your job to demonstrate your understanding. Explaining, applying, and evaluating direct quotations will help you to improve the quality of your writing by adding in **your ideas** and **judgements**.
Prompts to help you ‘unpack’ direct quotations

Learning to ‘unpack’ direct quotations is an important part of learning to write at university. It takes time to develop academic writing skills needed to practise academic integrity. The following questions can be used to ‘unpack’ direct quotations when writing assignments.

Use the prompts below when drafting your assignments. They will help you to demonstrate your understanding and get your ideas out of your head and onto the page/screen for the marker to read. Often, ‘unpacking’ a direct quotation involves adding an extra sentence or two to the paragraph.

To explain a direct quotation:
• What is the direct quotation about? Does it add to the topic I am writing about?
• Why did I include this direct quotation? How does it illustrate (evidence) the point I am making in this paragraph?
• How are the ideas expressed in the quotation relevant to my topic/point? What does the direct quotation explain or clarify?

To evaluate a direct quotation:
• What are the strengths of the ideas and claims made in the quotation? How can the ideas or claims contained in the quotation be linked back to the point I am making in this paragraph?
• What are the limits or weaknesses of the ideas and claims made in the quotation? How can I link these limits or weaknesses to the point I am making in this paragraph?
• Are there other credible sources I have read that identify the strengths or weaknesses of the ideas and claims made in the quotation? Can I draw on these sources to evaluate the quotation and develop my point for the paragraph?

To apply (use) a direct quotation:
• What are the key ideas or approaches contained in the quotation? How are they relevant to my point in the paragraph?
• Can I use the ideas or approach contained in the quotation to develop my discussion in rest of the paragraph?
• Can I use the ideas or approach contained in the quotation to analyze an example, explain an issue, or solve a problem?

Tips for blending direct quotations into your writing
• Always reference direct quotations in-text or in a footnote, and make sure the wording is correct (exactly matches the original source).
• Try not to start a paragraph with a direct quotation. If you start the paragraph with a quotation it means you have not ‘topped’ or ‘introduced’ it.
• Try not to finish a paragraph with a direct quotation. If you finish the paragraph with a quotation it means you have not ‘tailed’ or ‘unpacked’ it.
• **NEVER run quotes together one after the other.** Doing this makes it hard to show your understanding, and detracts from the flow and clarity of your writing. This is because running quotes together one after the other means you are using large chunks of others’ words, from sources likely written in a different style to your assignment.

• **‘Topping’ or introducing direct quotations** will help you to use sources more effectively by clearly showing when you use others’ words, and increasing the flow and clarity of your writing.

**Introduce direct quotations by:**

- naming the author
- identifying their expertise
- using a reporting verb
- describing the subject of the extract.

• **‘Tailing’ or unpacking direct quotations** blends sources into your writing in a way that adds your ideas and judgements, or your response. Unpacking direct quotations improves the quality of assignments because doing this demonstrates your understanding and ability to think critically (make judgements).

**Unpack direct quotations by:**

- explaining their meaning (and how it is relevant to the topic you are writing about)
- explaining how they are relevant to the point you are making in the paragraph
- applying or using the ideas contained the direct quotation to analyse an example, explain an issue, or solve a problem
- evaluating the direct quotation (supporting, critiquing, or qualifying the ideas stated in the direct quotation).

**Related Quick Guides**

Practising academic integrity: How to include direct quotations in your writing, Practising academic integrity: Reporting verbs