

## How do you use your sources?

In an article entitled “Writing from sources, writing from sentences”, Rebecca Howard et al. (2010) argue that teachers focus too much attention, especially now in the internet era, on determining whether students are plagiarizing and not enough on seeing if they actually understand the sources they use. The authors identified four main techniques students apply when using sources: summarizing, paraphrasing, copying, and patchwriting, that is copying from a source text and making slight grammatical, lexical or stylistic modifications. They carried out an in-depth examination of a small sample of undergraduate research papers to determine which of these techniques were used and how often. The aim of the study was to gather information about students’ strategies so as to inform the design and development of an adequate writing pedagogy.

In the following passage, the authors define and exemplify the four techniques under investigation. The illustrations all draw on Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, reproduced in full below.

For this research we defined summary as restating and compressing the main points of a paragraph or more of text in fresh language and reducing the summarized passage by at least 50%. The 266-word Gettysburg Address (Lincoln 1863), for example, might be summarized (by Lincoln or another person of his time) this way: “The civil war that we are now fighting tests the principles on which our country was founded. We must pursue this war as a way of honoring the men who fought and died on this battlefield.”

We defined paraphrasing as restating a passage from a source in fresh language, though sometimes with keywords retained from that passage. Paraphrase does not involve a significant reduction in the length of the passage. The first sentence of the Gettysburg Address, for example, might be paraphrased this way: “The United States was founded in 1776 on the principles of liberty and equality.”

Following Howard (1993), we define patchwriting as reproducing source language with some words deleted or added, some grammatical structures altered, or some synonyms used. The first sentence of the Gettysburg Address, for example, might be patchwritten this way: “Eighty-seven years ago, the founding fathers created a new nation that was conceived in the principle of liberty and was dedicated to the equality of man.” If quotation marks are used for the copied bits, the text is marked as quotation, not patchwriting. However, a passage may be patchwritten even when it is properly quoted and referenced.

By copying we mean the exact transcription (though perhaps with occasional minor errors) of source text. As we categorized passages of student text into the four of types of source use, whether the passage was referenced did not affect its category. Copying, then, can include both quotation and unacknowledged copying. Regardless of whether quotation marks and referenced citation were present or absent, exact copying was classified as copying.

The authors state that their proposed summary of the Gettysburg Address might have been written “by Lincoln or another person of his time”. This qualification is important. To be adequate a summary must show an understanding of the text but also often of the context as well. At the risk of digressing briefly, it should be pointed out that this short speech (one of the most famous in English) was delivered four months after the Battle of Gettysburg to dedicate the burial of slain soldiers, many of whom had still not received a proper internment. The battle itself, with over 20,000 casualties on each side in the first three days of fighting, was considered a turning point in the Civil War. The war was certainly about slavery but, as Jill Lepore (2010) pointedly observes, it is not mentioned in the Address. The “principles” in the authors’

summary, then, refer to the interpretation of the notions of liberty and equality set out in the US Constitution.

To return to the study, it was found that students' research papers showed abundant incidences of all the techniques above except for summary. In particular 89% of the papers used patchwriting, 100% paraphrase, 78% direct copying, and 72% direct copying without citation. There were no instances of summary. It was also revealed that 94% of the papers included information which is not common knowledge but had no citation.

What do the authors conclude from these findings? First of all, it seems unclear to what extent writers access complete texts or simply read single sentences. The lack of summaries may be significant. Research suggests that an adequate summary reflects an understanding of a text. The absence of a summary, however, does not necessarily mean that the writer has not accessed and understood the entire text. On the other hand, patchwriting seems to be a sign of insecurity, that is the writer does not feel confident enough to summarize. Copying and paraphrasing, finally, appear to provide little information about the writer's understanding of the source text. It seems clear that far more quantitative data will be required before an up-to-date pedagogical method can be elaborated.

It may not be necessary, however, to wait for more conclusive research to make use of the preliminary results of this exploratory study. If writers can learn to identify the techniques they employ and consciously choose the most appropriate for their purposes, they may see how to move from patchwriting to summarizing, that is from writing from sentences to writing from sources.

Howard, R. M., Serviss, T. Rodigue (2010), Writing from Sources, Writing from Sentences. *Writing & Pedagogy* 2(2), 178-192. [https:// doi:10.1558/wap.v2i2.177](https://doi.org/10.1558/wap.v2i2.177)

Lepore, J. (2019). *These Truths: A history of the United States* [Kindle DX version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com.

## Gettysburg Address

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate — we can not consecrate — we can not hallow — this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us — that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion — that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain — that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom — and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth. (Lincoln, 1863)