



Using Signal Phrases to Incorporate Sources into Your Paper

English Transcript

This tutorial will show you how to use signal phrases. So, just what are signal phrases? They're phrases that do two things: effectively incorporate sources into your paper, and clearly identify, or signal, the owner of an idea. Sometimes signal phrases are called lead-in phrases or voice markers.

Signal phrases communicate to whom an idea belongs. Similarly, playwrights use a method like this to indicate who is saying what.

Hey, Joe, can you hear me?

Maria, is that you?

Who else would it be? We're connected by tin cans and a string.

Ha ha, right!

You get the idea. When reading a play, a name followed by a colon tells the reader who is speaking.

In novels, authors also use signal phrases to let readers know who is speaking or thinking:

"Maria, which movie would you like to see?" asked Joe. "Something without zombies and mayhem," replied Maria. "That doesn't leave anything good," he protested. "Well, you can always go by yourself," she teased.

The phrases "asked Joe," "replied Maria," "he protested," and "she teased" are signals that tell a reader who is saying what.

When writing a research paper, a similar method is used. It's important that a reader can understand to whom an idea belongs. Wait, you say. I wrote the paper. It all belongs to me. To some extent, you're right. The paper does belong to you. However, as a researcher, you are expected to consult multiple sources to find the opinions and ideas of experts, think about what you have learned, and add your own ideas and conclusions.

It's very important that a reader can tell when you are making a point yourself versus when you are borrowing someone else's ideas. Let's see how signal phrases are used to incorporate information from sources into a research paper.

For our first example, we'll use this quote from Paul Loeb's book, *Soul of a Citizen*. Don't worry, there isn't a quiz about it.



"In the personal realm, most Americans are thoughtful, caring, generous. We try to do our best by family and friends. At times, we'll even stop to help another driver stranded with a roadside breakdown or give some spare change to a stranger. We've all but forgotten that public participation is the very soul of democratic citizenship and how much it can enrich our lives."

If you were to use Loeb's ideas in any way, you would need to give the author credit. The easiest, most direct way to do that is to use a signal phrase. For most people who use MLA style, a signal phrase is used for the first time a source is introduced, and it includes the author's full name, title of the work, and any credentials of the author. In this example, notice the phrase "Paul Loeb observes."

Similar to our earlier conversation between Maria and Joe, this phrase signals that the idea that follows it belongs to Loeb. The number in parentheses tells the reader that this idea appeared on page 2 of Loeb's book. Because there are no quotation marks around the idea, we know that it is a paraphrase and not a direct quote.

Now meet Omar. Omar wants to use some of Loeb's ideas in his research paper about the changing roles of Americans in democracy. But, he'll need to signal to the reader when an idea belongs to himself versus when it belongs to Loeb.

This is Omar's first draft: Most Americans are generous and kind on an individual, interpersonal level, but few recognize how important civic, social, and public engagement is to our democracy. We tend to isolate ourselves from others and focus on our private lives instead of the public good. We don't realize that helping others helps ourselves.

Can you tell which ideas are Loeb's and which ones are Omar's? Nope. They all look like they could belong to anyone. That's because Omar did not use any signal phrases to distinguish between his own ideas and Loeb's.

In his second draft, Omar tries to incorporate signal phrases by starting with-- According to Paul Loeb. However, there's nothing to indicate when Loeb's idea ends and Omar's begins.

This is Omar's second revision. Omar has further signaled to the reader which ideas belong to Loeb and which are his own. First he added the page number to indicate where the ideas came from in Loeb's book. Then Omar added a signal phrase in the last sentence-- Although Loeb doesn't say so explicitly-- to tell the reader that what follows it is his conclusion about Loeb's ideas.

The concepts of signal phrases and citations are closely related. When doing research, you mention sources within the paper to show where ideas come from. This is sometimes called in-text or parenthetical citation. You also list a full citation for all of the sources together in the bibliography at the end.



In MLA style, a bibliography is called a works cited list, and APA calls it a reference list. Here's what a full citation in MLA format would look like for Loeb's book.

Now let's meet Ava, who is writing a research paper about Hollywood's interpretation of World War II. One of her sources is a review of the movie, Pearl Harbor, by film critic Roger Ebert.

"Pearl Harbor is a two-hour movie squeezed into three hours about how on December 7th, 1941, the Japanese staged a surprise attack on an American love triangle. Its centerpiece is 40 minutes of redundant special effects surrounded by a love story of stunning banality. The film has been directed without grace, vision, or originality, and although you may walk out quoting lines of dialogue, it will not be because you admire them."

This is Ava's paraphrase of Ebert's review. Note that the first two sentences provide a summary while the third sentence offers Ava's commentary on the review. The fourth sentence returns to a summary of the review and includes a direct quote. Can you spot the signal phrases? There are two. begins with the signal phrase-- In his review of Pearl Harbor-- to let the reader know the ideas that follow belong to Ebert.

Then Ava uses the phrase-- Ebert's dislike for the movie is apparent-- letting the reader know that she is offering interpretation or commentary instead of simply summarizing. Also notice that Ava added in-text citations in two places to clarify the owner of the ideas.

Normally after the author of a source has been introduced, you can just cite the page number. However, since there are no page numbers on Ebert's website, Ava was correct to only list the author's name.

Even film reviews need full citations in your bibliography at the end of your paper.

By now you understand that signal phrases are important. Use them to tell the reader when you are paraphrasing or summarizing someone else's ideas and to indicate when you are adding your own comments, interpretations, or clarifications.

Ideas in this tutorial are inspired by and adapted from the text *They Say, I Say* by Graff and Birkenstein.

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