

6.2 ENGAGING SOURCES ACTIVELY

Experienced researchers don't read passively; they engage their sources actively, entering into conversation with them. If you can, read important sources twice. First, read generously. Pay attention to what sparks your interest. Reread passages that puzzle or confuse you. Don't look for disagreements right away, but read in ways that help the source make sense. Otherwise, you'll be tempted to emphasize its weaknesses if it presents an argument that rivals yours. Resist that temptation, at least at first.

Then, if your source seems important or seems to challenge your own position, read it a second time slowly and more critically. When you read a passage, think not only about what it says but about how you would respond. Record those responses in your notes or—if you own the source or are working from a copy—in the margins of the source itself. Test your understanding by summarizing: if you can't sum up a passage in your mind, you don't understand it well enough to disagree.

Don't accept a claim just because an authority asserts it. For decades, researchers cited the "fact" that the Inuit people of the Arctic had many terms for types of snow. But another researcher found that they have just three (or so she claims). And understand that experts frequently disagree. If Expert A says one thing, B will assert the opposite, and C will claim to be an expert but is not. When some students hear experts disagree, they become cynical and dismiss expert knowledge as just opinion. But don't mistake informed and thoughtful debate over legitimately contested issues for mere opinion. In fact, it's the mark of an active field.

If you are an advanced researcher, check the accuracy of everything important to your argument. Researchers whose work has been used by others will tell you, as often as not, that it was reported inaccurately, summarized carelessly, or criticized ignorantly. Writers regularly write to the *New York Review of Books* and the "Book Review" of the *New York Times*, pointing out how reviewers distorted their ideas or made factual errors criticizing them.

Check—and Check Again

Researchers rarely misrepresent sources deliberately, but they are occasionally careless or intellectually lazy. Colomb heard a prominent researcher confess after her talk that she had never read the work she had just discussed. One of Booth's books was "refuted" by a critic who apparently read only the title of a section, "Novels Must Be Realistic." Failing to read beyond it, he didn't know that Booth himself was attacking the claim in the title, along with other misconceptions about fiction. One reviewer of a book by Williams misquoted him and then, thinking he was disagreeing with him, argued for the point Williams made in the first place!

6.3 READING FOR A PROBLEM

Once you have a research problem, use it to guide your search for evidence, models, and arguments to respond to. But if you don't yet have one, you won't know which data, models, or arguments might be relevant. So read sources not randomly but deliberately to find a problem. Look for claims that seem puzzling, inaccurate, or simplistic—anything you can disagree with. You're more likely to find a research problem when you disagree with a source, but you can also find one in sources you agree with.

6.3.1 Look for Creative Agreement

If you believe what a source claims, try to extend that claim: What new cases might it cover? What new insights can it provide? Is there confirming evidence the source hasn't considered? Here are some ways to find a problem through creative agreement.

1. **Offer additional support.** You can offer new evidence to support a source's claim.

Smith uses anecdotes to show that the Alamo story had mythic status beyond Texas, but editorials in big-city newspapers offer better evidence.

- Source supports a claim with old evidence, but you offer new evidence.
- Source supports a claim with weak evidence, but you offer stronger evidence.

2. **Confirm unsupported claims.** You can prove something that a source only assumes or speculates about.

Smith recommends visualization to improve sports performance, but MRI studies of the mental activities of athletes offer evidence that shows why that is good advice.

- Source speculates _____ might be true, but you offer evidence to show that it is.
- Source assumes _____ is true, but you can prove it.

3. **Apply a claim more widely.** You can extend a position.

Smith argues that medical students learn physiological processes better when they are explained with many metaphors rather than with just one. The same seems true for engineering and law students.

- Source correctly applies _____ to one situation, but you apply it to new ones.
- Source claims that _____ is true in a specific situation, but you show it's true in general.

6.3.2 Look for Creative Disagreement

If you read actively, you'll inevitably find yourself disagreeing with your sources. Don't brush those disagreements aside, because they often point to new research problems. Look for these types (the list is not exhaustive, and some kinds overlap):

1. **Contradictions of kind.** A source says something is one kind of thing, but it's another.

Smith says that graffiti is merely vandalism, but it is better understood as a form of public art.

- Source claims that _____ is a kind of _____, but it's not.
- Source claims that _____ always has _____ as one of its features or qualities, but it doesn't.

- Source claims that _____ is normal/good/important/useful/moral/interesting, but it's not.

You can reverse those claims and the ones that follow to state the opposite:

- Though a source says _____ is not a kind of _____, you can show that it is.

2. **Part-whole contradictions.** You can show that a source mistakes how the parts of something are related.

Smith has argued that coding is irrelevant to a liberal education, but in fact, it is essential.

- Source claims that _____ is a part of _____, but it's not.
- Source claims that one part of _____ relates to another in a certain way, but it doesn't.
- Source claims that every _____ has _____ as one of its parts, but it doesn't.

3. **Developmental or historical contradictions.** You can show that a source mistakes the origin or development of a topic.

Smith argues that the world population will rise, but it won't.

- Source claims that _____ is changing, but it's not.
- Source claims that _____ originated in _____, but it didn't.
- Source claims that _____ develops in a certain way, but it doesn't.

4. **External cause-effect contradictions.** You can show that a source mistakes a causal relationship.

Smith claims that legalizing marijuana will increase its use among teenagers, but evidence shows that it doesn't.

- Source claims that _____ causes _____, but it doesn't/they are both caused by _____.
- Source claims that _____ is sufficient to cause _____, but it's not.

- Source claims that _____ causes only _____, but it also causes _____.

5. **Contradictions of perspective.** Most contradictions don't change a conceptual framework, but when you contradict a "standard" view of things, you urge others to think in a new way.

Smith assumes that advertising has only an economic function, but it also serves as a laboratory for new art forms.

- Source discusses _____ from the point of view of _____ but a new context or point of view reveals a new truth [the new or old context can be social, political, philosophical, historical, economic, ethical, gender specific, etc.].
- Source analyzes _____ using theory/ value system _____ but you can analyze it from a new point of view and see it in a new way.

6.4 READING FOR ARGUMENTS

6.4.1 Read for Arguments to Respond To

No argument is complete until it acknowledges and responds to its readers' predictable questions and disagreements. You can find some of those competing views in secondary sources. What alternatives to your claims do they offer? What evidence do they cite that you must acknowledge? Some new researchers think that they weaken their case if they mention any views opposing their own. The opposite is true. When you acknowledge the views of others, you show that you not only know those views, but have carefully considered and can confidently respond to them (for more on this, see chapter 10).

Experienced researchers also use those competing views to improve their own. You can't really understand what you think until you understand why a rational person might think differently. So as you look for sources, don't look just for those that support your claims. Be alert for sources that contradict them, because they are sources that your readers are likely to know.

6.4.2 Read for Models of Reasoning and Analysis

You can use secondary sources in another way as well: as models of reasoning and analysis. If you have never made an argument like the one you plan to, you might follow the pattern of other arguments that you find in your secondary sources. You can't use specific ideas (that would be plagiarism), but you do not plagiarize a source when you borrow its ways of arguing or of analyzing data. (Don't worry that using a source as a model will make your research seem unoriginal. Research arguments are often unoriginal in their methods and ways of reasoning. Readers will look for originality in your problem, claim, and evidence.)

Suppose you want to argue that the Alamo legend thrived because it served the political interests of those who created it and satisfied the emotional needs of those who repeated it. You will need reasons and evidence unique to your claim, but you can raise the *kinds* of issues that readers see in similar arguments about other legends, real or fictional. If, for example, a source shows how the King Arthur legend helped to shape English society and politics, you might make a similar argument about the Alamo and the Republic of Texas. You are not obliged to cite your model, but to gain credibility, you might note that it makes an argument similar to yours:

Just as the Arthurian legends helped to forge a definitively English social and political identity (Weiman 1998), so the legend of the Alamo . . .

6.5 READING FOR DATA AND SUPPORT

6.5.1 Read for Data to Use as Evidence

New researchers regularly mine secondary sources for data, but if you can, check the primary source. If an important quotation is available in its original form and context, it is risky and intellectually lazy not to look it up. You don't have to agree with a source to use its data; in fact, its argument does not even have to be relevant to your question, so long as its data are. However, use statistical data only if you can judge for yourself whether they were collected