

CSC: CoR: Chapter 6: Engaging Sources

The 10 salient sentence strings presented below are lifted from the chapter as is, without modification (except, perhaps, for a bit of punctuation here or there). They are presented in order of appearance in the chapter.

Ten Salient Sentence Strings

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. [R]ead 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. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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.

9. 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.
10. You cannot entirely avoid quoting out of context, because you cannot quote all of an original. So when you draft a paraphrase or summary or copy a quotation, do so within the context that matters most—that of your own grasp of the original. When you record a part of an argument, note the line of reasoning that the author was pursuing.