

From “Annoying Ways People Use Sources,” by Kyle D. Stedman

Good writers aim to engage readers, not annoy them. Here are some ways we inadvertently turn readers off by mishandling evidence and other information from external sources. Are you guilty of any of these?

1. “Armadillo Roadkill.” When you don’t introduce a quotation. It’s just dropped in to start off its own sentence. Stedman compares this to riding along in a car when an armadillo comes out of nowhere and the driver runs it over: “both involve a normal, pleasant activity (driving; reading) stopped suddenly short by an unexpected barrier (a sudden armadillo; a sudden quotation)” (245). *To fix:* Use *your own words* to introduce the quotation. Strategies include summing up the main idea of the quote, providing the author’s credentials or a reference to where the information came from, and paraphrasing part of the quote before bringing in the direct wording. For more help see *EW* p. 187, “Integrating quotations smoothly into your text.”

2. “Dating Spider-Man.” When you start or end paragraphs with quotations. Not technically wrong, but often feels “rushed, unexplained, disjointed” and is an “easy out.” Here’s how Stedman explains the nickname: It’s like dating Spider-Man. You’re walking along with him and he says something remarkably interesting—but then he tilts his head, hearing something far away, and suddenly shoots a web onto the nearest building and zooms away through the air. As if you had just read an interesting quotation dangling at the end of a paragraph, you wanted to hear more of his opinion, but it’s too late—he’s already moved on. Later, he suddenly jumps off a balcony and is by your side again, and he starts talking about something you don’t understand. You’re confused because he just dropped in and expected you to understand the context of what was on his mind at that moment, much like when readers step into a paragraph that begins with a quotation. (246) *To fix:* Give context for the quote. Unpack it for the reader. Don’t leave it hanging.

3. “Uncle Barry and his Encyclopedia of Useless Information.” When you place too many quotations in a row without fully exploring the meaning of each, so that the reader doesn’t get “to hear the real point of what the author wants to say” or a chance to “form an opinion about the claims” (248). Stedman compares this over-reliance on quotations to his annoying Uncle Barry, who often goes on tangents when speaking without fully exploring each story. If you have multiple quotations right in a row, not broken up by any sort of analysis or explanation, you are acting like Uncle Barry. *To fix:* Reevaluate your direct quotes. Do they need to be copied word for word or could they actually be paraphrased? Review the criteria in *EW* p. 186, “When to quote, paraphrase, or summarize.” Change some quotes into paraphrases (but be careful and do not copy the wording—be sure not to plagiarize!) If you still feel the quote needs to be preserved word for word, then you need to add more explanation between the direct quotes. Separate out the source’s words by interspersing your interpretation; give the reader time to absorb the research.

4. “Am I in the Right Movie?” When the quote introduction doesn’t quite match up with the text of the quote itself, usually for grammatical reasons. (Ex: According to a study done by George S. Curlique, “as found in the study, people named Harold live long, albeit boring, lives.” Notice how the “according to a study” overlaps with the “as found in the study.”) This is like going to the movies and expecting to see one film, but realizing you’ve stepped into the wrong theatre. The quote intro sets the reader up for one thing, but then the quote text itself does not meet the expectations due to some error—thus the transition into the quote is jarring. *To fix:* Eliminate any portions of the quote intro & the text of the quote that overlap. Also make sure that your tenses in the quote & intro match up (i.e. Lewis Johnson asserts that pizza “are some of the best foods ever” would not make sense because pizza is a singular noun, while are is a plural verb.) See *EW* p. 291-7 for subject-verb agreement.

5. “I Can’t Find the Stupid Link.” When the information in the in-text citation is improperly formatted or missing completely, so that the reader can’t easily find the source from which the quote or paraphrase was drawn when they look on the Works Cited page. Stedman compares this to searching for a link on a poorly-designed webpage. *To fix:* Check each parenthetical citation in the body of your essay. Each should include the source author’s last name (or a brief snippet of the source title, if there’s no author) and the page number (if applicable). If you include the correct information, the reader should be able to easily discern what source the info is drawn from. Make sure that it’s consistent throughout. Do remember that if you refer to the author’s name or article title in the quote intro, you just need to put the page number in the parenthetical citation that directly follows. See *EW* p. 374-375 for writing parenthetical citations, including when the author’s name is given in the signal phrase. MLA documentation section also has the low-down on how to cite anything and everything.

6. “I Swear I Did Some Research!” When you paraphrase a source, synthesize it with your own ideas, & provide the parenthetical citation at the end of the paragraph, so it’s unclear what’s the source’s idea and what’s your idea. Stedman explains that it’s good to synthesize the source with your own interpretation, but the end-of-the-paragraph citation is misleading because it’s hard to tell where the source’s idea ends and yours begins—or it might even look like you’ve just added in the in-text citation “as a way of defensively saying „I swear I did some research! See? Here’s a citation right here! Doesn’t that prove I worked really hard?”” (253). *To fix:* Use phrases to indicate what portions of the paragraph are your ideas and what came from the source. It’s as easy as inserting an “I think…” or an “As Lillian Q. Barnacle suggests…”