

How Citation Works

Sometimes, you might find that you need to use someone else's words in your paragraph. There are two things you need to do:

1. Cite your source (which the textbook does in a very limited way, for *reasons*)
2. Indicate which material isn't yours.

There are two ways to handle this:

First Option: Paraphrase

If the words aren't the point, just the ideas, then you can always paraphrase the source text. Take this paragraph:

Amidst so much political rhetoric, pseudoscience, and scholarly imagination, the truth of Genghis Khan remained buried, seemingly lost to posterity. His homeland and the area where he rose to power remained closed to the outside world by the Communists of the twentieth century, who kept it as tightly sealed as the warriors had done during prior centuries. The original Mongolian documents, the so-called *Secret History of the Mongols*, were not only secret but had disappeared, faded into the depths of history even more mysteriously than Genghis Khan's tomb.

— from *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* by Jack Weatherford. New York: Crown, 2004. (pg. xxvii)

If you just need the general idea, you could probably paraphrase a lot of this in a sentence or so, like this:

According to Jack Weatherford in *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, the truth about Genghis Khan and official records like the *Secret History of the Mongols* seemed lost to the world thanks to a long history of secrecy among Mongols and the efforts of twentieth century Communists alike (xxvii).

That's pretty long, but includes most of the important ideas in the paragraph. We could go even shorter, too:

According to Jack Weatherford in *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, Genghis Khan became an enigmatic historical figure due both to premodern Mongolian secrecy and modern Communist control (xxvii).

In these cases, you're indicating what material isn't yours through punctuation: Jack Weatherford's ideas are expressed in this sentence. Likewise, you're showing your source by mentioning Weatherford's name and the title of his book.¹

¹ Advanced citation methods like the MLA, APA, or Chicago Style, won't be covered in our class.

Option 2: Working With Quotations

If the reason you want to use someone else's material is because his or her words are so perfect, then you will instead want to use one or more quotations—though, again, if you're just writing a single paragraph, then a single quotation is usually enough.

For example, say you want to use this line:

Amidst so much political rhetoric, pseudoscience, and scholarly imagination, the truth of Genghis Khan remained buried, seemingly lost to posterity.

You need to use quotation marks to indicate where the quotation begins and ends, and you still need to indicate your source:

In *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, Jack Weatherford writes that “[a]midst so much political rhetoric, pseudoscience, and scholarly imagination, the truth of Genghis Khan remained buried, seemingly lost to posterity” (xxvii).

Notice that square bracket? We need to be really, really careful when we quote people's exact words. There are specific ways to indicate a change, and yes, even changing a capital letter to a lowercase letter needs to be indicated. Another example:

Regarding the secrecy surrounding the man, in *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* Jack Weatherford writes that it was maintained by “the Communists of the twentieth century [...] as the warriors had done during prior centuries” (xxvii).

Here the ellipsis (...) in square brackets means words have been removed. It's important to show that you're removing words, because the reader will know that there was something cut, and that if they want to really understand Weatherford's argument, they need to go to the original source. It's a way of protecting yourself from the accusation that you distorted Weatherford's ideas or words.

Putting It All Together

When you're considering using a quotation or paraphrase, ask yourself why you're doing it. Is there any specific reason? Are you leaning on an expert's authority? Is the way someone defined something so perfect that you don't think it can be done better? These are good reasons to use a quotation or paraphrase.

If you're just looking to bulk up your work, forget it: pointless quotations and paraphrases are easy to spot, annoy the reader, and result in worse grades. However, a good quotation or paraphrase can be worth its weight in gold... as long as you use it wisely, as part of a larger paragraph of your own.