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Using Signal Phrases and Interacting With Texts (Podcast Transcript)



Using Signal Phrases and Interacting with Texts, Podcast 39, Click link to listen:

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Greetings everyone. This is Kurtis Clements with another Effective Writing podcast. In this episode, I am going to discuss using signal phrases and interacting with texts.

In case you're wondering what a signal phrase is, let me start there. All a signal phrase is is some introductory text that precedes (and sometimes splits and follows) information that comes from a source whether that information is a direct quote, a paraphrase, or even a summary. A signal phrase attributes content to a particular author or source and helps to distinguish content that comes from a source from your own ideas.

Listen to the following example:

Recent studies have shown that car accidents are the leading cause of death for teens in the United States. "Car crashes remain the leading cause of death for teenagers, who have a crash rate four times higher than that of older drivers" (Zernike, 2012, p. 76). Although some 16 year olds may appear more mature than some 18 year olds, records show that 16 year olds are more likely to get involved in car accidents. "This problem is related to both age and experience. Young drivers lack the fully developed judgmental and decision-making skills of older people at a time when they are just beginning to acquire their driving experience" (Preusser & Leaf, 2000, p. 36).

Could you tell what content in that section was mine and what content came from a source? Absolutely not, right? Now obviously if you could actually see the page and a direct quote was used then you would be able to tell what material comes from a source, but if you were paraphrasing or summarizing content—or if, for whatever reason, the essay was being read aloud—the author of the information would be less clear.

Listen to this updated version of the content I just read:

Recent studies have shown that car accidents are the leading cause of death for teens in the United States. According to Zernike (2012), "Car crashes remain the leading cause of death for teenagers, who have a crash rate four times higher than that of older drivers" (p. 76). While Zernike's contention should be concerning, others argue that some 16 year olds may be more mature than some 18 year olds, but records show that 16 year olds are still more likely to get involved in car accidents. Preusser and Leaf (2000) argue that the "problem is related to both age and experience. Young drivers lack the fully developed judgmental and decision-making skills of older people at a time when they are just beginning to acquire their driving experience" (p. 36).

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Is it clearer to understand what content comes from what source? I hope so. Without the signal phrases, the source of the content may be lost on the reader. The signal phrase functions as a signpost to readers and provides a clear transition from one's own thinking to what a source has to say.

While it's important to use a signal phrase, always using the same language (e.g., According to so and so) and the same placement (prior to the source material) will make your writing predictable and perhaps even boring to readers. To this end, you will want to vary how you use signal phrases. The signal phrase can be used prior to source material, but it can also be used after the source material or it can even split up content from a source. And of course you can mix up the wording you use in your signal phrase.

Another good reason for using a signal phrase when integrating a direct quote is so that you avoid using stand-alone quotes—that is, a quote that starts and ends the sentence. There is no transition into or out from the quote. The quote just appears. I call this kind of quote an island quote, but it's also known as a dropped quote because it's dropped into a paragraph without any transitions or real context. Stand-alone quotes should be avoided, and using signal phrases will help in this regard.

One suggestion for integrating source material is to be sure to include one or more sentences that establish your thoughts on a subject prior to using the material. You as the writer set the context before even beginning to use content from a source.

Listen to the following excerpt and take note of how the first sentence clearly expresses a personal view as well as a reaction to previously used content, and then a new sentence starts with a signal phrase, followed by the source material.

While Zernike's contention should be concerning, others argue that some 16 year olds may appear more mature than some 18 year olds, but records show that 16 year olds are still more likely to get involved in car accidents. Preusser and Leaf (2000) argue that the "problem is related to both age and experience. Young drivers lack the fully developed judgmental and decision-making skills of older people at a time when they are just beginning to acquire their driving experience" (p. 36). Preusser and Leaf's argument is logical—how can new drivers be expected to make split-second decisions when they are still learning to drive? The prudent course of action is to set eighteen as the minimum age in which a driver can be issued a license.

When you are writing an academic essay, you as the writer are expressing your view—in some way, shape, or form—on a topic, so you want to make sure that your voice is loud and clear in the discussion. To this end, when source material is integrated into your composition, you want to make sure that you interpret and comment on that source material as a way of developing your thoughts on the topic and advancing what the essay as a whole is trying to say. When you interact with material from sources in this way, your voice is entering the conversation on the topic.

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Did you notice in the previous excerpt how the writer included such commentary on the evidence presented? Listen to part of the excerpt again:

Preusser and Leaf (2000) argue that the “problem is related to both age and experience. Young drivers lack the fully developed judgmental and decision-making skills of older people at a time when they are just beginning to acquire their driving experience” (p. 36). [Here comes the part to pay attention to]: Preusser and Leaf’s argument is logical—how can new drivers be expected to make split-second decisions when they are still learning to drive? The prudent course of action is to set eighteen as the minimum age in which a driver can be issued a license.

The excerpt begins with a signal phrase that clearly lets readers know the source of the content, and after the material is used, the writer offers commentary on that content as a way for the writer to make his case. The commentary directly follows the content and in this case begins with “Preusser and Leaf’s argument is logical.”

It’s important to offer commentary on evidence presented or you risk an essay that is simply presenting information and has no other purpose—or at least no clear purpose. Even if the purpose of the essay is to inform, commentary connects the content to the point of the paragraph as well as to the larger point of the essay.

Well that wraps up this Effective Writing podcast. I hope you have found the discussion of signal phrases and interacting with texts helpful.

Until the next podcast, happy writing.