

# WORKING WITH SOURCES: THE 80/20 PRINCIPLE

## (PODCAST 28 TRANSCRIPT)

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Greetings everyone. This is Kurtis Clements with another effective writing podcast. In this episode, I am going to discuss working with sources: the 80/20 principal.

What on earth do I mean by “the 80/20 principal”? Good question! Well, to put it simply, when you are assigned to write a “research” paper, 80% of that paper needs to be your own thinking—that is, your ideas, your analysis, your commentary, indeed, your words—and 20% will be content borrowed from sources—summaries, paraphrases, and quotes. These percents are approximations, of course, but they can serve as a good general guide to follow as you integrate content from research into a paper of your own. Indeed, the operative words in that last sentence are “a paper of your own,” because you need to be the author of your own paper and it is your voice that needs to be heard loud and clear on the page.

Have you ever wondered why professors assign papers in the first place? They want to know what you think about an important topic in your field. They already know what the experts know and think, but they can only know what you think if you tell them. Every writing assignment should be an invitation to grow an idea and share it with your readers even when using content from outside sources.

The bottom line is that you need to be the author of your own essay. In fact, the word “essay” comes from the French verb that means “to try.” Back in the 16th century, a writer named Montaigne invented the essay form by composing 107 short words, in which he “attempted” to take the reader through his thoughts about a topic.

Today, the essay is the most commonly assigned form of writing for students everywhere. Professors hope that when you write, you will try to make sense of something you’re learning and make that sense clear to your readers. Imagine, for example, that you want to explore the topic of free speech and the media. You’ll need to find information to help you make your points and inform or convince your readers. You might begin by exploring the history of free speech in the United States. Perhaps you’ll read original sources and laws or legal cases. You might research challenges to free speech and laws as they apply to the media. Are there limits to free speech? May one, for example, race into a hospital and scream “Bomb” just to scare everyone?

As you research your topic, you begin to grow and shape your idea, creating a main idea or thesis that you want to explore with your reader. That thesis expresses your unique understanding of the topic you selected. You select the approach to your topic and choose a few pertinent facts, statistics, and



expert testimony that support your ideas.

Some writers make a basic mistake: Instead of writing their own ideas, they report the ideas of others. This approach is not an attempt of the writer to express his or her views on a topic—there is no attempt to understand, as information is simply being reported. In addition, when the writer merely reports, there is no attempt at growing one’s thinking. When you grow your thinking you are, in part, building upon what you already know or believe by synthesizing information from a variety of sources and making connections. Some of what you learn will validate your thinking, some of what you will learn will enhance your understanding so that you are better informed, and some of what you learn will challenge your thinking. All of this is good and will help grow your thinking. Make sense?

Less experienced writers can learn from more experienced authors who know and practice the 80/20 principle. Eighty percent of a research based essay should represent the writer’s own thoughts and words and no more than 20% should come from outside sources to support the writer’s original ideas. If a writer includes more than 20% from outside sources in his or her essay, the writer becomes a reporter rather than an author. Reporters summarize what others think; authors focus on what they think.

What you need to be aware of is your use of content from outside sources. Information from source material alone does not help you make your case. You need to do something with that content, and in doing so you are presenting your thoughts, which should, after all, be front and center, not backstage. Right?

Listen to the following example and think about what you are hearing:

A 2009 study reported that, “for the first time in the nation’s history, one out of every 99.1 adults is behind bars. With a sevenfold increase in prisoners since 1973, the U.S. has experienced prison crowding” (Boehm & Lampert, 2008, p. 54). California corrections officials estimated that by the end of 2012, prison facilities would run out of bed space for inmates and more than 15,000 inmates would have to be housed in areas not designed for living space. To compound the problem in California, voters in November did not approve a bond to fund prison expansion at the state’s thirty-two correctional facilities (Selman, 2012). According to Warnecki (2012), the prison population is expected to increase as there is a “direct correlation between a poor economy and crime” (p. 39).

What you heard was a lot of information—one sentence after another of information. There was nothing from the writer to set up the paragraph and no commentary on the information presented. What is the exact point of the paragraph? Is there any sense that the paragraph is connected to a larger idea? A purpose? No. The writer has simply presented information like a reporter and even if the information is good, readers will wonder what it all adds up to.

Here are some suggestions for powerfully integrating sources. First always introduce a paragraph with a sentence that you believe is your own thought on the subject matter. This means framing a body paragraph with a focus statement or content that makes the focus clear. It’s important not to jump in too quickly to the evidence. Set things up and then move to marshal in evidence.

Second, introduce and comment on every quotation, paraphrase, and summary. Use evidence to help support an assertion you make and to serve as the basis of analysis. Do not rely on the evidence alone



to make your case. You have to set up and comment on that evidence. Remember, you need to be the author of your own paper and let your thoughts be heard the loudest.

Third, take your time and sustain the writing. Surround the content you use from sources with your own interpretation or opinion. To this end, you can explain where the material is from and why it is interesting (in other words, telling readers why the source is relevant to your paper).

A research writer wants to make his or her own ideas, argument, or interpretation of that research clear to the reader. For that reason, it is wise to avoid using too many quotations or references because then someone else's ideas dominate the discussion, not yours. When integrating source material, follow the pattern of introducing the content and then following it with commentary and/or interpretation. Don't rush. Sustain the writing and discuss the information presented as it relates to the point of the paragraph and to the larger point of the paper as articulated in the thesis. In this way, the reader will focus on your ideas and how the parts of the paper fit together and work to support a dominant idea.

In short, keep the 80/20 principle in mind whenever you are working with information from resources. 80% of your paper needs to be your own thinking and 20% will come from sources. With practice—and keeping the 80/20 principle in mind—you will develop useful critical writing skills that will help you in your academic career and beyond.

Thanks, everyone. Happy writing.

