Implicit and Explicit Documentation: Teaching Students to Write from Literature

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The Dos and Don'ts of Using Quotations

Writing persuasively about one or more sources begins, of course, with engaged reading. We all sift the best practices to find approaches that will help a student interact with the text. Since there is so little room in the syllabus to use the best incentive for engaged reading -- personal choice -- teachers seek meaningful activities that will energize the act of reading. Literature Circles, reader response journals, two-and-three column notes, Venn Diagrams, double entries, porcupine notes, entry/exit cards, questions, highlighting, color marking -- any of these can help the reader both comprehend and interact with the material. Once the student has "something to say," then she is more interested in learning how to incorporate the sources that generated her ideas.

While the skill of documentation can be taught and learned fairly quickly, the art of selecting evidence comes through time and practice. Anyone can work through the mechanics of quotation marks, the order of internal documentation, and the sentences that lead into or out of the quotation. And these are of course crucial. But the real learning comes in knowing how to choose and present the evidence. What is the difference between paraphrase and summary? What is "mere" summary, and what is summary-as-evidence? What should be quoted, and when? What about offering no quotations at all?

My students seem to often fall into two kinds of thinkers/writers: those who document explicitly, complete with quotations, links, and examples, and those who work implicitly, playing dangerously close to summary. Rarely able to convert either to the other's camp, I have learned instead to focus on helping each become better at her preferred method. After some mini-instruction on formats, I use models from current and previous students for discussion of the effectiveness of the choices they made.

Three Examples of Explicit Documentation from a Source

The first examples illustrate the most frequent task: explicit documentation in support of an argument or position from a single source. The excerpt from Gina's examination response on Fleur Adcock's poem, "The Man Who X-Rayed an Orange," is the most complex in thought and evidence of the examples provided to the students, and in the following paragraph she brings her argument to its close. She briefly summarizes her earlier points, saving the quotations for emphasis. Her parenthetical documentation is muddy, but even that muddiness is rich. It allows us to discuss other choices for talking about text and subtext. She definitely has "something to say," and effectively incorporates and documents lines and phrases from the poem.

As Adcock tells the tale of the man's attempt at superhuman strength, the final judgment comes over the level of success of the act. The man starves himself and reaches a plane of power in which he sees through and suspends an orange. The audience recognizes the accomplishment ("For surely he lacked nothing, / Neither power nor insight nor imagination." (29-30)), but to the Man "It was not enough" (20). Though her audience certainly expresses a deep respect for the man, Adcock shares the opinion of the man himself and builds to the ultimate disappointment of the attempt to be a god-like creator. The last line of the poem, "His only fruit from the Tree of Life" (35), describing the "light-filled" (34) orange, shows the closest level a man can get to God. The actual orange, the "golden globe" (33) itself, represents the man's ultimately impossible attempt at reaching divinity.

Gina is a sophisticated reader, thinker, and writer. Other students need more work at different stages of the process. Since most students use explicit documentation, we then move from Gina's essay to look at some less successful essays employing the same strategy. For the weakest model, I use a paper from several years ago. This student's analysis of a scene from Margaret Laurence's The Stone Angel begins with a repetition of some of the words and phrases in the prompt, as indicated by the highlighting: "The passage shows the process a person goes through when wondering about the motives behind one's actions. Margaret Laurence uses excellent word choice to show this." Already, we sense that the student has little to say. Her first paragraph of development labels some sentences as "short," her second "characterizes the main character," and her third at last discusses the promised "word choice":

The word choice in this passage is also very effective. Some of the words may seem simplistic or complex; however, they fit and flow in each sentence. Laurence uses many words such as it, that, and him in this passage and in the entire novel. By doing this, the reader must continuously be certain of what the he, she, or it is. This may be significant because it may make the reader go back again and maybe recognize or notice some evidence or situation he or she did not notice the first time.

The student can be taught fairly easily to place quotation marks around "it," "that," etc. The teaching and learning of inference, evidence, and clarity, however, are more formidable. Back we go to the models and activities.

The next example shows someone who knows (somewhat) how to introduce evidence and use quotation marks but little else. This single paragraph constitutes the entire essay, in which the student seeks to discuss the imagery in a novel but ends up merely summarizing it, using quotations simply to complete the restatement. She, too, begins with a repetition of the prompt and then organizes her evidence sequentially. She can list examples but cannot elaborate on them, as shown in her use of ellipses in between confusing quotation marks.

The atomic bomb imagery plays a large role in the development of Ibuse's story. In the beginning we receive a small sketch of what happened, with Yasuko's diary entry for August 6. "At the Furue there was a great flash and boom. Black smoke rose up over the city of Hiroshima like a volcanic eruption." As the story progresses, with each character's account of what happened to them, there is another piece added to a larger puzzle, until finally on page 282 of the novel, a name is given to the bomb and meaning is actually placed to what happened to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. "An 'atomic bomb', ... That's the name for it, ... It gives off a terrible radiation." However, one can say that the bomb has about seven different names during the course of the story, each one being more specific than the prior. "The name of the bomb..., from the initial "new weapon" through "new-type bomb," "secret weapon," "special new-type bomb"... that day, [became] an "atomic bomb."

An Example of Implicit Documentation and Multiple Sources

After discussion of these three examples using explicit documentation from a single source, we move to the concept of implicit documentation using multiple sources. We examine the essay of a sophomore student, Adrienne, who has the task of comparing two movie versions of Hamlet to the original play. Description becomes an important tool for her because her sources are visual and aural. She turns brief summary into strong evidence, drawing conclusions from the setting, the body language, and the action in order to compare the characters' motives. There is not a single direct quotation, yet her evidence is strong, citing the videotape and the catacombs, the gun and the sword, the internal struggle and the external action. Her phrase "rewinds the soliloquy" not only concludes her point but shows her potential for fine writing.

Ethan Hawke portrays Hamlet as a poet whereas Mel Gibson makes Hamlet to be more of a soldier in the famous soliloquy, "To be or not to be." Throughout the whole movie Hawke has incorporated the videotape into the scenes to express his thoughts. In this soliloquy Hawke is pointing a gun to his head and repeats the first lines many times, as if he really is contemplating killing himself. The struggle is much more internal and drawn out painfully, with a gun to his temple. Hawke seems to be unsure when he mutters nonchalantly. This is a contrast with Mel Gibson's version. Gibson gives the speech in the catacombs of his ancestors, with his hand occasionally touching his sword. However, the feeling that he would draw the weapon to do harm to himself is barely hinted, unlike the direct gun pointed to Hawke's head. The death images surrounding Gibson remind him of his dead father and the murder he has yet to revenge. Hawke, however, continuously rewinds the soliloquy as if searching for the meaning he knows is embedded in the word but cannot seem to find.

These four models work well for discussion about incorporating sources into one's own essay. By now everyone seems to have "something to say" about what makes good evidence and how to incorporate it. We find ourselves arguing for less paraphrase and summary and more persuasive writing with implicit and explicit documentation.

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