SCHOLARLY WRITING GUIDELINES

You write all the time, perhaps mostly in digital modes, but for academic purposes you need more formal styles in your repertoire. The ability to use such styles correctly makes your work look expert and professional, which is useful when communicating with employers, clients, or grad schools. Different disciplines (like different tribes) have their own standards—English wants MLA while Psychology wants APA—so when you choose a major, be sure to master its forms. In Anthropology courses, however, you need to use an Anthropology style. Much of what follows is common to many disciplines, and being behaviorally flexible (able to use more than one culture/style) is a great adaptive advantage, so hopefully this overview will help you write better scholarly papers in many courses.

What is scholarly writing?

Scholarly writing is something that developed in universities and research organizations over the centuries, a specialized mode of communication that promotes clarity and confidence in the information presented while discussing complex and often controversial issues. Good scholarly writing is intellectually dense, since scholars are busy people: every word should count. It needs to spell out the issues and ideas it addresses very clearly, explicitly making logical connections between evidence and arguments/hypotheses. It takes a lot of practice to write well in this mode, and as an undergraduate, you should aim for competence in the basics.

One of those basics is being able to recognize and use authoritative sources of information to support your argument or disprove someone else’s. In a time when “alternative facts” can have power, we want to have some confidence in the information we’re given.

Scholarly sources

When we professors ask you to write papers, we often tell you to use “scholarly sources.” What are scholarly sources, and why do we insist on them?

A scholarly source is something that has been written by an authority, someone who has spent a substantial amount of time studying a subject. These are people who have seen/touched/heard evidence first-hand and/or thought deeply about what it means. Authorities often have advanced degrees in their fields (for a scholar, learning never ends); sometimes they have no academic credentials, only experiential ones. Because of the time and effort these people have put into understanding a particular subject, we respect their views more than those of ordinary people.

So first you need to be able to distinguish between what is written by expert authors and opinion that isn’t backed up by much research or reflection. Before the internet, this was easy: the companies that published books and journals wanted to make sure they produced a quality product, so they screened authors and their works—especially university presses and academic journals. If you were not an expert, it was hard to get published.

The internet has made things more complicated. Just about anyone can say what they want there, whether it’s true or not, so when you use on-line sources, you need to look more closely at who produced the site and its content. Printed books and journals that have been put on-line as PDFs are just as authoritative as the original printed copy. Sites produced by universities, museums, and research institutions are also respected. If web authors don’t give their credentials on-site, you may have to do a little research to find out who they are and why
they would count as an expert. What you want to avoid is *anonymous* sources, ones where you can’t find an author’s name. Not only can’t you check their credentials, but some people use anonymity as a cloak to write deliberate untruths. How can you respect information if the person giving it won’t stand by it?

Therefore the first rule is: **find the experts.** Get your information from them. Be very skeptical of anonymous sources.

**Some scholarly sources are better than others**

Even when you’re reading or listening to the experts, however, there are differences in the quality of information they present. When they are discussing things they have seen for themselves—eyewitness records of events, an experiment they personally conducted—we refer to these as **primary sources**. Primary sources are gold: how can you be more knowledgeable than having seen it for yourself?

Primary sources are the best—but how much can one individual experience first-hand? When they want to talk about wider topics, scholars have to go beyond their own expertise, using their colleagues’ primary sources to extend their knowledge. A work that brings together the research found in several different primary sources is referred to as a **secondary source**. When scholars deal with *really* big issues, there are just too many primary sources for any one person to read and consider, so they use secondary sources to develop their understandings and collect data. A work that brings together the research found in multiple secondary sources is referred to as a **tertiary source**. Most textbooks are tertiary sources; so are encyclopedias—including Wikipedia (which is also anonymous)—and most course lectures. (When I lecture on the coastal archaeology of South Argyll, Scotland, that’s a primary source; when I lecture on British archaeology, that’s a secondary source; and when I lecture on global prehistory, that’s a tertiary source. When I talk about hip-hop, that’s nothing but opinion.)

Second rule: **quality of information degrades the further you get from a primary source.** When an author pulls information from several primary sources to write a secondary source, they can’t fit it all in: things get left out or simplified in ways that skew the evidence; the author may have misunderstood (or deliberately misreported) a source they used. This is why many professors tell students not to use tertiary sources in their papers, because the oversimplification and bias are compounded. We need tertiary sources to get the big picture, but you don’t want to rely on them to make detailed arguments.

This brings us to another kind of source, which sometimes trips students up: **popular science.** As part of their job, many scholars give talks and interviews, or appear in Discovery Channel or PBS programs. These presentations, aimed at the general public, are meant to capture people’s interest, and are often excellent for that purpose. Yet they also simplify the ideas and information discussed in ways that make them poor scholarly sources. Consequently, you should treat these like tertiary sources.

**Books or journal articles?**

Usually, the two main types of scholarly sources you will find are books and articles in academic journals. What are the pros and cons of each?

**Books** are longer works, and that puts some students off right away. But that length has advantages: books often provide better “big-picture” explanations, which can be very useful if
you’re still trying to understand what you’re writing about. I encourage you to seek out books on your topic. Here at SU, our library is not well-supplied with anthropology books—but you can use the library’s on-line catalog to order books from other schools in the system. It will take about a week for the books to get here, so don’t put this off until the last minute! The other thing you should know about books is that it takes longer to get a book published than an article, so the information in books isn’t as “fresh”: the general rule is that the research in books is at least 10 years when it’s published. In some disciplines, that doesn’t matter much, but in archaeology and bioanthropology, where new discoveries can radically revise our views, 10 years is a long time. Use books as a foundation for your research.

Articles are shorter, and students love the fact that they’re accessible 24/7 through the library’s “Quick Search” (http://www.salisbury.edu/library/resources/default.html). However, these can be super-geeky primary sources, scholars talking to other scholars in their own discipline, and so they assume you already know the basics of what they’re talking about. (Not the best thing to be grappling with if you’re confused at 3am.) The information in articles is “ fresher” than that in books—around 3–5 years older than the publication date.

Ideally, you should use a mix of these as sources for your research paper, so you get the benefits of both: the mature consideration and fuller explanations of books, and the cutting-edge details of articles. For the very latest discoveries, you can use research-specific news sources such as The New York Times Science section and ScienceDaily.com, but these should not be your principal (and certainly not your only!) sources.

Using other people’s work—citations

Since none of us can observe everything of importance in the world, to have a meaningful discussion requires referring to information or ideas we got from someone else. In ordinary speech we don’t usually bother telling people where various bits came from—although in complicated and/or delicate social or political situations, we might: “Susan said Jim told her that . . . “ or “According to the President . . . .” That’s because we know people can be biased. Scholars are people, too, and not immune to bias, which is why you need to let your reader know where you got your information.

While you might do that by writing “According to Boas,” that isn’t always good enough. Major researchers like Franz Boas, the “father of American anthropology,” write many books and articles over the course of their careers; often their views change over time, as new evidence comes to light. What Boas said in 1883 was different from what he said in 1942. So we need more information, and we need to slip it into what we’re writing without breaking the flow of the argument.

This is the purpose of citations. At a minimum, a citation briefly tells the scholarly reader who you got your information from and how “fresh” it is; ideally it also tells them exactly where to find it, so they can check the information for themselves and make sure you didn’t distort the original author’s meaning. The major anthropological journals use a parenthetical citation style similar to MLA; precisely, variants of The Chicago Manual of Style’s author-date system (Chicago University Press 2010: 655). You put the last name of your source’s author(s) and the date of the source in parentheses, right after (or before) the information you took from the source. If the source was printed and has page numbers, you include the number(s) of the page(s) where that specific information was found. Here is an example:
Over seven million pounds of silver were taken to Spain from American mines during the 16th and early 17th centuries (Wolf 1997: 139).

Here is another, where the author’s name is already part of the sentence:

David Anthony (2007:206–213) used the presence of bit-wear on prehistoric horses’ teeth to prove they were ridden.

In anthropology, this is the only time you can leave some of the information out of the parentheses. All citations must always include the author’s/authors’ name(s) and date, and page numbers if applicable, even if you just gave the same exact citation a few sentences earlier. If there is no date on the document, let readers know that with the abbreviation n.d. (“no date”) in the place where the date would go, in the citation and in the reference.

Here’s an example for a source with two authors:

Anthropology has often been used by Mediterranean historians to illustrate what they saw as an unchanging rural past (Horden and Purcell 2000: 463–466).

If you had more than two authors, you would use the last name of the first author listed (senior author) followed by et al. (“and others”)—(Champion et al. 1984).

The rest of the information—references

Okay—so the stuff in the parentheses didn’t tell you all that much. That’s because the citation is only half of process. Citations are a kind of shorthand. The rest of the details, put at the end of the paper where they doesn’t clutter up what you’re trying to say, are found in the reference. This provides the author’s/authors’ full name(s), the date of publication, the full title of the work, and other important information that would help you find a copy of the source.

So, at the end of the paper, under the heading “References Cited”—include only works you cite in your paper—you list, in alphabetical order by the author’s last name, your sources. If there are multiple authors, be sure to list them in the order given on the source (the senior author goes first for a reason) and alphabetize it using the senior author’s name. If there is more than one work by an author, give the author’s name once and list the works under it in chronological order, from the oldest to the most recent.

References Cited

Anthony, David

Champion, Timothy, Clive Gamble, Stephen Shennan, and Alasdair Whittle

Horden, Peregrine, and Nicholas Purcell
University of Chicago Press

Wolf, Eric R.

All of these are books, and your references should follow this format *exactly*. Make sure you get the punctuation right! Last name first for authors (or lead authors; the others’ names are given in the normal order); title of the book italicized; the name of the publisher and the city where it was published. Often there are several cities listed in the book: choose the nearest one. If the city isn’t well-known (like Malden), include a reference to the state/country to narrow it down.

Here are the formats for other common scholarly sources:

**Journal article**

Lowell, Julia C.

The article title is not italicized; the journal title is (the journal is the “book”). Do not put the article title in quotes. Include the number of the volume the article was published in and its page numbers.

**Journal article published online** (if there is also a print/PDF version)

Lowell, Julia C.

The DOI (Digital Object Identifier) number will take readers directly to the article online. It can usually be found near the title on the article’s webpage.

**Chapter/article in an edited book**

Higham, Charles

Be sure you lead off with the name of the *author* of the piece, not the editor of the whole book—their name comes later. The chapter/article title is not italicized; the book title is.
Web pages, electronic documents, and blogs

Society for American Archaeology (SAA)

Here we have an institutional author: a source that was put together by an organization rather than one or more individuals. Since institutions often have long names, they are commonly abbreviated—that’s the bit in parentheses—and the abbreviation is used in citations to keep them short. Be sure to explicitly tell people in the reference what abbreviation you’re using. The title is the name of the specific document or web page—it should NOT be the title of an entire website. Be sure to provide the full URL, and to say when you looked at the site—unlike printed books, information can change quickly online, or disappear completely . . . which is why scholars find the Web frustrating. How do you go back and double-check the information then?

Oh, and this (SAA 2014) is the official style guide for American Antiquity, the premier archaeological journal in the United States. This is the style you are expected to use for your research papers, and if you have unusual sources, consult this site to find out the proper way to cite and reference them.

Took the words right out of my mouth

We use information and ideas we get from other people all the time—but until the ability to digitally cut and paste came along, it wasn’t common to find people copying others exactly. Now that it’s so easy to copy, this has become a major issue in scholarly work (and in intellectual property and copyright law). When is it appropriate to use someone’s exact words, and when is it not? If you want to use someone else’s exact words, how should you do that?

As I mentioned earlier, different disciplines have different standards. In English Lit, you may want to repeat a passage you’re about to analyze, since exactly which words were used and what order they were in is your data. In other disciplines, repeating someone else’s words verbatim is considered unprofessional, signaling laziness and/or a lack of writing skill/creativity. There are two widely accepted exceptions to this rule. First, when you strongly disagree with someone, it is wise to let them state their own position, as it were, through a quote, so no one can accuse you of distorting what they said. Second, in rare instances, a passage is so meaningful or beautiful that reducing it to basic facts destroys much of its value. These are the only times I should see you using direct quotes in your papers. In all other instances, you should acknowledge your source with a citation and put that information into your own words (paraphrase).

Changing a few words in an otherwise identical passage is not paraphrasing, and if you make it ungrammatical in the process (as many students do), the errors catch your professors’ eye. This isn’t a matter of “five identical words in a row”: that is a grossly oversimplified rule for plagiarism. You don’t need to put “Salisbury University’s Fulton School of Liberal Arts” in quotes every time you write it—that’s a name, not a quotation; a single “piece” of information. And if the information you want to use is “common knowledge”—widely known facts or sayings—you do not need a citation.

But as scholars, we deal with uncommon knowledge.
When you choose to use someone else’s words, you need to signal that to the reader, so they know “someone else is talking.” There are two ways to do this: to set off the words with quotation marks, which is the preferred method for short passages (less than four lines); or to format it as a block quote. All lengthy passages must be set as block quotes: separated from the rest of the text by a blank line before and after, single-spaced, with 1.5-inch margins on both sides; there are no quotation marks, and the citation (in square brackets rather than parentheses) goes at the end of the block.

Quoting other writers and citing the places where their words are to be found are by now such common practices that it is pardonable to look upon the habit as natural, not to say instinctive. It is of course nothing of the kind, but a very sophisticated act, peculiar to a civilization that uses printed books, believes in evidence, and makes a point of assigning credit or blame in a detailed, verifiable way [Barzun and Graff 1992: 273].

References Cited
Barzun, Jacques, and Henry F. Graff

University of Chicago Press

(Here I have taken a quote not from the original source, but from a book where it was quoted. Properly, one acknowledges that you didn’t read the original but took someone else’s word for it. This is not encouraged in scholarly writing.)

For run-in quotes, such as “these weapons, together with over 1,000 coins, fragments of military belts and uniforms, and bones of humans, horses, and mules, are all that survived of some 15,000–20,000 Roman soldiers” (Wells 1999:3), citations come after the quotations marks and before punctuation such as commas or periods.

Reference cited
Wells, Peter S.

Yes, this is complicated; yes, it is incredibly nitpicky. That’s what scholars do: deal with complex issues where the details are important. It’s a lot to keep track of, but with practice, it becomes second nature and you don’t have to think about it much. Making difficult things look effortless is something that impresses potential employers, clients, and colleagues, so start practicing now!