Sandie Friedman and Robert Miller

# Launching students towards source-based writing

## An introduction for librarians

This article is a bit like a team-taught class, a collaboration between a librarian and a writing instructor. First, librarian Robert Miller describes a pedagogical challenge he encountered in a library instruction session: How could he help a student integrate a source into a writing project? In the second part of the article, writing instructor Sandie Friedman addresses that challenge by introducing techniques for teaching students how to make effective use of sources they've found in their research.

### What do you want me to do with it?

During a one-shot instruction section in a business writing class, I was going around the computer lab, working individually with students on their research projects. One student explained to me that she was writing a proposal to convince the owner of a small business to begin using a shared, online calendar among management and employees.

Because the assignment required the use of at least a few sources drawn from the library, I began thinking how to help the student. The practical, applied nature of the topic pretty much ruled out journal articles. But fortunately our library had recently subscribed to a database comprising IT and business e-books, many of them being third-party software user manuals of the . . . *for Dummies* variety. Using that database, I was able to pull up a guide to Google and quickly found the chapter on using the calendar.

"There," I said to the student, assuming my accustomed stance of the all-knowing, beneficent librarian. "You're all set."

The student looked at me, then at the e-book chapter on the computer screen, then back at me.

"What do you want me to do with it?" she asked.

### A librarian's epiphany

In my mind, the e-book chapter on online calendars was a highly useful source for the proposal that the student was writing. In my mind, she could take each affordance of an online calendar as enumerated in the chapter (sharing, alerts, daily agendas, and so on) and then describe how those affordances would make a small business run better. In my mind, the rhetorical moves that the student could make using the e-book chapter—how she could integrate the information from the chapter into her writing project—were clear.

The only trouble was, the student couldn't read my mind.

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And that's why the student's wonderfully honest question—"What do you want me to do with it?"—came to me like an epiphany. How much of my work as a librarian consists in interactions like this one, in which I blithely lead a student into what is, for her, a conceptual cul-de-sac? And how many times am I unaware of the problem, because a student lacks the time and energy—lacks, indeed, the information-literacy skill—to ask, "Okay, what next? What's so great about this information anyway? How do I use it?"

## What to do

In fact, I was lucky to have encountered a student who had the presence of mind to ask the central question of information literacy practice: What should you do with the stuff you find when you conduct research? Because these days, finding stuff is easy. The student and I wound up in a library e-book database because of the arbitrary stipulations of her writing assignment, which required her to use the library. But she could have easily found useful, authoritative information on the affordances of an online calendar via a simple Google search. Which means that my job, as a librarian, may be a little less about pushing databases and their content at students, and a little more about helping students conceptualize what to do with the information that is so readily available.

For help in guiding students on how to incorporate the ideas and facts they find during research into their writing projects, we turn to an expert, academic writing instructor Sandie Friedman.

## Source-based writing: Getting students started

The beginning college writer's repertoire for using sources is often limited: the student may turn to sources for facts, to "back up" ideas, or as a finishing touch—sprinkling in quotes as a kind of topping. Over the past ten years, composition scholars have offered students a variety of strategies to answer the question of what to do with a source. One of the most widely used guides is Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*.[1] Graff and Birkenstein's book equips students with "templates": linguistic frameworks they can use to integrate source material into their papers.

Students sometimes respond with shock to a textbook that openly contradicts the high school shibboleth that one should never use "I" in academic writing. Graff and Birkenstein's templates not only free students from that hobbling misconception, but can also help them take a more nuanced stance towards a text—for instance, agreeing with some aspects of an argument, while opposing others:

Although I agree with X up to a point, I cannot accept his overall conclusion that _____.

Though I concede that _____, I still insist that _____."[2]

It may look as if Graff and Birkenstein's templates address the problem of integrating sources only at the surface level, providing instructions about what to do with sentences. However, they suggest that templates help students move towards deeper, more complex ideas, and I can testify that formulas of this kind—whether from *They Say, I Say* or crafted by instructors for the purposes of a particular class or assignment—do push students to make new intellectual moves.

Graff and Birkenstein's handbook is probably the most well-known guide for helping students to integrate sources, but many instructors in my writing program prefer two other models, both of which give students a set of key concepts for understanding what academic writers do with sources. One of our favorites is *Rewriting: How To Do Things with Texts* by Joseph Harris.[3] Harris's book, which speaks directly to students in a conversational tone, invites them to think of academic writing as a conversation and suggests there are several fundamental "moves" scholars make when they enter this conversation.

**Coming to terms.** Students may know how to summarize a text, but as Harris

defines this move, "coming to terms" goes beyond mere summary in two important ways. First, in "coming to terms," you try to understand what is beyond the text—the writer's larger project, her motives, her audience. Second, you take a more critical stance than we usually associate with mere summary, evaluating the source's "uses and limits."[4]

• **Forwarding.** Harris borrows the term from email: rather than responding directly to a source, it's more precise to say that scholars forward it into a new context with their own thoughts and comments. (That is, you don't *write back* to Shakespeare, but instead continue to circulate his text with your own interpretation appended.) "In forwarding a text," Harris explains, "you extend its uses."[5]

• **Countering.** Harris is at pains to clarify to student readers that this isn't simply contradicting what's been said. The aim is not to defeat the source, but to open up new lines of inquiry. In countering the source, you are "using problems in a text as a springboard to get at something [you] wouldn't otherwise say."[6]

• **Taking an approach.** As with "coming to terms," Harris's conception of this move takes us beyond the expected meaning: "taking an approach" is not just applying a theory. According to his description, you also look critically at the ideas you are borrowing from your method source. Some might regard this as a graduate-level move, but I have found that a properly scaffolded assignment can enable first-year students to at once apply a theory and consider its limitations.

While Harris names the moves academic writers make, Joseph Bizup's "BEAM" rubric helps students identify the various *roles* sources can play in a researched argument.[7] Harris can be useful even if the student is working to integrate only a single source. However, Bizup's framework really only makes sense for a more advanced type of project, integrating multiple sources, as in a traditional research paper.

In contrast to the categories of "primary" and "secondary," which indicate what the source is in itself, Bizup's categories refer to the way the text functions in a paper. Each of the letters in "BEAM" stands for a category of source use: Background sources deliver facts or information the reader needs in order to understand the argument. Exhibit sources are the focus of the analysis—the text (film, novel, poem, artwork, event, etc.) the writer is subjecting to interpretation. Argument sources provide the writer with claims about the exhibit source, which she can respond to. Method sources lend key terms or a theoretical framework.

In my writing class, where I have used both Harris and Bizup, I was concerned about inundating students with too much terminology. When I expressed this concern, though, my students were quick to point out that the two systems are actually complementary. It helps to know that you "come to terms" with Background sources (in fact, you can "come to terms" with a source in any of the BEAM categories); you "forward" and "counter" Argument sources; you "take an approach" with a Method source.

Following this insight from my students, I use a class handout that places the two sets of terms side-by-side, so we can discuss the correlations. The framework you choose depends upon the assignment, so you may want to consult with instructors about which moves they think are important for students to learn, given the disciplinary context of their classes.

## Pedagogical strategies for librarians

My writing program at George Washington University has a strong partnership with instructional librarians, who are embedded in specific sections of our University Writing course. In cotaught library sessions, we not only introduce our students to techniques for searching in the library catalog and subject-specific databases, but we also immediately ask them to think about what they've found in terms of the BEAM rubric: What role might this source play in your paper? There's a

good chance it's an Argument source, and if so, we ask: How might you forward this source, extending the ideas or making new use of one of its key concepts? How might you counter it, bringing forth an idea the source has occluded or dismissed?

In responding to these questions, students begin to orient themselves differently towards sources. Perhaps they start to experience scholarly writing as a conversation, with themselves as participants, as opposed to seeing the paper as a transaction between student and teacher with the sole purpose of earning a grade.

But what about Miller's student, or any student who asks you for help finding a source, but has only a vague sense of what she might do with it, once located? Here are several suggestions, ranging from one that requires minimal time and resources, to a large-scale, long-term project.

• **Make a handout.** Drawing from the resources we've discussed, create a handout for students about how to use sources in academic writing. Use this handout as the basis for a conversation about how they might integrate the material you've discovered. You might try some of the questions we ask students in my writing program, to get them thinking.

• **Share your ideas.** Whether you've articulated it for yourself or not, when you search for a source, you have some idea in mind about how it might work in the student's paper. Try being explicit about these ideas. What is obvious to you might not be for the student. Perhaps in conversation with the student, you might come up with several ways the source could productively enter into the student's project.

For instance, in Miller's example, it was clear to him that the student could use the guide to persuade the small business owner (the audience for her proposal) of how simple and efficient it could be to use an online calendar. In this instance, Harris's email analogy might be helpful. It's as if the student is forwarding the guide to the business owner with her comment: "See how easy it could be to use this, and how much time it might save you." But this wasn't obvious to the student, nor even to me. I had to give it some thought, too.

• **Partner with writing teachers at your institution.** A collaboration with writing teachers, especially in the context of a first-year writing seminar, can launch students towards a new way of conceptualizing the library: as a resource for ideas, rather than just a repository for information.

In fact, Miller and the student's frustration might be partially explained by a lack of collaboration between Miller and the business writing instructor whose class he was visiting. When the student asked Miller, "What do you want me to do with it?" that could have been a cue for the writing instructor to enter the conversation, and the three players (student, librarian, writing instructor) could discuss their various perspectives on finding and using sources.

Finding the source is really only the beginning of the process from the student's point of view. We are arguing that students may need to reorient themselves in relation to sources, thinking of them as voices in a scholarly conversation. Further, we are suggesting that to help students reorient, librarians, too, may need to conceive of their roles differently by beginning to shape the student's argument by actively guiding them towards a more skillful use of sources.

## Notes

1. Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, *They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006).

2. Ibid., 60.

3. Joseph Harris, *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2006).

4. Ibid., 15.

5. Ibid., 38.

6. Ibid., 55.

7. Joseph Bizup, "BEAM: A Rhetorical Vocabulary for Teaching Research-Based Writing," *Rhetoric Review* 27, no. 1 (January 2008): 72-86.