

Engaging with the Idea or the Author?

In this fact sheet you'll learn how to decide whether to give prominence to the author or idea when quoting, paraphrasing and summarising.

AT A GLANCE

Information Prominence

- Puts the idea first
- Usually used when ideas are known or are factual

Eg. "A concentrated banking system results in large banks that are too big to fail" (Bullock 2017, p5).

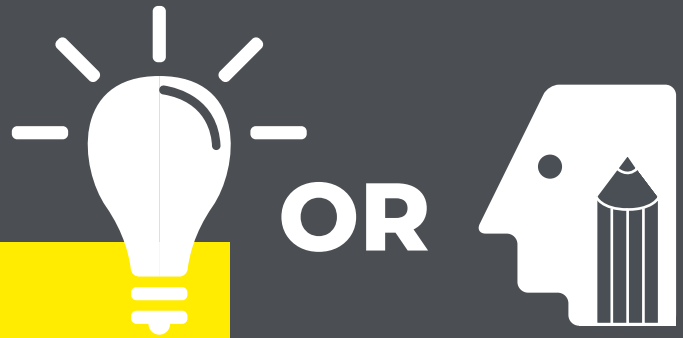
If a banking system has only a few banks, governments cannot afford to let them fail when under financial stress (Bullock 2017, p5).

Author Prominence

- Puts the author first
- Used when presenting arguments, beliefs or when formulating a position on a topic
- Also used when the idea of the author is different to others, or when comparing and contrasting viewpoints

Eg. According to Bullock (2017, p.5) "a concentrated banking system results in large banks that are too big to fail".

Bullock (2017, p5) argues that if a banking system has few banks governments cannot allow to let them fail when under financial stress.



How to choose between Engaging with Ideas or engaging with the Authors?

Information prominent representations often give the impression the idea is 'given', maybe 'factual'; the citation simply shows where you found this piece of information. This is more typically used when referring to sources of facts, such as textbooks or data bases.

Author prominent representations make the author the subject of the statement. We attach the idea to the author, it is 'according to' the author, or something the author argues, claims, believes, or asserts. This is typically used when referring to texts which are presenting arguments, or formulating a position on a topic, such as research or journal articles.

Basis of choice

In academic writing you typically engage with debates, arguments, controversies and so on, and so you engage with the positions authors take in these debates as you develop your own position. In this case, agreed 'facts' are yet to be confirmed or established. So author prominence is very typical.

However, you will also cite sources for claims that you present as established or known (that is, you will make information prominent attributions), and sometimes you may wish to present an idea as established, even when it is still being debated or argued over, because it suits your purpose to do so.

Thus, making the choice between author or information prominence is not only unavoidable, but doing it well contributes to the effectiveness of your argument. Such choices are part of what is called the 'rhetoric of writing'.

Reasons for choosing between these alternatives

You cannot avoid making these kinds of choices, and the more skilful you become in making them, the more persuasive you can make your writing. Your choice of verb of attribution is also a choice on how to represent the author's position. For example, stating that 'Bullock argues...' generally gives more credibility to the author's statement than 'Bullock claims'.

You might choose to use the verb 'claims' if you are arguing against the position Bullock stands for. If you make such an attribution you will probably go on to provide evidence which shows why Bullock's position is weak.

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