

Developing Effective Signal Phrases

What is a Signal Phrase?

Signal phrases are used to introduce a cited passage from research texts. Typically, signal phrases can offer readers useful background information for a source i.e., book or chapter title, academic standing, previous publications, and so on. Signal phrases are an important part of the paragraph because they also serve as transitions. It is important to always use signal phrases to introduce source material into your text. They help writers create unity and cohesion in their texts!

Best Practices.

Commonly signal phrases introduce the author by using the author's name, the title of their article, and a verb to introduce a passage. For example:

- Ann Johns (1997) claims that “students should provide ‘maps’ or ‘signposts for readers throughout the texts” (p. 506).

In this example, the author's first and last name are used suggesting this may be the first time the writer has introduced Ann Johns. **If it is the first time an author is introduced, the signal phrase may provide more pertinent information** to provide readers with a sense of who the author is. For example,

- Ann Johns (1997), in her article “Discourse Communities and Communities of Practice” claims that “students should provide ‘maps’ or ‘signposts for readers throughout the texts” (p. 506).
- Ann Johns (1997), of San Diego State, claims that “students should provide ‘maps’ or ‘signposts for readers throughout the texts” (p. 506).

Once an author is introduced for the first time, afterward, writers are only obligated to reference authors by their last names:

- Johns (1997) further argues that “students should provide ‘maps’ or ‘signposts for readers throughout the texts” (p. 506).

These signal phrases are dependent clauses. In other words, they rely on the rest of the sentence to function. However, it is possible to introduce cited passages with complete sentences, or an independent clause.

In fact, using complete sentences as a signal phrase can be extremely useful when citing a passage that starts at the beginning of the sentence. For example, using the same passage from Ann Johns, we can see—by introducing the passage with a complete sentence—that the previous examples have modified the passage to eliminate the first word of Johns’ passage:

- In her article, “Discourse Communities and Communities of Practice”, Ann Johns notes an important practice for writers: “In academic texts, students should provide ‘maps’ or ‘signposts for readers throughout the texts” (506).

Note here the complete sentence ends with a colon. This allows the writer to provide a sentence after the colon that begins at the beginning of the sentence with a capital letter. Using a dependent clause as a signal phrase to introduce a sentence that starts at the beginning of a sentence creates an awkward situation with a weird capital letter in the middle of a sentence:

- Johns claims “In academic texts, students should provide ‘maps’ or ‘signposts for readers throughout the texts” (506).

AVOID DOING THIS! The capital letter in the middle of a sentence is awkward and notes a lack of attention to detail!

Following a few simple guidelines like those mentioned here when introducing sources in your texts will go a long way in developing your credibility as a writer!

References

Johns, A.M. (1997). Discourse communities and communities of practice: membership, conflict, and diversity. In Johns, A.M. (Ed.) Text, role, and context: Developing Academic Literacies (pp. 51-70). Cambridge UP.