

## RELEVANT MATERIAL

Sometimes you're not sure that the sources listed in the card catalog, indexes, and bibliographies are really about your topic since titles can be ambiguous or vague. You need to be something of a detective. For example, suppose you've decided to investigate the safety methods- use of ropes and other equipment-of the early mountaineers to see whether their "safety" methods were really safe or just another unintended hazard. In the card catalog you find a listing for Hours of Exercise in the Alps, an 1896 book by John Tyndall. The catalog card is evidence that the book possibly is related somehow to your topic, but is the work a nineteenth-century physical fitness treatise or a book about mountain climbing? When you have the book in your hands, you can confirm that it deals with mountain climbing, but how do you find if it has specific information on your topic-the "safety" practices of early mountaineers? First, of course, check the table of contents-maybe there will be a chapter on "Climbing Techniques" or something similar. If there isn't, next check the introductory material. The preface, author's introduction, foreword, or whatever it's called may tell you the range of material covered in the book and the author's intent. In the preface you find the author of Hours of Exercise did not intend to cover safety techniques: I refrain from giving advice, further than to say that the perils of wandering in the High Alps are terribly real, and are only to be met by knowledge, caution, skill, and strength. "For rashness, ignorance, or carelessness the mountains leave no margin; and to rashness, ignorance, or carelessness three-fourths of the catastrophes which shock us are to be traced." Those who wish to know something of the precautions to be taken upon the peaks and glaciers cannot do better than consult the excellent little volume lately published by Leslie Stephen, where, under the head of "Dangers of Mountaineering," this question

is discussed. John Tyndall, *Hours of Exercise in the Alps* (New York: Appleton, 1896), pp. vi-vi

You make a partial bibliography card on Leslie Stephen's book and hope it's available, but don't give up on *Hours of Exercise* yet. Check the index under such possible headings as "ropes," "ice axes," "accidents," and so on, to see what you can find. Again, there isn't much, but you do find this passage: Why, then, it may be asked employ the rope? The rope, I reply, notwithstanding all its possible drawbacks under such circumstances (one fall carrying all others on the rope to their deaths), is the safeguard of the climber. Not to speak of the moral [psychological] effect of its presence, an amount of help upon a dangerous slope that might be measured by the gravity of a few pounds is often of incalculable importance; and thus, though the rope may be not only useless but disastrous if the footing be clearly lost, and the glissade [slide] fairly begun, it lessens immensely the chance of this occurrence. This isn't the sort of detailed discussion you'd hoped for, but it is an important aside that shows the philosophy early mountaineers had toward rope use. It shows that early climbers felt the rope would keep a small misstep from becoming a fall, but as Tyndall admitted, once the misstep became a fall, the rope could be disastrous. It could carry to their deaths all those tied to it. This aside helps confirm your theory that the "safety precautions" of early climbers were not entirely safe. It's a small but important piece of information, relevant to the topic and worth noting for possible use in the final paper. You can find a note card summarizing Tyndall's point on p. 53.

**RELIABLE MATERIAL**

We must depend on them to yield appropriate fitting. Once you find that a source does have relevant material, you have to determine whether that material is reliable: First check the date. Eventhough if you're writing about mountain climbing in the 1800s, a secondary book or article written recently may be more valuable to you than one written 20 years ago because later sources have the advantage of drawing upon all previous sources. And, to cite another example, if you're writing on something like the technology for solar heating, you'll find that the state of the art has advanced enough that earlier works may be hopelessly obsolete. Of course, a recent source isn't necessarily better than an earlier one, but the date is well worth checking. \*Tyndall, pp. 289-90.

You make a partial bibliography card on Leslie Stephen's book and hope it's available, but don't give up on *Hours of Exercise* yet. Check the index under such possible headings as "ropes," "ice axes," "accidents," and so on, to see what you can find. Again, there isn't much, but you do find this passage: Why, then, it may be asked employ the rope? The rope, I reply, notwithstanding all its possible drawbacks under such circumstances (one fall carrying all others on the rope to their deaths), is the safeguard of the climber. Not to speak of the moral [psychological] effect of its presence, an amount of help upon a dangerous slope that might be measured by the gravity of a few pounds is often of incalculable importance; and thus, though the rope may be not only useless but disastrous if the footing be clearly lost, and the glissade [slide] fairly begun, it lessens immensely the chance of this occurrence. This isn't the sort of detailed discussion you'd hoped for, but it is an important aside that shows the philosophy early mountaineers had toward rope use. It shows that early climbers felt the rope would keep a small misstep from becoming a fall, but as Tyndall admitted, once the misstep became a fall, the rope could be disastrous. It could carry to their deaths all those tied to it. This aside helps confirm your theory that

the "safety precautions" of early climbers were not entirely safe. It's a small but important piece of information, relevant to the topic and worth noting for possible use in the final paper. You can find a note card summarizing Tyndall's point.

You also need to determine whether your source is authoritative and this gets you into a subjective area that is difficult even for experienced writers: Can you trust the author? Just because something is printed doesn't make it so. If an author says something that doesn't seem convincing, trust your own judgment and investigate further. After all, there may well be others in the cot field who disagree with that author. How do you know when to be suspicious? You should always be little suspicious, but be especially suspicious if the author presents more assertions than detailed support. And always check those assertions against the details in other sources as well. Furthermore, be suspicious of authors who dwell on the unusual. For instance, you probably should be skeptical of an author who maintains there's a mysterious force in the Bermuda Triangle that destroys ships and airplanes. The tone of the book-the author's attitude toward readers and the material in the book-also can be a cause for extra suspicion. Consider these excerpts from forewords in two books on the same topic-the battle of the Alamo. From the Foreword to *A Time to Stand*: These men were all kinds. They were farmers, clerks, doctors, lawyers. There was a blacksmith ... a hatter ... a house painter ... a jockey ... a shoemaker ... a Baptist preacher. Very few were the frontier type, although one was indeed the greatest bear hunter in all the West.... As a group, they had little in common-yet everything. For they were all Americans, sharing together a fierce love of liberty and a deep belief that the time had come to take their stand to keep it. From the Foreword to *The Alamo*: Barring versions which may exist in manuscript., this is the first chronicle of the Alamo which seeks to present the story of that histone structure in full. Finding and assembling the necessary

parts has been a fascinating but, at the same time, complicated business. Before they could be recognized with sureness, many of the scattered pieces we walked past time and again. Dozens upon dozens of those available were suspect upon discovery because mutually contradictory. The spurious could only be discarded with confidence after months of reviewing and collating.\* Walter Lord, *A Time to Stand* New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), p. 11. EP are in the original, except the one following "West." \*John Myers Myers, *The Alamo* (New York: Dutton, 1948), p. 11.

In the first foreword, the author seems so dedicated to the noble motives of the Texans and the glory they deserve that we do not feel we can trust him to say anything seriously to their detriment. We'd continue looking at the book and perhaps find something useful in it, but we'd be very skeptical and hope to find confirmation of important points in other sources. The second foreword shows us that the author apparently is more proud of the authenticity of his book than in any motives of the Texans. That doesn't mean that his book is reliable, or even necessarily more reliable than the first, but we're more comfortable at this point that we can trust what the author says in the main text of the book. Of course, we'll continually evaluate its reliability as we're going through it. Taking Notes After evaluating a source and deciding that it appears useful, your next step is to take notes from it. We suggest you use index cards either 4 X 6 or 5 X 8-because they're easy to handle and easy to rearrange. Later when you're getting ready to write your paper, you'll probably want to match your research information to your outline. If the information is note cards, you can arrange the cards so that all the information on a subtopic is together, even though it has come from a number of books and articles. We'll go into detail later, but here's what a note card looks like:

## **WHY TAKE NOTES?**

You may wonder whether note cards are still worthwhile now that copying machines are readily available. Yes, they certainly are, though using a copying machine to reproduce material can reduce the length and number of notes you need to take. Depending on how much money you have and how willing you are to spend it, you can take almost any source out of the library by reproducing all or part of the ones that can't be checked out. The purpose of taking notes extends beyond merely having all your research material handy as you prepare to write. Suppose you don't take notes. Instead, during a week of library research you find four good books and mark the important pages with pieces of notebook paper; you also find, reproduce, and highlight with a felt tip pen six helpful articles. Your problem as you prepare to write is that you don't remember what's marked by those pieces of notebook paper and you don't remember what you've highlighted. And what if you were writing a larger research paper involving many more sources? You'd really be lost. You really don't need to have all the sources you want to use, or even copies of them, at hand as you write your paper. Earlier in this chapter we presented a paragraph from *Hours of Exercise on rope use by early mountain climbers*. Since that was the only relevant paragraph from the book, we'd just fill out a brief note card rather than checking out the book or reproducing the paragraph itself. With note cards for simple material like this, you can cut down the amount of material you need within reach when you write. Having only key sources supplemented by note cards spread around you as you write helps eliminate confusion. The main reason for taking notes has to do with the exercise of writing information on the cards. Before you're really ready to write, you need to have sifted through your

research material thoroughly so that you are knowledgeable about your topic. To use computer terminology, you need to "process" that material through your mind. Filling out note cards forces you to become actively involved with the research material, to read it carefully with an eye to how-or if-you can use it in your paper. Much of the general information will remain in your mind, and the note cards will help you recall small details as you write. Your goal for the note-taking process, then, is to end up with note cards that contain the essence of the material you've reviewed.

## **PARAPHRASE NOTE CARD**

A paraphrase, like a summary, is a retelling of a passage in your own words. But there's a difference between summary and paraphrase. Both can adopt the organization and flow of the original. However, a paraphrase tends to follow the sentence-by-sentence pattern of the original more closely and also is about the same length. Paraphrase note cards should be used sparingly. If you're going to take notes that follow the original as closely as a paraphrase does, why not quote instead? Then you'll have the exact words in case you decide to quote all or part of the passage in your paper. Sometimes, though, the original either is highly technical or complex or is not worded well, so a paraphrase can help simplify or "interpret" it. That's the best time to paraphrase-when you don't need the exact words of the original and want to simplify the wording. For example, here's a confusing sentence from Tyndall's *Hours of Exercise*: Not to speak of the moral effect of its presence, an amount of help upon a dangerous slope that might be measured by the gravity of a few pounds is often of incalculable importance. 56

