

Signal Phrases

A **signal phrase** introduces the work of another, whether in a paraphrase, summary, or quotation, “signaling” to the reader that the following information comes from a source. Signal phrases contribute to “good flow” and make writing at length about material from a source easier. They also clearly set up whose voice is being introduced into the paper and allow you to introduce and cite research without relying exclusively on parenthetical citations which can sometimes interrupt the flow of a sentence. Signal phrases often make writing livelier since they usually rely on suggestive verbs that help to characterize the work being referenced.

Uses of Signal Phrases

- Signal phrases designate where an author begins using information from a source. A phrase like *Smith (2006) argues that* makes it unmistakably clear that what follows will have come from Smith.
- A signal phrase can call attention to an important scholar’s position in the field, or a source’s title (e.g., *Dr. Emily Strang (2018) points out that...*).
- If your paper requires you to manage a number of different sources (especially in a single paragraph or even a single sentence), signal phrases make it easier for your reader to distinguish between different voices and positions (e.g., *Jones (2015) asserts that. . . , while Brown (2017) rejects this notion, stating. . .*).

Consider the following two paragraphs.

The first uses signal phrases:

Geoff Glennie (2015) claims that proportional representation systems often yield surprising or even volatile governing bodies prone to “gridlock, indecision and constant elections ... resulting in the inability to pass meaningful economic legislation” (pp. 77-78). While they may reflect the will of the people broadly, **he persuasively argues that** the instability that comes from this model has a detrimental effect on voter participation. In Greece, for example, the 2013 economic crisis led to the formation and election of a rash of populist and socialist parties who were incapable of agreeing on a legislative response to the crisis hamstringing the government’s recovery efforts (Glennie, 2015). And while Glennie's argument accurately represents the situation in Greek politics, **he suggests that Canada’s Elections Act of 1996 outlaws** the possibility of frivolous, factional elections in Canadian parliament.

The second does not use signal phrases:

Proportional representation systems often yield surprising or even volatile governing bodies prone to “gridlock, indecision and constant elections ... resulting in the inability to pass meaningful economic legislation” (Glennie, 2015, pp. 77-78). While they may reflect the will of the people broadly, the instability that comes from this model has a detrimental effect on voter participation (Glennie, 2015). In Greece, for example, the 2013 economic crisis led to the formation and election of a rash of populist and socialist parties who were incapable of agreeing on a legislative response to the crisis hamstringing the government’s recovery efforts (Glennie, 2015).

But while this argument accurately represents the situation in Greek politics, Canada's Elections Act of 1996 effectively outlaws the possibility of frivolous, factional elections in Canadian parliament (Glennie, 2015).

Both paragraphs are accurately and completely cited, but the use of signal phrases in the first allows the author to engage with the sources in a way that the second version does not. The author makes judgements and claims about the way Glennie writes; notice the difference between the verbs *persuasively argues* and *suggests* in the second paragraph.

Strong Verbs

Keep a list of energetic and specific verbs. Students who eagerly attempt to include a variety of critical and scholarly positions sometimes tend to rely on a couple of very broad signal phrases which can begin to sound stale after repeated usage (e.g., *According to _____*, and *suggests* are often overused). Here is a list of verbs with distinct meanings you can use to accurately characterize the type of information you are presenting to the reader (from [The Writing Centre at George Mason University](#)):

acknowledges	confirms	grants	refutes
adds	contends	illustrates	rejects
admits	counters	implies	reports
affirms	counterattacks	insists	responds
agrees	declares	mentions	reveals
answers	defines	notes	speculates
argues	denies	observes	states
asserts	disputes	predicts	suggests
claims	echoes	proposes	surmises
comments	endorses	reasons	warns
concedes	estimates	recognizes	writes
	finds	recommends	