Summarizing Sources Pitfalls

“The closest cliché syndrome”¹: Identifying the author’s argument as the closest cliché. For example, the closest cliché for William Cronon’s “The Trouble with Wilderness” would be: save the forests. His argument is more complicated than this. If it’s a published article, it usually isn’t advancing a cliché.

**List summaries or reconstructions:** Inventorying each of the author’s points chronologically. “The author says this, then he states this, and then he argues that, and then he shows this…” List summaries include too much information, and they do not prioritize important information. Writers need to prioritize on two levels: first, they must acknowledge how the author prioritizes his/her ideas; second, a writer has to prioritize ideas important to his/her argument (while faithfully presenting the text). Writers of list summaries might be relying on what they know how to do: plot summary.

**Over-simplifications:** Presenting only a strand of the author’s argument and overlooking other important strands.

**Patchwriting:** This is Rebecca Moore Howard’s term for: “Copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one synonym-substitutes” (“Plagiarism Pentimento” 233). This usually happens when a writer attempts to paraphrase but has not digested the text sufficiently.

**Manipulative summaries:** Bending the meaning of a text to support the argument. In five-paragraph essays students are asked to use texts to support a preconceived thesis; this invites writers to sweep differences under the rug, select moments in a source that reinforce the thesis, and avoid complexity altogether.

**Decontextualization:** Cherry picking quotes from a text and running with them without regard for their context.

**All quotes, no student:** Relying too heavily on quotations. Here are some reasons why writers might rely too heavily on quotes: they fear plagiarism; they have not digested the text; they don’t know the appropriate balance of quotation to paraphrase and analysis.

**No quotes, all student:** Leaving out the author’s voice entirely. This often leads writer to stray from the text’s ideas and misrepresent them. This pitfall is particular to the humanities. In the sciences writers more often than not present texts without incorporating quotations.

**Blurring between author and student:** This is easy to spot: the name of the author drops out after he/she is first introduced and the author’s ideas are presented as if they are simply facts or the writer’s own ideas. This is another common form of unintentional plagiarism.

**Drive-by quotings:** Dropping quotations into the text without introducing them.

¹The “closest cliché syndrome” and “list summaries” are adapted from Gerald Graff and Kathy Birkenstein’s They Say, I Say.
What must a writer know how to do to present a text effectively to an unfamiliar audience?

While reading:
- Recognize a text’s rhetorical context (genre, audience, occasion)
- Read for key concepts and ideas
- Look up unfamiliar words
- Take notes in the margins of challenging texts identifying the overarching idea of each section and key concepts

While writing:
- Distill the author’s project/argument/conclusions
- Identify sub-ideas or arguments
- Prioritize information for the reader
- Understand and explain how the author supports his/her argument or reaches his/her conclusions
- Define key concepts/terms
- Distinguish between your ideas and the author’s
- Select quotations to incorporate that reflect the author’s argument or quotations that writer will engage with directly (reinforce/challenge/undermine/subvert/analyze)
- Use appropriate signal verbs (presents, finds, claims, argues) to integrate quotations
- Paraphrase (both how to paraphrase and what to paraphrase)
- Introduce a text and its author
- Cite sources appropriately
- Use appropriate punctuation
- Use appropriate tense

NOTE: How to cite and when to use quotations or paraphrase depends on the discipline.