Abraham Kaplan says “popular art is never a discovery, only a reaffirmation” he points to exactly this distinction.* If we agree with Kaplan, as I do, that art is defined by the way it makes us see things from a new perspective, Peanuts appears to deserve the respect it has received from philosophers and theologians, not to speak of the general public. Donald Duck reveals to us what we believe when we are not thinking or seeing clearly; it reassures us. But Peanuts makes us expand our vision, and so is a different kind of art.

The point is that in using sources we must not be simple sponges, soaking up uncritically everything we read: we must distinguish between the opinion of the author we are reading and the opinion which we ourselves, after careful consideration, come to hold. And others’ opinions cannot stand by themselves; the fact that a source has said something is only one piece of evidence to help us demonstrate our own ideas.

Most notes refer to books (footnote 1, below), articles in books (footnote 2), articles in periodicals (3), or previous notes (4). Here is one example of each of these kinds of notes; if you memorize these forms in detail you will need to refer to a handbook (such as the Modern Language Association style sheet) only occasionally.

But the real problem, as we have seen, comes when we try to sort out the ideas, opinions, interpretation of other people from those we hold ourselves. Each of us has his own intellectual identity, though most of our ideas inevitably come from sources outside us, and a responsible use of sources recognizes that identity and distinguishes clearly between what we think and what our source thinks. It is no sin to accept wholly another person’s idea: “If we agree with Kaplan, as I do. . . .” The sin is in not having sufficient respect for yourself as a thinking being, or as a student, to interpose yourself between your sources and your writing (or thinking, for your papers should be occasional crystallizations of a continuum of reflection). It is lazy and irresponsible to pass off Kaplan’s ideas (or anyone else’s ideas) as your own, without first making them your own through a process of critical scrutiny. These ideas then enrich the substance of what you have to say about your subject and become part of the evidence you bring to support your own assertions.

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* Kaplan, p. 254.
4 Wertham, p. 75.
Note on Responsible Use of Sources

Suppose you are writing a paper about popular art, and you have chosen to contrast two comics—Peanuts and Donald Duck—in order to show what it is that defines popular art. You feel a difference between the two comics, and you wonder if this difference is one between two forms of popular art or between popular art and art.

In the course of your reading of and about the comics, you come across a fine article by Abraham Kaplan called “The Aesthetics of the Popular Arts,” where, among other things, you read:

All art selects what is significant and suppresses the trivial. But for popular art the criteria of significance are fixed by the needs of the standardization, by the editor of the digest and not by the Author of the reality to be grasped. Popular art is never a discovery, only a reaffirmation. Both producer and consumer of popular art confine themselves to what fits into their own schemes, rather than omitting only what is unnecessary to the grasp of the scheme of things. The world of popular art is bounded by the limited horizons of what we think we know already; it is two-dimensional because we are determined to view it without budging a step from where we stand.*

What Kaplan has to say is clearly useful for your paper. But how are you to use it?

Few students are deliberately dishonest and foolish enough to plan plagiarism, that is, to copy it word for word and hand it in as if it were original. But honest and sensible people still have trouble using sources properly and sometimes stumble unawares into plagiarism, unless they understand clearly how to incorporate other people's ideas into their own work.

For instance, one way to use Kaplan's material would be to copy what he says word for word and put a note at the end referring to page 354 of the Journal of Aesthetics. But even though the source is acknowledged, plagiarism is still going on, since Kaplan's words and ideas are put forward as your own; there is no sign that you are thinking about your topic or your source, and you thus defeat the whole point of the paper—to show what you have to say.

It is more honest, but only a little more responsible, to put the quotation in quotation marks; at least there is now no pretense. Another possibility would be to look at the passage, try to figure out what it is saying, and put it in your own words:

One important difference between popular art and art is that popular art is never new, never discovers anything out of the standard scheme of things. So popular art doesn't challenge people to think differently.

But the idea is still Kaplan's. So you might, just to be safe, put a note at the end of the paraphrase. Perhaps some time you have strung together a series of such paraphrases, with occasional quotations, in the belief that you were doing a "research" paper with footnotes.

But no such procedures will fulfill your responsibilities as a writer. Just what do such footnotes mean? How much of what you say is yours, how much is Kaplan's, or is there any difference? The problem for a writer is to inform himself as fully as possible about his topic and his sources, then form his own opinion. The job is not only to understand Kaplan, but to come to some personal understanding of the material at hand (here, the comics). This means regarding Kaplan critically. If you end up agreeing with him, you should say so, explicitly. If not, point out where and why you differ.

So we return once more to the comics. What is different about the way the characters are conceived, for instance? Why are there no "grown-ups" in Peanuts, while the Disney comic establishes a father and an uncle? What kinds of responses do the two comics ask their readers to have? Do Kaplan's terms apply wholly or partially? not at all?

To think this way is to come to terms with the problems of writing a paper using sources. Perhaps in the end you write:

The real art of Peanuts becomes clear when you put it next to the dreary stereotypes and stale plots that make up Donald Duck. Peanuts seems fresh and original, to have its own world with its own rules and systems of behavior, whereas the Disney comic, with its constant fussing about money and social class, seems a reduced and corrupted version of our own world. When