KNOWLEDGE AND RESPONSIBILITY, Professor Janet Chernela

Janet Chernela is Professor of Anthropology and Latin American Studies. Professor Chernela describes below how she reinforces the importance of attribution in writing. She asks students to consider how they know what they know and to think about the reliability and the unique perspectives of the information they receive and upon which they create their own knowledge.

In teaching "Language as Practice" (ANTH 468I) I draw students' attention to the ways they register or fail to register the bases for the information they report and the information they receive. This exercise is part of a larger discussion of knowledge and the ways in which different languages value and communicate sources of received information. In about a quarter of the world's languages, for example, the sources of statements are encoded grammatically; in these languages it is necessary to communicate the source of all information with each utterance. In English it is not grammatically necessary to provide the sources of information, but it may be accomplished through purposeful actions, such as the addition of adverbial clauses.

In the social sciences and other disciplines where research is critical, providing the sources of all knowledge not your own is considered requisite. Students are therefore encouraged to be aware of the presence or absence of this source information and to develop a variety of means to incorporate it into their writing.

To introduce the concept, I asked students to respond in writing to a question based on their common knowledge. In April of 2007 I asked, "What happened at Virginia Tech?" In March of
2012, I asked, "What happened in February in Sanford, Florida?" A review of answers in each case shows the importance of citing sources.

As part of an exercise related to the Sanford, Florida incident, I used two examples to illustrate the way English speakers and writers make decisions to convey sources of knowledge or to omit them.

1. “Last month in Florida, a seventeen year-old black male named Trayvon Martin was shot to death by George Zimmerman, a self-identified White Latino. Zimmerman was a volunteer for the neighborhood watch armed patrol in his particular gated, Florida community. Trayvon was unarmed and walking home wearing a black hoodie and carrying skittles and iced tea.”

2. “A man by the name of George Zimmerman shot a teenager named Trayvon Martin in a Sanford suburb. Police don’t know the details, but Martin’s family and others believe it was a murder in cold blood while Zimmerman claims he was attacked. Trayvon was found to be unarmed, raising calls that Zimmerman should be arrested.”

We observed that Excerpt #1 is grammatically correct, precisely stated, and legibly written. Since no instructions for citing were provided, the short essay stands as a well-conceived narrative. In the absence of any sources of information, however, the writer takes full responsibility for that which she conveys; she becomes the source of information.

Excerpt #2 is also grammatically correct, precisely stated, and legibly written. It differs from the first statement, however, in giving importance to the basis for knowing. Writer #2 uses several devices to convey the basis for the information conveyed. He cites three identified sources and one indirect source. In alluding to what the police know or don’t, he indicates a level of
confidence based on status and position. But, insofar as the “Police don’t know the details,” the writer places himself at a remove from for the information, since his authorized (and therefore, for this writer, credible) sources are themselves not fully informed. Martin’s family and others who characterize the action as murder comprise the second set of sources on the matter. Their account is set in contrast (“while”) to Zimmerman’s claim “that he was attacked.” The writer concludes with his own analysis: “Trayvon was found to be unarmed, raising calls that Zimmerman should be arrested.” The terms “believe” and “claim” are statements used by English speakers and writers to reflect degrees of certainty. They are important terms in conveying nuanced levels of a speaker/writer confidence in information and in a listener or reader’s abilities to evaluate it.

Excerpt #1 presented and integrated the same two points of views of Excerpt #2, but did not identify them explicitly. In the absence of sources, a writer may be assumed to have full responsibility for the information conveyed. English speakers can distance themselves from such responsibility through phrases such as “they say,” “they claim,” “they assert; allegedly,” “reportedly,” “as I understand,” “it seems,” and so on. A different device is the use of the passive voice, such as “it is said,” in which a foundation for knowledge is alluded to but not named. In the phrase found in Excerpt #2), “was found to be unarmed” the writer uses the passive voice to suggest that there is a basis for the information but he does not provide it.

In many academic disciplines, there is a high value placed on registering the degree of confidence in information through providing the sources of the knowledge. This is accomplished through phrases, such as, “According to [name]” or in-text citations. Because disciplines differ in their approaches to knowledge and the conventions used in presenting it, it is
important that one be aware of the expectations and standards for writing in any discipline. Typically, these will be modeled in the journals of the discipline.

The exercise was valuable because a) students did not have first-hand knowledge of the events; b) the reported accounts of events varied, with some contradicting others; c) the reporters’ credibility differed according to distance from the information and perceived identity and power; and e) the variety of sources allowed us to reflect on the ways we receive and assign credibility to information.

Cases like these, which point to the relevance of careful attribution of sources, help writers understand that the conventions of citation are not mere formalities, but derive from theories of knowing and communicating that call for critical evaluations, standards, and author responsibility.