Verbs of Attribution: Going Beyond “So-and-so says…”

Verbs of attribution, also known as lead-in verbs, signal that the writer is quoting, paraphrasing, or referring to another source. “Says” is the most common—and boring if overused—verb of attribution. The following verbs indicate you are citing someone else’s opinions, or information you found elsewhere. Often these verbs show whether or not the writer or the source author agrees with the cited material. While some verbs of attribution are relatively objective, others carry more emotional weight and should be used with care.

More objective: illustrates, indicates, mentions, addresses, states, suggests, cites, writes…

Use with care: exclaims, insinuates, retorts, mumbles, whines…

General list of attributive verbs:

- accepts
- accounts for
- acknowledges
- addresses
- adds
- admits
- advises
- affirms
- agrees
- alleges
- allows
- analyzes
- answers
- argues
- asks
- asserts
- assumes
- categorizes
- challenges
- charges
- cites
- claims
- comments
- compares
- complains
- concedes
- concludes
- concurs
- confesses
- considers
- contends
- contents
- criticizes
- deals with
- decides
- declares
- defines
- denies
- describes
- disagrees
- discusses
- disputes
- emphasizes
- endorses
- explains
- expresses
- finds
- grants
- hypothesizes
- illustrates
- implies
- indicates
- insinuates
- insists
- interprets
- introduces
- lists
- maintains
- mentions
- exclaims
- mumbles
- objects
- observes
- offers
- opposes
- points out
- proposes
- questions
- realizes
- reasons
- refutes
- rejects
- remarks
- replies
- reports
- reveals
- sees
- shows
- speculates
- states
- suggests
- supports
- supposes
- thinks
- uses
- verifies
- verifies
- whines
- writes

Be attentive to each verb’s implied meanings. Be careful not to mislead the reader with inappropriate verbs of attribution. For example, here is a quotation from bell hooks (Gloria Watkins publishes as bell hooks, and she purposefully does not capitalize her name):

Feminism is essentially a white, middle-class endeavor.

-bell hooks, Yearning
Notice how different verbs of attribution are or are not appropriate:

• **admits** = indicates resistant acceptance; will likely be qualified with a rebuttal.
  
  bell hooks admits that “feminism is essentially a white, middle-class endeavor.”

• **asserts** = the writer is presenting the statement as bell hooks’ opinion rather than a fact.
  
  bell hooks asserts that “feminism is essentially a white, middle-class endeavor.”

• **insinuates** = indicates that the source author is indirectly suggesting a negative evaluation.
  
  bell hooks insinuates that “feminism is essentially a white, middle-class endeavor.”

• **believes** = the quotation is a belief, not a statement of fact. The writer has the opportunity to agree or disagree in the following sentences.
  
  bell hooks believes that “feminism is essentially a white, middle-class endeavor.”

• **verifies** = the writer is using the source author’s statement to support his own claim, and thereby implying that the source author is an authoritative source. Be sure to use verifiable facts rather than opinions with this verb. Notice that this verb does not appropriately introduce bell hooks’ opinion.
  
  bell hooks verifies that “feminism is essentially a white, middle-class endeavor.”

• **confesses** = the writer is implying that the source author accepts responsibility or admits guilt.
  
  bell hooks confesses that “feminism is essentially a white, middle-class endeavor.”

If in doubt, use a dictionary to check the implied meanings of any attributive verb you use. Be aware of that some verbs require special sentence structure; not all verbs are directly interchangeable with “says.” For example, the verb “accounts for” must be followed by a noun. Also remember that verbs of attribution are used to not only directly quote a source, but also paraphrase:

bell hooks accounts for class and race within a feminist paradigm.

For more information about blending quotes into your text, see the “Using and Framing Direct Quotations” handout. For more information about paraphrasing, see the “Paraphrasing” handout.