Reading to Write: Distinguishing an Author's Opinion

In academic writing, an author often develops his or her central concepts by referring to other published articles. Sometimes, other writers with similar views are cited. However, the ideas expressed by cited sources are not ***necessarily*** in agreement with the stance expressed in the article you're reading. Authors cite other articles for a wide range of reasons, among them: (1) to provide an overview of relevant publications as background for the reader; (2) to identify theoretical trends; (3) to point out gaps in research; (4) to give examples of what they see as flawed data or concepts, or (5) to argue against another scholar's view. When you read published articles, practice looking for ways in which the author has **critically examined** and **responded** to other sources. The following guidelines may be helpful in determining the function of a cited source and distinguishing one author's opinion from another:

a. Be alert to **verbal signals** like "We take issue with…" or "Previous research has focused primarily on…" or "In a series of sweeping generalizations…"

b. Exercise your **intuition**. With what you know of the title, abstract, and overall purpose of the article, where might the cited source **logically** fit into the argument?

c. Is the author of the source named? The inclusion of a **name** may indicate that the source is a respected authority in this discipline. The author may not necessarily agree with this expert, but the opinion expressed in the source may be important for you to understand.

d. Pay attention to nuances of **tone**, or **attitude** toward the source. For example, does the writer of the article state that the source "claims" something is true, or does s/he state that the source "illuminates" something? These word choices often carry hints of authorial opinion.

e. Keep in mind that your author may agree with the cited sources to a large extent and yet still take issue with them in very specific ways. Note which sources are referred to **more than once** or discussed extensively, and read these sections closely.

f. Try reading a dense or confusing section of an article **aloud**, stopping to paraphrase for yourself what you think the writer is saying. You can also do this with a classmate or study partner.

g. If you feel that your **vocabulary** is lacking, use a learner's dictionary like the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English,* which gives sample academic sentences, placing words in typical contexts.