Using a Text to Construct and Support an Argument

Note: This handout takes Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl as the primary text for the essay. Instructors could plug in references from their own course texts.

When to refer to the text: Your argument should derive from your close reading of the texts. As you read, you build an impression of the book which is then refined by class discussion, further thought, and the paper-writing process. So in the paper itself, you want to use examples from the text to show where your assertions come from. Refer to the text, generally, when an assertion is not patently obvious.

Methods of using a text:

General reference: Throughout Incidents, Jacobs emphasizes her role as a mother.

Citing an example: For instance, Harriet discovers that Ellen is being subjected to the same kind of sexual harassment she herself endured.

Indirect quotation: At one point (89) Jacobs says she wanted freedom more for her children than for herself.

(General rule: use page numbers when you refer to a specific statement, but not when referring simply to an incident in the plot.)

Direct quotation:

partial: Jacobs says she wanted freedom “more for my helpless children than for myself” (89).

whole sentence(s): Jacobs says she even put her children first when thinking of freedom: “I could have made my escape alone; but it was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom” (89).

long, indented: Jacobs says she even put her children first when thinking of freedom:

I could have made my escape alone; but it was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom. Though the boon would have been precious to me, above all price, I would not have taken it at the expense of leaving them in slavery. Every trial I endured, every sacrifice I made for their sakes, drew them closer to my heart, and gave me fresh courage to beat back the dark waves that rolled and rolled over me in a seemingly endless night of storms. (89-90)

In this way, she portrays herself consistently as a dutiful mother of whom her audience can approve.

General Rules:
1. Quote when you need the author’s exact words to make or emphasize your point.
2. Always INTEGRATE your quotation by leading up to it and away from it smoothly, so it meshes with the rest of the sentence and/or paragraph.