When and how do I cite a source within the text?

You need to document your source whenever you use either an idea that you paraphrase or a direct quote. Directly after you write the idea or quote, briefly indicate the source you used by listing the author's last name and the page number(s) where you found the idea (Wilcox 54). If you cited more than one work by that author, also include a shortened version of the title (Wilcox, Shifting Roles 54).

Since this in-text source information is placed within parenthesis, it is called a parenthetical and the process is parenthetical documentation.

Other examples of citing in text

The exact nature of your parenthetical reference will depend in (1) how your text's sentence reads, and (2) the nature of your source and its citation. The following examples are taken from the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 7th ed.

1. How the sentence reads --

   If your sentence includes the name of your source, your parenthetical reference may need only page numbers. The source is already identified
   Ex.: Tannen has argued (178-85) . . . . (MLA 216)
   If not referenced in the text, the source must be identified in the parenthetical.
   Ex.: This point has already been argued (Tannen 178-85). (MLA 216)

2. Nature of source and its citation --

   If your source has no author or otherwise must begin with the title, your parenthetical reference will be by title:
   Ex.: The nine grades of mandarins were "distinguished by the color of the button on the hats of office" ("Mandarin"). (MLA 223)

   If citing an entire work, it may be better to include the source information in the text rather than as a parenthetical.
   Ex.: Kurosawa's Rashomon was one of the first Japanese films to attract a Western audience. (MLA 219-20).

For more examples of parenthetical citations with the attendant Works Cited format, see MLA Handbook, 7th ed., Ch. 6.4 (218-30).