The notion of authority and the authorities themselves (both authors and earlier discourses) are key to the treatises specifically on the plague in later medieval and Renaissance Europe, from the Black Death of 1347 to 1600. The intertextual practices in these treatises are visible in various ways. Rhetorically, they use authority/ authorities as the cornerstone of their argument (i.e., argument based on authority); this leads to a polyphonic discourse, either taking the form of 'polyphonic authority' or 'reasoning based on authority'. Structurally, this leads to the regular use of scholarly marginal notes to furnish a precise bibliographical reference. Linguistically, it is denoted by markers underlining the truth ascribed to reported statements and/or claims made by their authors. Additionally, this intertextuality is evident in the use of 'discourses by another', which use various forms of reported speech (indirect and direct speech, free indirect speech, modalized assertions and borrowed autonymous assertions).

The rediscovery of classical texts in the Renaissance led to a new reverence for classical authors, initially transmitted mainly via Arabic-Latin mediation at the end of the Middle Ages, and this reverence increased further during the Renaissance. But when the Black Death struck, a disease the western world had not encountered for many centuries, the writers of the texts at the start of our period had first to look to non-specialist writings, be they general medical works, literature, or even religious texts, including the Bible. Next, and quite rapidly, treatises on previous outbreaks of the plague were added to the first sources, constituting a new, specific genre which started to develop in the late Middle Ages and grew in importance in the 16th century. For example, Nicolas de Nancel's   of 1581 describes the importance and the significance of all the discourses which have gone before his own in the following terms: 'All those who have written about the plague and which I have been able to see, read and listen to