Understanding Plagiarism

What is this plagiarism tutorial all about, anyway?

Chances are pretty good that every college catalog has a section on academic honesty that includes a warning about what can happen to a student who is caught plagiarizing. Depending on your school's policy, and your instructor, the penalties for plagiarism run from a failing grade on a plagiarized paper to failing a course to being expelled from school. Most colleges and most professors frown on plagiarism.

It may not even matter that your plagiarism is unintentional. If you use a source of information that you don't properly identify or cite, you are guilty of plagiarism whether you meant to omit it or not. How severely you can be punished, even for unintentional plagiarism, will depend largely on your instructor and the policies of your academic institution.

The main purposes of this tutorial are

1. to help you understand what plagiarism is, and
2. to help teach you how to avoid committing plagiarism.

Along the way, we'll also show you how to

1. properly attribute sources you use in your papers
2. properly quote material
3. accurately summarize material
4. carefully paraphrase material, and
5. how to cite and attribute information retrieved from electronic or other unconventional sources.

Finally, we'll give you a list of Internet sites where you can learn more about plagiarism and how to avoid it, as well as some sites to help you use proper bibliographic and other reference citations.

What is plagiarism?

Simply put, **plagiarism is using someone else's words and ideas in a paper and acting as though they were your own**. This definition includes copying someone else's ideas, graphs, pictures, or anything that you borrow without giving credit to the originator of the words and ideas. It definitely includes anything you download from an Internet site or copy out of a book, a newspaper, or a magazine. It also includes stealing the ideas of another person without giving her or him proper credit.

Some obvious examples of plagiarism include

- copying someone else's paper.
- taking short or long quotations from a source without identifying the source.
- turning in a paper you bought over the Internet.

Some less-obvious examples include

- changing a few words around from a book or article and pretending those words are your own.
- rearranging the order of ideas in a list and making the reader think you produced the list.
- borrowing ideas from a source and not giving proper credit to the source.
- turning in a paper from another class. Whether this is plagiarism or not depends on your instructor—ask first!
- using information from an interview or an online chat or email, etc., without properly citing the source of the information.
- using words that were quoted in one source and acting and citing the original source as though you read it yourself.

The ironic thing about committing plagiarism is that most professors prefer that you use quoted material and properly cite it. They want you to come up with your own ideas in a paper, but will usually give you a good deal of credit for the quality and quantity of outside sources you use as well. Learning how to give credit where credit is due is what this tutorial is all about, so it's time to get started.

Basic Rules for Avoiding Plagiarism

The Golden Rule for Avoiding Plagiarism—Give Credit Where Credit is Due

Basically, there is only one way to avoid plagiarism—**give credit to a source whenever you use information that is not your own unless it is common knowledge**. If you come up with an idea all on your own, you don't have to give credit to anyone, except yourself. Also, if you are writing about something that is common knowledge, you don't have to give a citation for your source.

Common Knowledge

Common knowledge is whatever information you and your reader are likely to know without referring to some other source. For example, there are 435 U.S. Congress Members and 100 U.S. Senators. That's probably common knowledge. How many of the Congress Members and Senators are Democrats, Republicans, or from other political parties, may or may not be common knowledge, depending on you and your reader(s). The more likely both you and your reader(s) are to know that information, and especially the more controversial a fact or idea is, the more likely it is to be common knowledge. How many votes any particular member of the House or the Senate got in the last election is probably not common knowledge. If the number of votes a candidate received is part of your paper, you should probably cite the source.

The best rule of thumb to determine whether or not to give credit to a source for information that might be common knowledge is, "When in doubt, give the source." It is always better to err on the safe side.

Cite Your Sources

When should you cite a source? You should give credit to a source whenever you use someone else's work or idea that is not common knowledge. This includes any time you use or refer to information that comes from

- interviews.
- Internet sites.
- chat room conversations.
- radio or television programs.
- personal letters.
- speeches.
- books.
- magazines.
- newspapers.
- tape, video, or CD recordings.
- electronic databases.
- basically any source.

Don't forget to give credit any time you use any of the following that come from another source:

- quotations
- statistics
- graphs
- pictures
- ideas or hypotheses
- stories
- lists

As stated above, the bottom line is that you have to provide a source citation for every use of another person's words or ideas unless the information is common knowledge.

Quoting Sources

When Should I Quote a Source?

Rasmussen (2003, p. 4) recommends that, "Direct quotations should be reserved for cases in which you cannot express the ideas better yourself. Use quotations when the original words are especially precise, clear, powerful, or vivid."

When to Quote

Direct quotations should be reserved for cases in which you cannot express the ideas better yourself. Use quotations when the original words are especially precise, clear, powerful, or vivid.

- **Precise.** Use quotations when the words are important in themselves or when the author makes fine but important distinctions.

  Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state, an intolerable one.
  THOMAS PAINE

- **Clear.** Use quotations when the author's ideas are complex and difficult to paraphrase.

  Paragraphs tell readers how writers want to be read.
  WILLIAM BLAKE

- **Powerful.** Use quotations when the words are especially authoritative and memorable.

  You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.
  ABRAHAM LINCOLN

- **Vivid.** Use quotations when the language is lively and colorful, when it reveals something of the author's or speaker's character.

  Writing. I'm more involved in it, but not as attached.
  KAREN, A STUDENT

ORIGINAL

The human communication environment has acquired biological complexity and planetary scale, but there are no scientists or activists monitoring it, theorizing about its health, or mounting campaigns to protect is resilience. Perhaps it's too new, too large to view as a whole, or too containing - we swim in a sea of information, in poet Gary Snyder's phrase. All the more reason to worry. New things have nastier surprises, big things are hard to change, and containing things are inescapable.
Stewart Brand, *The Media Lab*

INACCURATE QUOTATION

In *The Media Lab*, Stewart Brand describes the control that is exerted by watchdog agencies over modern telecommunications: "The human communication environment has ... activists monitoring it, theorizing about its health ..." (258).

By omitting certain words, the writer has changed the meaning of the original source.

ACCURATE QUOTATION

In *The Media Lab*, Stewart Brand notes that we have done little to monitor the growth of telecommunications. Modern communication technology may seem overwhelmingly new, big, and encompassing, but these are reasons for more vigilance, not less: "New things have nastier surprises, big things are hard to change, and containing things are inescapable" (258).

There Are Two Cardinal Rules for Quoting Sources.

There are two cardinal rules for quoting sources that apply in all circumstances and regardless of which style manual you use. **Your quotations must be accurate and must accurately represent the intent of the author(s).**

To make sure that your quotations are accurate, be sure to copy them directly from the original source or a photographic copy of the original source, and not from a secondary source. If your sources are from electronic databases or can be scanned into a computer where an electronic version of the print can be accurately produced, you can literally "cut and paste" the quotation from the original source in to the body of your paper. Otherwise, you will simply have to carefully check that you have accurately typed the quotation into your paper.

You must read the original material carefully to make sure that your quotation accurately represents the intent of the author(s). Statements that are written sarcastically, for example, can be quoted improperly to represent a point of view entirely opposite of the author's point of view. Quotations can also be taken out of context with the result of misrepresenting the author's perspective. For example, if an author wrote, "Capital punishment must be outlawed under all circumstances where the convicted murderer is mentally retarded," it would be taking the quotation out of context to report that the author said, "Capital punishment must be outlawed under all circumstances. . . ."

Use Ellipsis to Indicate What You Leave Out of a Quotation

If it makes sense to leave out part of a quotation, use ellipsis, which are three spaced periods, depending on whether the omitted material comes in the middle, beginning, or end of a quotation, to indicate the omitted material. Be careful to follow the directions of the specific style manual that you use, since each one differs slightly.

The recent Supreme Court decision is likely to have a significant impact on how state judges apply the death penalty. According to Richey (2002, p. 1), "The court, in a 7-to-2 decision, drew a parallel between the sentencing system of Arizona . . . and the sentence-enhancement system that the high court struck down two years ago in a landmark case called Apprendi v. New Jersey. The bottom line: A much anticipated revolution in criminal sentencing just became a lot more revolutionary."

Use Brackets to Indicate What You Add to a Quotation

If you need to add words to a quote, either because the original source left out a word, or because the portion of the material you quoted makes better sense with the added word, **use brackets to indicate your insertions**. For example, if you were quoting part of the material just above this paragraph, you might insert the word "Supreme" to give more specific context to the quotation:

According to Richey, "The [Supreme] [C]ourt . . . drew a parallel between the sentencing system of Arizona . . . and the sentence-enhancement system that the high courts struck down two years ago in . . . Apprendi v. New Jersey."

You want to make it clear to your reader what material is being quoted, and what, if any, material is being omitted from or added to an original quotation.

You also want to refer to the style manual that you're using on to make sure the way you use brackets is appropriate for that style of writing.

How Do I Place the Quotations in My Paper?

Brief quotations are simply embedded in the body of your paper and enclosed with quotation marks. What constitutes a brief quotation? It depends on the style manual you're using.

- MLA and CBE guidelines define brief quotations as four or fewer typed lines.
- CMS guidelines use eight to ten or fewer typed lines as the cutoff.
- APA guidelines define brief quotations as forty words or fewer.

Integrate the brief quotation into your paper by including it in a sentence or introducing it with a sentence or two of explanation of the purpose and meaning of the quotation.

Longer quotations are set apart from the main text in blocked paragraphs. The longer quotation is indented either one inch or ten spaces, depending on the style manual, and does not include quotation marks.

All quotations, brief or long, should be grammatically correct and the tense should be consistent with the rest of the paper. If words have to be added to help a quotation makes sense in the paper, then use brackets to enclose words or letters that you add and ellipses to indicate words or sentences that have been left out of the middle or end of a quotation.

For example, for briefer quotes, quote the material, using quotation marks, within the paragraph in which it's being quoted.

The Apprendi case is likely to have a significant impact on how state judges apply the death penalty. According to Richey, "A much anticipated revolution in criminal sentencing just became a lot more revolutionary."
In APA format, if the quoted material is longer than forty words, indent the quoted material without quotations marks.

The recent Supreme Court decision is likely to have a significant impact on how state judges apply the death penalty. According to Richey:

The court, in a 7-to-2 decision, drew a parallel between the sentencing system of Arizona (and by extension eight states with similar systems), and the sentence-enhancement system that the high court struck down two years ago in a landmark case called Apprendi v. New Jersey. The bottom line: A much anticipated revolution in criminal sentencing just became a lot more revolutionary.

So, quote material properly when a quote will say things better than you can say them in your own words, but make sure your quotes are accurate and contextually consistent with the original work. Refer to the appropriate style manual for specific questions about quotations that are not answered here. Remember, too, that you don't always have to quote material. You may also want to paraphrase or summarize it.

Paraphrasing

What is a Paraphrase?

A paraphrase is simply a restatement of a source's words or ideas into your own words. It's really that simple! A paraphrase will typically restate a fairly brief portion, say a paragraph or so, of an original source and may be structured similarly and of a similar number of words.

You might prefer a paraphrase to a direct quotation when you can state an idea more clearly or concisely or in words more consistent with your own writing style than the original source. You have to follow the same cardinal rules as you do for quoting. Your paraphrase must be accurate and it must be consistent with the intent of the source.

How Do I Paraphrase Correctly?

It's not enough to simply change a few words around, or replace words with synonyms to constitute a paraphrase. You literally have to rewrite the material using your own words. One good way to be sure that you're paraphrasing fairly is to follow these steps:

1. Read the material you want to paraphrase several times.
2. Try rewriting the material in your own words without looking at the original source.
3. Check your rewrite against the original source, making sure to verify that your rewrite is accurate and consistent with the intent of the source and that you have not simply shuffled a few words around.

Make sure that you make it clear to the reader where your paraphrase begins and ends and where your own ideas or comments are included. Don't be afraid to put the original source's unique terms or phrases in quotation marks as part of your paraphrase. In all cases, remember to identify that you are referring to an outside source in the body of your paper and to provide a complete source at the appropriate place in your paper.

It is not inappropriate to abbreviate the paraphrase from the original source if the material that is left out is not essential to the point you're making or to understanding the paraphrase. This is similar to using ellipses to leave out irrelevant or unimportant material, but you don't have to indicate what has been left out.

Some Examples of Incorrect and Correct Paraphrasing

From the Original
Although the high court declined to extend its Apprendi reasoning to strike down minimum mandatory sentencing schemes in a related case also announced Monday, the court's ruling in the death-penalty case is expected to trigger a fresh barrage of appeals in state and federal courts nationwide. (Richey 2002, p. 2)

An Incorrect Paraphrase (not different enough from the original)
Richey (2002, p. 2) reported that the Supreme Court didn't extend the reasoning of Apprendi to strike down the sentencing laws in another case reported a couple of days ago, but that the new case will probably result in a number of new appeals in state and federal courts across the country.

An Incorrect Paraphrase (not accurate)
Richey (2002, p. 2) says that the Supreme Court might as well have applied the Apprendi case to strike down "sentencing schemes" in other states, since the new case is likely to have the same effect.

An Accurate Paraphrase
Richey (2002, p. 2) predicts that the current Supreme Court ruling on a death penalty sentencing case will nonetheless be likely to encourage widespread state and federal court appeals to cases involving minimum mandatory "sentencing schemes."

Summarizing

A summary is a restatement of the main ideas of a source that is written in your own words. Typically, a summary will abbreviate more information than a paraphrase, and can abbreviate as little as a few paragraphs, or as much as a chapter or even an entire book.

The most important things to remember when summarizing an outside source are:

1. Make sure your summary is accurate.
2. Make sure your summary represents the intent of the source you're using.
3. Make sure that you properly attribute the source immediately after the summarized material in the body of your paper as well as in your notes or references.

When to Summarize

As you draft, summarize often so that your paper doesn't turn into a string of undigested quotations.

- **Main points.** Use summary when your readers need to know the main point the original source makes but not the supporting details.
- **Overviews.** Sometimes you may want to devise a few sentences that will effectively support your discussion without going on and on. Use summary to provide an overview or an interesting aside without digressing too far from your paper's focus.
- **Condensation.** You may have taken extensive notes on a particular article or observation only to discover in the course of drafting that you do not need all that detail. Use summary to condense lengthy or rambling notes into a few effective sentences.

ORIGINAL

For a long time I never liked to look a chimpanzee straight in the eye—I assumed that, as is the case with most primates, this would be interpreted as a threat or at least as a breach of good manners. Not so. As long as one looks with gentleness, without arrogance, a chimpanzee will understand and may even return the look.

> Jane Goodall, *Through a Window 12*

INACCURATE SUMMARY

Goodall learned from her experiences with chimpanzees that they react positively to direct looks from humans (12).

ACCURATE SUMMARY

Goodall reports that when humans look directly but gently into chimpanzees' eyes, the chimps are not threatened and may even return the look (12).

Citing Electronic Sources

Many electronic sources, such as Web sites, chat rooms, listservs, and so on, do not have the kind of information which has traditionally been required for a source citation. Many Web pages, for example, don't have authors or even dates. How do you document a conversation held in a chat room? New forms and forums for information are being created all the time that do not have established formats for proper citation.

There are two excellent sources for keeping up to date with the format changes for various non-traditional sources:

One such source is the *Columbia Guide to Online Style (COS)* published by the Columbia University Press. This style manual keeps up-to-date information on the proper way to cite electronic sources in humanities (*MLA* and *Chicago*) or social science (*APA* and *CBE*) formats. Their basic online style guide, which includes tips on how to document sources within the text as well as in the citations, can be found at:

http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cup/cgos/idx_basic.html

Your school or local library is likely to have a copy of the *COS Guide*. If not, for information on how to buy this manual, go to

http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cup/sales/index.html

Another excellent online source for learning how to document electronic source in *APA* format can be found at:

http://www.apastyle.org/elecref.html

Also, here is an online source for documenting in *MLA* format:

http://www.mla.org/

Using Proper Citation Format

Your instructor is likely to require you to use a specific style manual. If not, choose a style manual that is appropriate for the discipline in which you're writing. Your college and public libraries are likely to have copies available for each of the style manuals discussed below.

Pearson Education's *Content Select Research Database* provides an excellent guide to the MLA, APA, CMS, and CBE style guides, and can be accessed for free at:

http://contentselect.pearsoned.com/

MLA

In the humanities, high school and college undergraduate writers typically rely on the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 5th edition (1999) by Joseph Gibaldi. The Modern Language Association (MLA) does not publish their manual on line, although they do provide updates at their site, which can be accessed through their website at:

http://www.mla.org/

Many colleges provide templates for MLA format. An excellent choice is from Purdue University's Online Writing Lab (OWL) which is located at:

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r_mla.html

Click here for an example of a MLA Works Cited page.

APA

The American Psychological Association (APA) style guide, used widely in the social sciences, is titled *The Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 5th edition (2001). To obtain your own copy of the manual will require you to purchase one, but updates are available for free through their website, which is at:

http://www.apastyle.org/

For an online guide to APA formatting, visit Purdue's APA template which can be found at:

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r_apa.html

Click here for an example of an APA References Page.

CMS

The Chicago Manual of Style (CMS), 14th edition (1993), is preferred by writers in the humanities (except for literature) who prefer to use footnotes or endnotes rather than names and dates embedded in the document. This manual is available through the University of Chicago Press website and includes updates and answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs):

http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/cmosfaq/cmosfaq.html

The University of Wisconsin-Madison has an excellent online handbook for helping a writer use the CMS note-style format for papers: http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/DocChicago.html

CBE and Science Field Style Manuals

Writers in the natural sciences (physics, chemistry, biology) applied sciences (technology), and mathematics, tend to use specialized style manuals designed to accommodate the particular needs of their respective disciplines. A general scientific style guide that is widely referred to is *Scientific Style and Format: The CBE Manual for Authors, Editors, and Publishers*, 6th edition (1994). The organization that prepared this guide, formerly named the Council of Biology Editors, is currently identified as The Council of Science Editors. The website from which their manual can be purchased is:

http://www.councilscienceeditors.org/pubs_ssf.shtml

The University of Wisconsin-Madison for CBE style can be accessed at:

http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/DocCBE6.html

For a detailed list of style guides in other specific scientific disciplines, refer to Claremont College's library page titled, "Guide to a scientific writing style," located at:

http://voxlibris.claremont.edu/research/lrs/science_cit.htm#style