

What is Plagiarism? (and How to Avoid It)

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Note: This document is intended as advice on how to avoid plagiarism; however, it is not a substitute for the university's published policy on plagiarism and cheating, which may be found in your syllabus and student handbook.

Plagiarism is the most serious form of academic misconduct possible. Put simply, plagiarism is taking the words or ideas of other individuals without giving them proper credit. It is important, however, to note that it is appropriate—indeed, in many circumstances, necessary—to reuse the ideas and even words of others when writing or speaking. The development and accumulation of knowledge relies on building on the ideas of others.¹

The offense of plagiarism lies in the failure to give credit—the failure to *attribute* the ideas or words to their original source. So you can avoid plagiarizing by ensuring that when you use someone else's ideas, you give them credit—usually, in an academic paper, you would *cite* the relevant source, while in speech you might simply mention whose ideas or words you are making use of.

Plagiarism also includes *falsely attributing credit to a source*. For example, on more than one occasion, I have encountered student papers that have made use of material from Wikipedia.² Rather than citing Wikipedia as a source, however, students have claimed that the words they used directly from Wikipedia (whether quoted or not—usually not) have come from other sources. This form of plagiarism is also considered academic misconduct and is equally serious.

Plagiarism is taken very seriously by most professors and universities; for example, at Virginia Tech the *minimum* penalty in most cases for intentional plagiarism is a zero grade on the assignment in question,³ and I have reported several cases of academic misconduct in recent years.

Most of the time the question of plagiarism is fairly clear-cut. However, there are two issues that students sometimes find tricky when it comes to plagiarism; first, what ideas or words are unique enough to require attribution, and second, when it is better to quote than to paraphrase or summarize.

Uniqueness: Generally speaking, facts and information that are not considered “common knowledge” should be attributed or cited. This distinction isn't always clear, as one person's common knowledge may be another person's hopeless obscurity. Common knowledge also depends on your audience and the context; for example, if you are writing for a magazine read by bicycling enthusiasts, it may be common knowledge among the readership that Lance Armstrong has the record for the most wins of the Tour de France, but that might not be common knowledge among the public at large.

¹Of course, there are some circumstances in college when it is *inappropriate* to copy others' words and ideas; for example, during an examination it is usually considered cheating to copy from another student's paper, or to make use of outside help during the exam.

²I, and many other professors, generally frown on the use of Wikipedia as a source. Wikipedia—along with traditional printed encyclopedias—can be a useful place to learn quickly about an area of knowledge, but encyclopedias are summaries of existing research rather than the original research itself; in college, one is expected to rely more on original sources rather than summaries.

³Please refer to the [University Honor System website](#) for specific sanctions.

A good rule of thumb when it comes to factual information is to err on the side of caution, and cite a source if in doubt. I'd say that if it's not something you'd expect a high school graduate to know, it's probably something that should be cited.

When it comes to words or phrases, a general rule is that a source should be cited (and the words and phrases quoted) if the words are relatively unique. The longer the phrase, the more likely this is to be the case, but there are also relatively short (but obscure) phrases that should be cited. For example, in discussing the work of political scientist Robert Dahl, you might come across the word "polyarchy" (a term he uses to refer to representative democracies); since this word is not widely used, and because Dahl is the first person to use the word, it would be wise to mention Dahl as the source for the term. On the other hand, the word "democracy" is much more widely used, and thus there is usually no need to discuss its origins by citing an ancient Greek philosopher or three.

Also, it is possible to string together a few words that someone else has said before; there are only so many ways to state certain ideas (for example, something like, *George Washington won the election of 1792* or *India is the world's most populous democracy*). So long as you are not directly reusing something in front of you, this form of repetition is usually fine and no quotation marks are needed; however, you might want to cite a source that supports the fact if it seems sufficiently obscure (as discussed above).

Quoting, Paraphrasing, and Summarizing: When you make use of someone else's ideas, you generally have three options: you can directly quote the words they used; you can rewrite what they said, in substantially your own words (while not significantly shortening what they said); or you can summarize what they said (usually reducing the length of their statement). No matter what approach you use, you still need to cite the source.

I have found that students often end up writing a very clumsy paraphrase to avoid using direct quotes. I suspect students do this to avoid having their papers "flagged" by TurnItIn or other automated systems for detecting plagiarism. Regardless of the motivation, however, it usually results in an unreadable mess, and it still does not relieve you of the obligation to properly cite the source. Why butcher someone else's words if you don't have to?

In general, my advice is to try to summarize (rather than paraphrasing or quoting) if at all possible. The downside for you, the writer, is that summaries are shorter than paraphrases and quotes—and thus if you are trying to make some minimum page count, you may need to make use of more sources or write more material of your own. The upside is that generally you will write a better essay or research paper when you summarize, as that requires you to have more fully understood the original author's (or speaker's) argument and so you will have a better idea of how you can use their argument to help support yours.

You should almost never have the need to quote or paraphrase more than a few sentences in a row. There is virtually never a good reason to have an extended quote that is more than a few sentences long, unless you are translating or interpreting a document (which is rarely necessary in the social sciences); even if you are discussing an article originally printed in another language, it is probably best to summarize the author's statements rather than attempting to include a direct translation.⁴

If you are deciding between quoting or paraphrasing, my advice is to quote when the author is using words or phrases that are relatively unique or are difficult to improve upon. For example, one would almost certainly rely on quotes of the more colorful parts of the Declaration of Independence ("When in the course of human events...") rather than paraphrases ("Sometimes in history..."). It is also important to use direct quotes in a legal context, as the specific terminology used in the law or a court opinion may matter and a paraphrase may subtly alter what is meant.

Paraphrasing—as opposed to summarizing or quoting—should be used sparingly. Paraphrase does have an

⁴You may need to translate the article into English first to be able to summarize it, of course, but there is almost never any need to include the translation as part of your paper.

important place, however, when you are writing a literature review; when reading academic articles, you will often find that they are not very well-written, and so translating from “academic-ese” to plain English will improve your argument. Paraphrase is best used to simplify and clarify; however, if the source material is written relatively clearly, it is usually unnecessary.

Paraphrasing may also be useful when you are trying to make your own argument; shoe-horning someone else’s quotes into your own sentences is not always the best strategy, particularly if you need to rework or butcher the original quote to make it fit.

How To Quote: There are, of course, a large number of style guides available on both quotation and citation. Here follows some brief advice, however.

In-line quotes should not be stand-alone sentences. Do not quote a full sentence within a paragraph. Direct quotes within a paragraph should usually be worked into a sentence, rather than standing alone.

Longer “block” quotes can contain full sentences. Style guides differ on how long a quote must be before it can be set off as a block quote; generally speaking, however, anything of a full sentence or more in length should be in a block quote. (Again, however, I refer you to my advice above that long quotations are to be avoided in most cases.)

When using an inline citation style, the citation goes at the end of the sentence or phrase, after the closing quote mark (if the quote ends the sentence), but before a trailing period or comma. See the following examples.

(Correct:) Sidlow and Henschen state that a presidential signing statement attached to a bill “indicate[s] how the president interprets that legislation” (286).

(Incorrect:) Sidlow and Henschen state that a presidential signing statement attached to a bill “indicate[s] how the president interprets that legislation.” (286)

(Correct:) “In an open primary, voters can vote for a party’s candidate” even if they are not members of that party (Sidlow and Henschen 2010, 208).

(Incorrect:) “In an open primary, voters can vote for a party’s candidate” (Sidlow and Henschen 2010, 208) even if they are not members of that party.

Of course, in both of these cases there was no real need to directly quote the authors. For example:

(Also correct:) Sidlow and Henschen describe a presidential signing statement as a message from the president indicating how he plans to implement and interpret a bill passed by Congress (286).

(Also correct:) Unlike closed primaries, open primaries allow voters to vote in party primaries without being registered with that party (Sidlow and Henschen 2010, 208).

Works Cited

Sidlow, Edward and Beth Henschen. 2010. *GOVT*, 2010 edition. New York: Cengage Learning.

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