

# Plagiarism

## What this handout is about

This handout explains what plagiarism is and outlines steps students can follow to avoid plagiarizing.

## What is plagiarism?

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, plagiarism is defined as "The act of using another person's words or ideas without giving credit to that person: the act of plagiarizing something." It can be taking quotes from someone else without giving the writer or writers proper credit, or it can be taking data or research and presenting it as your own. In any case, it is a very serious writing violation and can have severe repercussions for anyone who commits plagiarism, including even expulsion from a college or university.

## Why are my instructors so concerned about plagiarism?

In order to understand plagiarism, it helps to understand the process of sharing and creating ideas in the university.

All knowledge is built from previous knowledge. As we read, study, perform experiments, and gather perspectives, we are drawing on other people's ideas. Building on these other peoples' ideas and experiences, we create our own. When you put *your* ideas on paper, your instructors want to distinguish between the building block ideas borrowed from other people and your own newly reasoned perspectives or conclusions. You make these distinctions in a written paper by citing the sources for your building block ideas. Providing appropriate citations will also help readers who are interested in your topic find additional, related material to read—in this way, they will be able to build on the work you have done to find sources.

**Think of it this way:** in the vast majority of assignments you'll get in college, your instructors will ask you to *read* something (think of this material as the building blocks) and then write a paper in which you *analyze* one or more aspects of what you have read (think of this as the new structure you build). Essentially, your instructors are asking you to do three things:

- Show that you have a clear understanding of the material you've read.
- Refer to your sources to support the ideas you have developed.
- Distinguish *your* analysis of what you've read from the authors' analyses.

When you cite a source, you are using an expert's ideas as proof or evidence of a new idea that you are trying to communicate to the reader.

## What about “common knowledge”?

In every professional field, experts consider some ideas “**common knowledge**,” but remember that you’re not a professional (yet). In fact, you’re just learning about those concepts in the course you’re taking, so the material you are reading may not yet be “common knowledge” to you. In order to decide if the material you want to use in your paper constitutes “common knowledge,” you may find it helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

- Did I know this information before I took this course?
- Did this information/idea come from my own brain?

If you answer “no” to either or both of these questions, then the information is not “common knowledge” to you. In these cases, you need to cite your source(s) and indicate where you first learned this bit of what may be “common knowledge” in the field.

## What about paraphrasing?

**Paraphrasing** means taking another person’s ideas and putting those ideas in your own words. Paraphrasing does **NOT** mean changing a word or two in someone else’s sentence, changing the sentence structure while maintaining the original words, or changing a few words to synonyms. If you are tempted to rearrange a sentence in any of these ways, you are writing too close to the original. That’s plagiarizing, not paraphrasing.

Paraphrasing is a fine way to use another person’s ideas to support your argument as long as you attribute the material to the author and cite the source in the text at the end of the sentence. In order to make sure you are paraphrasing in the first place, take notes from your reading *with the book closed*. Doing so will make it easier to put the ideas in your own words. When you are unsure if you are writing too close to the original, check with your instructor **BEFORE** you turn in the paper for a grade. So, just to be clear—do you need to cite when you paraphrase? Yes, you do!

## How can I avoid plagiarizing?

Now that you understand what plagiarism is, you’re ready to employ the following three simple steps to avoid plagiarizing in your written work.

### **Step 1: Accentuate the positive. Change your attitude about using citations.**

Do you feel that you use too many citations? Do you use too few? Many students worry that if they use too many citations their instructors will think that they’re relying too heavily on the source material and therefore are not thinking for themselves. In fact, however, using citations allows you to demonstrate clearly how well you understand the

course material while *also* making clear distinctions between what the authors have to say and your analysis of their ideas.

Thus, rather than making your paper look less intellectually sophisticated, using citations allows you to show off your understanding of the material and the assignment. Also, instead of showing what you *don't* know, citing your sources provides evidence of what you *do* know and of the *authority* behind your knowledge. Just make sure that your paper has a **point, main idea, or thesis** that is your own and that you organize the source material around that point.

Are you worried that you have too few citations? Double-check your assignment to see if you have been given any indication of the number or kind of source materials expected. Then share your writing with another reader. Do you have enough evidence or proof to support the ideas you put forward? Why should the reader believe the points you have made? Would adding another, expert voice strengthen your argument? Who else agrees or disagrees with the ideas you have written? Have you paraphrased ideas that you have read or heard? If so, you need to cite them. Have you referred to or relied on course material to develop your ideas? If so, you need to cite it as well.

### **Step 2: How can I keep track of all this information? Improve your note-taking skills.**

Once you've reconsidered your position on using citations, you need to rethink your note-taking practices. Taking careful notes is simply the best way to avoid plagiarism. And improving your note-taking skills will also allow you to refine your critical thinking skills. Here's how the process works:

(1) Start by carefully noting all the bibliographic information you'll need for your works cited or references page. (See #3 for more details on how to determine exactly what information you'll need for different kinds of sources.) If you're photocopying an article or section out of a book or journal, why not photocopy the front pages of the source as well? That way you'll have the bibliographic information if you need it later. If you forget to gather the information for a book, you can usually get it from the library's online card catalogue. Simply pull up the entry for the book you used to see the bibliographic information on that source. If you're working on an article from a journal, you can return to the database from which you got the original citation to find the bibliographic information.

(2) Next, try thinking about your notes as a kind of transitional space between what you've read and what you're preparing to write. Imagine yourself having a conversation with the author of the story/novel/play/poem/article/book you're reading, in which you repeatedly ask yourself the following questions:

- *What* is the author trying to explain?
- *Why* does s/he think these points are important?
- *How* has s/he decided to construct the argument?

- *How* does the structure of the argument affect the reader's response to the author's ideas?
- How *effective* is the author's argument?

Adopting this “conversational” approach to note-taking will improve your analysis of the material by leading you to notice not just what the author says, but also *how* and *why* the author communicates his or her ideas. This strategy will also help you avoid the very common temptation of thinking that the author's way of explaining something is much better than anything you could write. If you are tempted to borrow the author's language, write your notes *with the book closed* to ensure that you are putting the ideas into your own words. If you've already taken a step away from the author's words in your notes, you'll find it easier to use your own words in the paper you write.

(3) Finally, be careful to use quotation marks to distinguish the exact words used by the author from your own words so that when you return to your notes later in the writing process, you won't have to guess which ideas are yours and which ones came directly from the text. You'll have to experiment with different note-taking techniques until you find the one that works best for you, but here's one example of how your notes might look:

**James Leoni, trans. Ten Books on Architecture by Leone Battista Alberti. London: Alec Tirani, Ltd., 1955.**

**BOOK I, CHAPTER X: “Of the Columns and Walls, and Some Observations Relating to the Columns”**

- (p. 14) Alberti begins by talking about walls, and then says a row of columns is simply “a Wall open and discontinued in several Places;” he says the column supports the roof, and that columns are the most beautiful of the architectural elements; here, he'll address what columns have in common, and later he'll discuss their differences.
- (p. 14) all columns rest on a plinth (or dye), which supports a base, which supports the column, which is topped by a capital; columns are usually widest at the base, and taper toward the top; Alberti says the column was invented simply to hold up the roof, but men sought to make their buildings “immortal and eternal,” so they embellished columns with architraves, entablatures, etc.

Notice that you can adapt this note-taking strategy to any format—whether you prefer to take notes by hand, on note cards, on your computer, or some other way. For more information on developing an effective note-taking technique, you can consult any grammar handbook. Here are a few particularly helpful ones:

- Leonard J. Rosen and Laurence Behren. *The Allyn & Bacon Handbook*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2000. **OR** Allyn & Bacon online at: [www.abacon.com](http://www.abacon.com)

- Joseph Gibaldi. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2003.
- Kate L. Turabian. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

### **Step 3: So many details, so little time! Locate the appropriate style manual.**

Don't worry—no one can remember all the different citation conventions used in all the different university disciplines! Citing your sources appropriately is a matter of:

1. determining which style your instructor wants you to use,
2. finding the appropriate style manual, and
3. copying the “formula” it gives for each type of source you use.

First, carefully read the assignment to determine what citation style your instructor wants you to use (APA, MLA, Chicago, and CSE are the most common). If s/he doesn't specify a citation style in the assignment, check your syllabus, course pack, and/or online site. If you can't find the citation style in any of those places, ask your instructor what style s/he prefers.

Second, academic citation styles follow specific formats, so making an educated guess about how to structure your citations and works cited page is usually not a good idea. Instead, find the specified style manual in the reference section of the library, in the University Writing Center, or online.

Finally, style manuals provide easy-to-follow formulas for your citations. For example, the MLA handbook provides the following format for citing a book by a single author:

Author's name. *Title of the book*. Publication information.

You can use this formula for your own citation by simply plugging in the information called for, following the format of the formula itself. Here's an example of how that might look:

Berlage, Gai Ingham. *Women in Baseball: The Forgotten History*. Westport: Greenwood, 1994.

### **How can I tell whether I've plagiarized?**

If you've followed the above guidelines but still aren't sure whether you've plagiarized, you can double-check your work using the checklist below.

#### **You need to cite your source, even if:**

1. you put all direct quotes in quotation marks.
2. you changed the words used by the author into synonyms.

3. you completely paraphrased the ideas to which you referred.
4. your sentence is mostly made up of your own thoughts, but contains a reference to the author's ideas.
5. you mention the author's name in the sentence.

**\*\*The moral of this handout: When in doubt,  
give a citation\*\***

**Works consulted/cited**

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout's topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using.

Alberti, Leone Battista. *Ten Books on Architecture*. James Leoni, trans. London: Alec Tirani, Ltd., 1955.

Leonard J. Rosen and Laurence Behren. *The Allyn & Bacon Handbook*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2000. OR Allyn & Bacon online at: [www.abacon.com](http://www.abacon.com)

Joseph Gibaldi. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2003.

Kate L. Turabian. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

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