

How to Avoid Plagiarism

What is plagiarism?

“Plagiarism” means using another’s work without giving credit. Often when students plagiarize, they do not intentionally steal another person’s work. Instead, they plagiarize by accident because they do not have a complete understanding of what constitutes plagiarism. This is what we mean by “reckless.” If you fail to give proper credit to someone else’s ideas because you didn’t know you were supposed to or because you didn’t know how to do so, you face the same consequences as if you intentionally stole someone else’s work. Therefore, it is your responsibility to understand when and how to acknowledge someone else’s contribution.

Why 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 their 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.

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.

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. So, just to be clear—do you need to cite when you paraphrase? Yes, you do!

Avoiding Plagiarism

Step 1: Accentuate the positive. Understand the value of citations.

Do you feel that you use too many citations? 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 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. And 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: Seek instruction.

Tell your professors that you'd like to make sure you're not plagiarizing. Ask them if they'd be willing to meet with you to review your draft before you turn it in for a grade. Ask if they'd be willing to help you identify any passages that need better citation. Bring your draft, your notes, and your sources so your professor can see the original. Be proactive in this process!

Also remember that you can make an appointment with a Writing Center coach. Bring your draft and source materials, and show your coach the passages you're concerned about. Your coach can teach you strategies for paraphrasing, summarizing, and quoting effectively, and for attributing properly.

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.