

Avoiding Plagiarism

What Is Plagiarism?

Plagiarism is using someone else's words or ideas in your writing as though they were your own. It is a very serious offense, which can result in a student not only failing a class, but also being expelled from the university.

The more severe cases of plagiarism involve students deliberately stealing someone's work to pass off as their own or paying someone else to write papers for them. More common are cases in which students accidentally plagiarize, because they do not understand the rules for citation. Whenever you refer to someone's unique ideas or use someone else's specific words, you must give credit to your source. There are no exceptions to this rule. If you are unsure of whether or not a source needs to be cited, then cite it anyway, just to be careful. It is always better to be safe than sorry with citations.

The most important thing to remember when you write a research paper is that ultimately the paper should be about your ideas. You should use other people's writing and ideas to support your own thoughts but always cite those sources. The sources you use should strengthen your own original argument, and the more properly cited sources you use, the stronger your argument will be.

When to Use Citations

- **Quotations:** Whenever you use someone's exact words, you must put them in quotation marks and cite the author—whether the quote comes from a book, newspaper, interview, movie, web page, or other source.
- **Unique Ideas:** Whenever you talk about, refer to, build on, or discuss in any way an idea which is unique to another person, you must use a citation.
- **Images:** The same rules of citation that are used when quoting words apply when copying images, such as pictures, photographs, charts, or graphs.

Common Knowledge vs. Unique Ideas

You *do not need to cite* when writing about something which is considered to be **common knowledge**. This includes:

- Ideas which are widely believed to be true

Common Knowledge:	Michelangelo is among the greatest artists of the Renaissance.
--------------------------	--

Unique Idea:	Hyung-Wa Critic believes Michelangelo to be the greatest artist of the Renaissance because of his brilliant technique, bold style, and mastery of both sculpture and painting.
---------------------	--

- Folklore (stories, songs, or sayings without an author which are commonly known)

Common Knowledge: The children sang, “Mary had a little lamb/ its fleece was white as snow.”

Unique Idea: In the words of Sheryl Songwriter, “I love you because you’re pretty/ funny, kind, and also witty.”

- Quotations which are widely known and used

Common Knowledge: The Declaration of Independence states that “all men are created equal.”

Unique Idea: In his July 4, 1776 letter to George Washington, Thomas Revolutionary wrote, “no longer can we deny the innate equality of all citizens of the world.”

- Information shared by most scholars in your discipline

Common Knowledge: Many of Sigmund Freud’s theories have been discredited.

Unique Idea: Kazim Psychologist’s essay directly refutes Freud’s theories about childhood development.

Paraphrasing vs. Quoting

The decision of whether to paraphrase or to quote a source can be both stylistic and practical. Do you prefer the sound of the author’s words in your paper or would you rather phrase his or her ideas in your own language? If the author’s words sum up exactly what you want the reader to know, then you would probably be better off quoting. A direct quotation which backs up your idea gives weight to your argument.

Sometimes though, you will not be able to find the perfect quote. You may need to sum up an entire paragraph or chapter into one sentence for your paper, for instance. Or perhaps the source material you are working with deals with more than just the subject of your paper. In these cases, you should paraphrase.

With both paraphrasing and quoting, it is usually a good idea to name the person to whose ideas you are referring to in the sentence. Go out of your way to acknowledge your sources—not just in citations, but in the text of your paper as well. This will not only help you avoid plagiarizing but will also strengthen your paper.

How to Paraphrase

It is usually easier to paraphrase by simply putting the author’s ideas in your own words without looking at the original source. However, it is very important that you then compare what you have written to the source material to make certain that the paraphrase accurately reflects the

ideas of the author, without repeating his or her words. If your wording is at all similar, then you must either change it or make the citation a direct quotation.

If the author uses any specific and unique phrases which you cannot change, then you must put the phrase in quotation marks even if you are paraphrasing.

For instance: Tomoko Author coined the term “invisible color” to describe Jose Artist’s style.

No matter whether you paraphrase or quote, you must put a citation at the end of the information you are using from a source. If you refer to the source again later in your paper, you will also need to cite it again.

Created by Janet Beard

COMMON WRITING PROBLEMS SEEN IN THE WRITING CENTER AT MSU:

- **Thesis/focus:** writers generally tell all they know about a topic.
- **Organization:** keeping each paragraph focused on a separate idea is difficult.
- **Purpose:** writers generally cannot identify a reason for writing.
- **Audience:** little or no attention is given to audience because the teacher is seen as the only audience.
- **Revising:** a first draft is usually considered a final draft.
- **Assignment:** writers have difficulty understanding the requirements of the assignment.
- **Development:** ideas are generally underdeveloped.
- **Documentation:** writers are confused about or unaware of the type of documentation style to use.
- **Conclusions:** conclusions are generally foregone.
- **Conventions:** grammar, spelling, punctuation, usage errors are prevalent especially when writers are unclear about the assignment.