

# A Guide to Avoiding Plagiarism

**Plagiarism** is using someone else's work—words, ideas, or illustrations, published or unpublished—without giving the creator of that work sufficient credit. A serious breach of scholarly ethics, plagiarism can have severe consequences. Students risk a failing grade or disciplinary action ranging from suspension to expulsion. A record of such action can adversely affect professional opportunities in the future as well as graduate school admission.

## Documentation: The Key to Avoiding Unintentional Plagiarism

It can be difficult to tell when you have unintentionally plagiarized something. The legal doctrine of **fair use** allows writers to use a limited amount of another's work in their own papers and books. However, to make sure that they are not plagiarizing that work, writers need to take care to credit the source accurately and clearly for *every* use. **Documentation** is the method writers employ to give credit to the creators of material they use. It involves providing essential information about the source of the material, which enables readers to find the material for themselves. It requires two elements: (1) a list of sources used in the paper and (2) citations in the text to items in that list. To use documentation and avoid unintentionally plagiarizing from a source, you need to know how to

- Identify sources and information that need to be documented.
- Document sources in a Works Cited list.
- Use material gathered from sources: in summary, paraphrase, and quotation.
- Create in-text references.
- Use correct grammar and punctuation to blend quotations into a paper.

## Identifying Sources and Information That Need to Be Documented

Whenever you use information from **outside sources**, you need to identify the source of that material. Major outside sources include books, newspapers, magazines, government sources, radio and television programs, material from electronic databases, correspondence, films, plays, interviews, speeches, and information from Web sites. Virtually all the information you find in outside sources requires documentation. The one major exception to this guideline is that you do not have to document common knowledge. **Common knowledge** is widely known information about current events, famous people, geographical facts, or familiar history. However, when in doubt, the safest strategy is to provide documentation.

## Documenting Sources in a Works Cited List

You need to choose the documentation style that is dominant in your field or required by your instructor. Take care to use only one documentation style in any one paper and to follow its documentation formats consistently. The most widely used style manuals are *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, published by the *Modern Language Association (MLA)*, which is popular in the fields of English language and literature; the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA)*, which is favored in the social sciences; and *The Chicago Manual of Style*, published by the **University of Chicago Press (CMS)**, which is preferred in other humanities and sometimes business. Other, more specialized style manuals are used in various fields. Certain information is included in citation formats in all styles:

- Author or other creative individual or entity
- Source of the work
- Relevant identifying numbers or letters
- Title of the work
- Publisher or distributor
- Relevant dates

## Constructing a Works Cited List in MLA Style

In an actual Works Cited list, items are not listed separately by type of source. All items are alphabetized by authors' last names. When no author is given, an item can be alphabetized by title, by editor, or by the name of the sponsoring organization. MLA style spells out names in full, inverts only the first author's

name, and separates elements with a period. In the MLA Works Cited list below, note the use of punctuation such as commas, colons, and angle brackets to separate and introduce material within elements.

### Books

- Bidart, Frank. Introduction. Collected Poems. By Robert Lowell. Ed. Frank Bidart and David Gewanter. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2003. vii–xvi.
- Chernow, Ron. Alexander Hamilton. New York: Penguin, 2004.
- Conant, Jennet. 109 East Palace: Robert Oppenheimer and the Secret City of Los Alamos. New York: Simon, 2005.
- Maupassant, Guy de. "The Necklace." Trans. Marjorie Laurie. An Introduction to Fiction. Ed. X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia. 7th ed. New York: Longman, 1999, 160–66.
- . Tuxedo Park: A Wall Street Tycoon and the Secret Palace of Science That Changed the Course of World War II. New York: Simon, 2002.

### Periodicals

- "Living on Borrowed Time." Economist 25 Feb.–3 Mar. 2006: 34–37.
- "Restoring the Right to Vote." Editorial. New York Times, 10 Jan. 2006, late ed., sec. A: 24.
- Spinello, Richard A. "The End of Privacy." America 4 Jan. 1997: 9–13.
- Williams, N. R., M. Davey, and K. Klock-Powell. "Rising from the Ashes: Stories of Recovery, Adaptation, and Resiliency in Burn Survivors." Social Work Health Care 36.4 (2003): 53–77.
- Zobenica, Jon. "You Might As Well Live." Rev. of A Long Way Down by Nick Hornby. Atlantic July–Aug. 2005: 148.

### Electronic Sources

- Glanz, William. "Colleges Offer Students Music Downloads." Washington Times 25 Aug. 2004. 17 Oct. 2004 <http://washingtontimes.com/business/20040824-103654-1570r.htm>.
- Human Rights Watch. Libya: A Threat to Society? Arbitrary Detention of Women and Girls for "Social Rehabilitation." Feb. 2006. Index No. E1802. Human Rights Watch. 4 Mar. 2006 [http://hrw.org/reports/2006/libya0206/1.htm#\\_Toc127869341](http://hrw.org/reports/2006/libya0206/1.htm#_Toc127869341).
- McNichol, Elizabeth C., and Iris J. Lav. "State Revenues and Services Remain below Pre-Recession Levels." Center on Budget Policy Priorities. 6 Dec. 2005. 10 Mar. 2006 <http://www.cbpp.org/12-6-05sfp2.html>.
- Reporters Without Borders. "Worldwide Press Freedom Index 2005." Reporters Without Borders. 2005. 28 Feb. 2006 [http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id\\_article=15331](http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=15331).

## Using Material Gathered from Sources: Summary, Paraphrase, Quotation

You can integrate material into your paper in three ways—by summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting. A quotation, paraphrase, or summary must be used in a manner that accurately conveys the meaning of the source.

A **summary** is a brief restatement in your own words of the source's main ideas. Summary is used to convey the general meaning of the ideas in a source, without giving specific details or examples that may appear in the original. A summary is always much shorter than the work it treats. Take care to give the essential information as clearly and succinctly as possible in your own language.

### Rules to Remember

1. Write the summary using your own words.
2. Indicate clearly where the summary begins and ends.
3. Use attribution and parenthetical reference to tell the reader where the material came from.
4. Make sure your summary is an accurate restatement of the source's main ideas.
5. Check that the summary is clearly separated from your own contribution.

A **paraphrase** is a restatement, in your own words and using your own sentence structure, of specific ideas or information from a source. The chief purpose of a paraphrase is to *maintain your own writing style* throughout your paper. A paraphrase can be about as long as the original passage.

### Rules to Remember

1. Use your own words and sentence structure. Do not duplicate the source's words or phrases.
2. Use quotation marks within your paraphrase to indicate words and phrases you do quote.
3. Make sure your readers know where the paraphrase begins and ends.
4. Check that your paraphrase is an accurate and objective restatement of the source's specific ideas.
5. Immediately follow your paraphrase with a parenthetical reference indicating the source.

A **quotation** reproduces an actual part of a source, word for word, to support a statement or idea, to provide an example, to advance an argument, or to add

interest or color to a discussion. The length of a quotation can range from a word or a phrase to several paragraphs. In general, quote the least amount possible that gets your point across to the reader.

### **Rules to Remember**

1. Copy the words from your source to your paper exactly as they appear in the original. Do not alter the spelling, capitalization, or punctuation of the original. If a quotation contains an obvious error, you may insert [sic], which is Latin for “so” or “thus,” to show that the error is in the original.
2. Enclose short quotations (four or fewer lines of text) in quotation marks, and set off longer quotations as block quotations.
3. Immediately follow each quotation with a parenthetical reference that gives the specific source information required.

### **Creating In-Text References**

In-text references need to supply enough information to enable a reader to find the correct source listing in the Works Cited list. To cite a source properly in the text of your report, you generally need to provide some or all of the following information for each use of the source:

- Name of the person or organization that authored the source.
- Title of the source (if there is more than one source by the same author or if no author is given).
- Page, paragraph, or line number, if the source has one.

These items can appear as an attribution in the text (“According to Smith . . .”) or in a parenthetical reference placed directly after the summary, paraphrase, or quotation. The examples that follow are in MLA style.

### **Using an Introductory Attribution and a Parenthetical Reference**

The author, the publication, or a generalized reference can introduce source material. Remaining identifiers (title, page number) can go in the parenthetical reference at the end, as in the first sentence of the example below. If a source, such as a Web site, does not have page numbers, it may be possible to put all the necessary information into the in-text attribution, as in the second sentence of the example below.

*The Economist* noted that since 2004, "state tax revenues have come roaring back across the country" ("Living" 34). However, McNichol and Lav, writing for the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, claim that recent gains are not sufficient to make up for the losses suffered.

### Identifying material by an author of more than one work used in your paper

The attribution and the parenthetical reference combined must provide the title of the work, the author, and the page number of the citation.

Describing the testing of the first atom bomb, Jennet Conant says, "The test had originally been scheduled for 4:00 A.M. on July 16, when most of the surrounding population would be sound asleep and there would be the least number of witnesses" (109 *East Palace* 304-05).

### Identifying material that the source is quoting

To use material that has been quoted in your cited source, add *qtd. in*, for "quoted in." Here, only one source by Conant is given in the Works Cited list.

The weather was worrisome, but procrastination was even more problematic. General Groves was concerned that "every hour of delay would increase the possibility of someone's attempting to sabotage the tests" (qtd. in Conant, 305).

## Using Correct Grammar and Punctuation to Blend Quotations into a Paper

Quotations must blend seamlessly into the writer's original sentence, with the proper punctuation, so that the resulting sentence is neither ungrammatical nor awkward.

### Using a Full-Sentence Quotation of Fewer Than Four Lines

A quotation of one or more complete sentences can be enclosed in double quotation marks and introduced with a verb, usually in the present tense and followed by a comma. Omit a period at the close of a quoted sentence, but keep any question mark or exclamation mark. Insert the parenthetical reference, then a period.

One commentator asks, "What accounts for the government's ineptitude in safeguarding our privacy rights?" (Spinello 9).

"What accounts," Spinello asks, "for the government's ineptitude in safeguarding our privacy rights?" (9).

### **Introducing a Quotation with a Full Sentence**

Use a colon after a full sentence that introduces a quotation.

Spinello asks an important question: “What accounts for the government’s ineptitude in safeguarding our privacy rights?” (9).

### **Introducing a Quotation with “That”**

A single complete sentence can be introduced with a *that* construction.

Chernow suggests that “the creation of New York’s first bank was a formative moment in the city’s rise as a world financial center” (199–200).

### **Quoting Part of a Sentence**

Make sure that quoted material blends grammatically into the new sentence.

McNichol and Lav assert that during that period, state governments were helped by “an array of fiscal gimmicks.”

### **Using a Quotation That Contains Another Quotation**

Replace the internal double quotation marks with single quotation marks.

Lowell was “famous as a ‘confessional’ writer, but he scorned the term,” according to Bidart (vii).

### **Adding Information to a Quotation**

Any addition for clarity or any change for grammatical reasons should be placed in square brackets.

In 109 East Palace, Conant notes the timing of the first atom bomb test, “The test had originally been scheduled for 4:00 A.M. on July 16, [1945,] when most of the surrounding population would be sound asleep” (304–05).

### **Omitting Information from Source Sentences**

Indicate an omission with ellipsis marks (three spaced dots).

In 109 East Palace, Conant says, “The test had originally been scheduled for 4:00 A.M. on July 16, when . . . there would be the least number of witnesses” (304–05).

### **Using a Quotation of More Than Four Lines**

Begin a long quotation on a new line and set off the quotation by indenting it one inch from the left margin and double spacing it throughout. Do not enclose

it in quotation marks. Put the parenthetical reference *after* the period at the end of the quotation.

One international organization recently documented the repression of women's rights in Libya:

The government of Libya is arbitrarily detaining women and girls in "social rehabilitation" facilities, . . . locking them up indefinitely without due process. Portrayed as "protective" homes for wayward women and girls, . . . these facilities are de facto prisons . . . [where] the government routinely violates women's and girls' human rights, including those to due process, liberty, freedom of movement, personal dignity, and privacy. (Human)

## Is It Plagiarism? Test Yourself on In-Text References

Read the Original Source excerpt. Can you spot the plagiarism in the examples that follow it?

### Original Source

To begin with, language is a system of communication. I make this rather obvious point because to some people nowadays it isn't obvious: they see language as above all a means of "self-expression." Of course, language is one way that we express our personal feelings and thoughts—but so, if it comes to that, are dancing, cooking and making music. Language does much more: it enables us to convey to others what we think, feel and want. Language-as-communication is the prime means of organizing the cooperative activities that enable us to accomplish as groups things we could not possibly do as individuals. Some other species also engage in cooperative activities, but these are either quite simple (as among baboons and wolves) or exceedingly stereotyped (as among bees, ants and termites). Not surprisingly, the communicative systems used by these animals are also simple or stereotypes. Language, our uniquely flexible and intricate system of communication, makes possible our equally flexible and intricate ways of coping with the world around us: in a very real sense, it is what makes us human. (Claiborne 8)

### Works Cited entry:

Claiborne, Robert. Our Marvelous Native Tongue: The Life and Times of the English Language. New York: New York Times, 1983.

### Plagiarism Example 1

One commentator makes a distinction between language used as a **means of self-expression** and **language-as-communication**. It is the latter that distinguishes human interaction from that of other species and allows humans to work cooperatively on complex tasks (8).

*What's wrong?* The source's name is not given, and there are no quotation marks around words taken directly from the source (in **boldface** in the example).

### Plagiarism Example 2

Claiborne notes that language "is the prime means of organizing the cooperative activities." Without language, we would, consequently, not have civilization.

*What's wrong?* The page number of the source is missing. A parenthetical reference should immediately follow the material being quoted, paraphrased, or summarized. You may omit a parenthetical reference only if the information that you have included in your attribution is sufficient to identify the source in your Works Cited list and no page number is needed.

### Plagiarism Example 3

Other animals also **engage in cooperative activities**. However, these actions are not very complex. Rather they are either the very **simple** activities of, for example, **baboons and wolves** or the **stereotyped** activities of animals such as **bees, ants and termites** (Claiborne 8).

*What's wrong?* A paraphrase should capture a specific idea from a source but must not duplicate the writer's phrases and words (in **boldface** in the example). In the example, the wording and sentence structure follow the source too closely.

## Evaluating Sources

It's very important to evaluate critically every source you consult, especially sources on the Internet, where it can be difficult to separate reliable sources from questionable ones. Ask these questions to help evaluate your sources:

- Is the material relevant to your topic?
- Is the source well respected?
- Is the material accurate?
- Is the information current?
- Is the material from a primary source or a secondary source?

## Avoiding Plagiarism: Note-Taking Tips

The most effective way to avoid unintentional plagiarism is to follow a systematic method of note taking and writing.

- **Keep copies of your documentation information.** For all sources that you use, keep photocopies of the title and copyright pages and the pages with

quotations you need. Highlight the relevant citation information in color. Keep these materials until you've completed your paper.

- **Quotation or paraphrase?** Assume that all the material in your notes is direct quotation unless you indicated otherwise. Double-check any paraphrase for quoted phrases, and insert the necessary quotation marks.
- **Create the Works Cited or References list *first*.** Before you start writing your paper, your list is a **working bibliography**, a list of possible sources to which you add source entries as you discover them. As you finalize your list, you can delete the items you decided not to use in your paper.

Source: Linda Stern, Publishing School of Continuing and Professional Studies, New York University