

# Avoiding Plagiarism, or How to Use Source Information Properly

## What is Plagiarism?

Plagiarism includes many things. It can range from turning in as one's own work a paper taken or bought from an internet site to failing to include citations or quotation marks in an essay. Yes, plagiarism can be unintentional, but it is plagiarism nonetheless and can be punished just as severely as intentional plagiarism. Saying that you didn't know it was plagiarism is not an acceptable defense.

## How Do Instructors Know It's Plagiarism?

Instructors have spent their lives reading papers. While it may not sound like much fun, this experience gives them a finely tuned ear for the sound of a person's writing, called the writer's voice. Sometimes instructors choose to overlook it or think that it's not important for a particular assignment, but they can always tell when a student has copied from another writer. Here's an obvious example of changing voice:

When the people came back to their homes, they saw what had happened. The inferno had devoured the soul of the city, leaving only the smoldering shells of homes. It caused so much damage that no one had any place to go. They had to make shelters out of boxes.

The second sentence uses a more sophisticated sentence structure and poetic language. It is clearly not the same style as the sentences around it, and it's clear that the sentence is plagiarized. Although instructors can always tell when the writer's voice changes, they sometimes don't know the source of the plagiarized sentences or phrases. To help instructors positively identify sources of plagiarism, BCC subscribes to a plagiarism detecting service that checks suspected papers for plagiarized passages. The program has been very successful at identifying plagiarism in student writing.

## Why Make Such a Big Deal Out of It?

Plagiarism is a very serious offense in the academic world. Like betting on one's own team in sports, it attacks the foundation of the institution. Without an honest game, a team--and even an entire sport--loses its integrity, and without academic honesty, a school--and even education--loses its integrity as well. With this in mind, it is no surprise that the penalty for plagiarism can include expulsion from school in some cases.

## What is BCC's Stand on Plagiarism?

BCC policy gives instructors the freedom to respond to plagiarism as they see fit, and each instructor includes a policy on plagiarism in the class syllabus. If the instructor does not mention plagiarism, she or he can still respond by failing the plagiarized paper or failing the student for the entire quarter. Always ask for clarification so that everyone in class knows the rules for that course.

*Remember that when an assignment calls for doing research or using sources to write an essay, it means that you have to say in your paper where your information came from. If you fail to acknowledge the source of material in your essay, you are guilty of plagiarism whether or not you were trying to be dishonest. This applies to essay tests as well as term papers. Memorizing passages from a text and using them to answer essay questions is plagiarism.*

## Quoting from Sources

One can best avoid plagiarism by making good use of quotes interspersed with one's own writing. A problem often arises, however, when a writer doesn't know what needs to be included in quotation marks. The basic rule is this: Everything that comes directly from a source in the original words must appear in your paper within quotation marks. This is not limited to whole sentences or paragraphs. Even just a word or two needs to be in quotes if it is not something that you came up with.

Does this mean that every fact in an essay needs to be in quotes? No, it does not. Any piece of information that is common knowledge--that is, anything that appears in many sources or is known to most of one's readers--can be used without quoting or citing the source. For example, it is common knowledge that China is the country with the largest population in the world. That needs no quotes or citations. The actual census figure for China, however, is not common knowledge and merits an acknowledgement of the original source though not necessarily quotation marks.

**Generally speaking, we use quotes to introduce source material when the way it is written--not the information itself--is especially vivid or striking, or when the source is an important person or has unusual authority on the subject.<sup>1</sup>**

Using quotations from other sources in one's own writing is a skill that improves with practice. Proper use of quotations shows not only that you have done some research, but that you see the relationship between the material you've read and your own thoughts and ideas. The following stylistic guidelines can help to make your quotes sound better.

It is not sufficient to simply insert a quote as a separate sentence, or "drop" it in as Diane Hacker puts it in *A Pocket Style Manual* (95). Some instructors call this "quote dumping," and it is equivalent to interrupting a speech you are giving to hold up a sign with someone else's words on it--then going back to your speech with no mention of the quoted part. Here's a made-up example of a dumped quote:

By the time the battle ended, there were thousands of refugees. "I couldn't see the ground through all the feet around mine" (Numa 274). Within hours, the water problems began to take shape.

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<sup>1</sup> Figures and statistics are usually not worth putting into quotation marks but must be cited, that is, you must name the source (and give a page number if applicable) when you use statistical information.

Although the quote does provide some support for the statement about refugees, it is disconnected and seems to just appear from nowhere. This makes the writing sound immature and unplanned. Now here is the same passage, written to integrate the quoted material:

By the time the battle ended, there were thousands of refugees. One witness later said that he "couldn't see the ground through all the feet around [his own]" (Numa 12). Within hours, the water problems began to take shape.

In this example, the quote becomes part of the essay writer's design for the paragraph. This kind of integration shows that the writer has thought about the relationship between the source and his or her own ideas or words. Notice that part of the quoted material has been changed by the essay writer to make the material fit better into the surrounding sentence. When writers do this, it is customary to enclose the altered words in square brackets.

## **Paraphrasing**

Many students assume that changing a few words in a sentence or rearranging the words makes it unnecessary to quote that material since it's not the exact words. They think that changing a source's words slightly is acceptable paraphrasing and not plagiarizing, but this is a mistaken assumption. Changing a few words or the order of the words is still plagiarism and can result in the same penalty. So, you might ask,

What is an acceptable paraphrase?

A paraphrase puts the information from a source (such as a book or web site) into one's own words and in one's own style. It does not borrow colorful phrases or ideas from the source and restate them. Here is an example that comes from Diane Hacker's *A Pocket Style Manual*, a handbook for composition:

The following paraphrases are plagiarized—even though the source is cited—because their language is too close to that of the source.

### **Original Source:**

If the existence of a signing ape was unsettling for linguists, it was also startling news for animal behaviorists.

—Davis, *Eloquent Animals*, p. 26

### **Unacceptable Borrowing Of Phrases:**

The existence of a signing ape unsettled linguists and startled animal behaviorists (Davis 26).

### **Unacceptable Borrowing Of Structure:**

If the presence of a sign-language-using chimp was disturbing for scientists studying language, it was also surprising to scientists studying animal behavior (Davis 26).

### **Two Acceptable Paraphrases:**

When they learned of an ape's ability to use sign language, both linguists and animal behaviorists were taken by surprise (Davis 26).

According to Flora Davis, linguists and animal behaviorists were unprepared for the news that a chimp could communicate with its trainers through sign language (26).

In all of these paraphrases, the information is the same, but the acceptable ones put the information into the student's own means of expression. This shows the reader (and the instructor) that the writer has taken time to think about and assimilate the information. Also, notice that paraphrases still need citations to indicate the source of the material. When the paraphrase includes a signal phrase (like "according to So and So") only the page number is included in the parenthetical citation.<sup>2</sup>

"But these passages are written by experts," you might say. "How am I supposed to equal their writing?" The answer is that you're not supposed to equal the writing of a professional. You're supposed to express your own ideas with the language you've got. Anyone who can read this and understand it is capable of writing an acceptable sentence from scratch.

Diana Hacker and others advise student writers to use a simple technique to avoid unacceptable paraphrasing. The technique involves reading a passage from a source carefully, closing the book or hiding the web page, and then writing about the information from the source in your own words and style. After writing, you can check the original source for accuracy. Another way to avoid plagiarism is to write the paper early. Having a deadline approaching increases the temptation to use another writer's language.

### **Other Considerations**

Giving credit to the sources of information that you use in writing your paper also means that you get proper credit for your own work and ideas. It is important, therefore, to make it very clear where your ideas or words end and those of your source begin--or vice versa. The following passage has some problems with clarity concerning whose words are used. This writer commits plagiarism by not distinguishing between different voices.

The refugees had to find shelter, and often the places they found were overcrowded. One refugee said that he couldn't see his own feet because there were so many people. It was even hard to breathe when the crowd pushed, trying to squeeze in one more. Somebody had to take responsibility for the situation, but in none of its statements did the government ever mention the suffering of the refugees.

Now here is the same passage with the references cleared up and plagiarism avoided.

The refugees had to find shelter, and often the places they found were overcrowded. One refugee, interviewed by Nanami Numa, a reporter for the newspaper *The True World*, said that he had trouble seeing the ground because there were so many people. According to this man, it was even hard to breathe when the crowd pushed, trying to squeeze in one more (12). What he didn't say, but what is now apparent, is that somebody had to take responsibility for the situation, but in none of its statements did the government ever mention the suffering of the refugees.

Although this passage has not quoted any material, it still gives the name and other information about the source, including a page number at the end of the lines that came from the writer's research. Then the next line is clearly the student's own, and it is evident that the student has used outside sources correctly.

### **Work Cited**

Hacker, Diana. *A Pocket Style Manual*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Boston: Bedford Books, 1997.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about the format for citations and lists of works cited, see the documentation handouts available in the Writing Lab.