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Harvard Guide to Using Sources

A Publication of the Harvard College Writing Program

Harvard Guide to Using Sources: *What Constitutes Plagiarism?*

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In academic writing, it is considered plagiarism to draw any idea or any language from someone else without adequately [crediting that source](#) in your paper. It doesn't matter whether the source is a published author, another student, a Web site without clear authorship, a Web site that sells academic papers, or any other person: Taking credit for anyone else's work is stealing, and it is unacceptable in all academic situations, whether you do it intentionally or by accident.

The ease with which you can find information of all kinds on the Internet means that when you use online sources, you need to be extra vigilant about keeping track of where you are getting information and ideas, and about giving proper credit to the authors of the sources you use. If you cut and paste from an electronic document into your notes and forget to clearly label the document in your notes, or if you draw information from a series of Web sites without taking careful notes, you may end up taking credit for ideas that aren't yours, whether you mean to or not.

It's important to remember that every Web site is a document with an author, and therefore every Web site must be cited properly in your paper. For example, while it may seem obvious to you that an idea drawn from Professor Steven Pinker's book *The Language Instinct* should only appear in your paper if you include a clear citation, it might be less clear that information you glean about language acquisition from the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Web site](#) warrants a similar citation. Even though the authorship of this encyclopedia entry is less obvious than it might be if it were a print article (you need to scroll down the page

to see the author's name, and if you don't do so you might mistakenly think an author isn't listed), you are still responsible for citing this material correctly. Similarly, if you consult a Web site that has no clear authorship, you are still responsible for citing it as a source for your paper. The kind of source you use, or the absence of an author linked to that source, does not change the fact that you always need to cite your sources (see Evaluating Web Sources).

While it may seem obvious that copying someone else's words verbatim and submitting them in a paper with your name on it is plagiarism, other types of plagiarism may be less familiar to you. These more subtle forms of plagiarism are actually more common, and you should make sure you understand all of them, as well as how to avoid them by conducting your research and writing carefully and responsibly.

Verbatim plagiarism

If you copy language word for word from another source and use that language in your paper, you are plagiarizing *verbatim*. Even if you write down your own ideas in your own words and place them around text that you've drawn directly from a source, you *must* give credit to the author of the source material, either by placing the source material in quotation marks and providing a clear citation, or by paraphrasing the source material and providing a clear citation.

Example

Source material

Political transitions brought about by the collapse of authoritarian rule, democratization, or political reforms also make states particularly prone to violence.[28] The emergence and rise of exclusionary national ideologies, such as ethnic nationalism and religious fundamentalism, can be destabilizing as well. The emergence of dehumanizing ideologies, which literally deny the humanity of other ethnic groups, is particularly dangerous because it is often the precursor to genocidal slaughter.[29]

--Brown Michael E. "The Causes of Internal Conflict: An Overview." *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict*. Ed. Michael E. Brown et al. Cambridge: MIT, 2001. 14. Print.

Plagiarized version

While this student has written her own sentences about Rwanda, she has copied the italicized sentences directly from the source material. She has left out one passage from Brown's paragraph, but has reproduced the rest verbatim.

In the case of Rwanda, both overt ethnic discrimination and a weak state led to genocide. The state had not protected the civil liberties of the Tutsis, thus failing to uphold true democratic principles. *In fact, political transitions brought about by the collapse of authoritarian rule, democratization, or political reforms also make states particularly prone to violence. The emergence and rise of exclusionary national ideologies, such*

as ethnic nationalism and religious fundamentalism, can be destabilizing as well. The emergence of dehumanizing ideologies is often the precursor to genocidal slaughter.

Acceptable version #1 (direct quotation with citation)

By quoting directly from Michael Brown and including a citation (MLA in-text citation in this case), the student gives adequate credit to Brown. Only the page number is required in the citation as Brown's name is mentioned when the quotation is introduced.

In the case of Rwanda, both overt ethnic discrimination and a weak state led to genocide. The state had not protected the civil liberties of the Tutsis, thus failing to uphold true democratic principles. *In fact, Brown notes that "political transitions brought about by the collapse of authoritarian rule, democratization, or political reforms also make states particularly prone to violence. The emergence and rise of exclusionary national ideologies, such as ethnic nationalism and religious fundamentalism, can be destabilizing as well. The emergence of dehumanizing ideologies… is often the precursor to genocidal slaughter" (14).*

Acceptable version #2 (paraphrase with citation)

In this version the student has paraphrased Brown's argument, making it clear that these are Brown's ideas by introducing the section with a clear signal phrase ("Michael Brown suggests…") and citing the page number of the source (in this case using the MLA in-text citation style).

In the case of Rwanda, both overt ethnic discrimination and a weak state led to genocide. The state had not protected the civil liberties of the Tutsis, thus failing to uphold true democratic principles. *In fact, as Michael Brown suggests, violence often results from the end of an authoritarian government and its replacement with a more democratic society. Violence is also more likely when an authoritarian society gives way to ethnic nationalism or religious fundamentalism. When emerging ideologies dehumanize certain ethnic groups, the conditions are also ripe for genocide (14).*

Mosaic plagiarism

If you copy bits and pieces from a source (or several sources), changing a few words here and there without either adequately paraphrasing or quoting directly, the result is *mosaic plagiarism*. Even if you don't intend to copy the source, you may end up committing this type of plagiarism as a result of careless note-taking and confusion over where your source's ideas end and your own ideas begin. You may think that you've paraphrased sufficiently, or quoted relevant passages, but if you haven't taken careful notes along the way, or if you've cut and pasted from your sources, you can lose track of the boundaries between your own ideas and those of your sources. It's not enough to have good intentions and to cite some of the material you use. You are responsible for making clear distinctions between your ideas and the ideas of the scholars who have informed your work. If you keep track of the ideas that come from your sources and have a clear

understanding of how your own ideas differ from those ideas, and you follow the correct citation style, you will avoid mosaic plagiarism.

Example

Source #1

An episode of *Scrubs* off a DVD (without commercials) is only 22 minutes long. A 22-minute episode followed by a 5-minute break and a 22-minute discussion will be more engaging and more memorable to the students than a lecture…

One need not agree with all elements of the story for it to have educational value. What is accurate and what is inaccurate are grist for a good discussion, and encourages student participation more than any article that just tells them what to believe. Furthermore, watching people and hearing their voices provide much better tests of clinical skills of observation than merely reading words on a page. One must *see* a patient's body language and *hear* her tone of voice in order to learn how to observe (or how to hone one's skills).

--Spike, Jeffrey. (2008). Television viewing and ethical reasoning: Why watching *Scrubs* does a better job than most bioethics classes. *The American Journal of Bioethics, 8*(12), 11-13.

Source #2

Indeed, of the more than 3500 hours of instruction during medical school, an average of less than 60 hours are devoted to all of bioethics, health law and health economics *combined*. Most of the instruction is during the preclinical courses, leaving very little instructional time when students are experiencing bioethical or legal challenges during their hands-on, clinical training. More than 60 percent of the instructors in bioethics, health law, and health economics have not published since 1990 on the topic they are teaching.

--Persad, G.C., Elder, L., Sedig, L., Flores, L., & Emanuel, E. (2008) The current state of medical school education in bioethics, health law, and health economics. *Journal of Law, Medicine, and Ethics 36*, 89-94.

Plagiarized version

The information in this sentence is drawn directly from Persad, but because the student ends the citation of Persad above, this sentence appears to be the student's own idea.

Everything up to this point in the paragraph is either paraphrased or taken verbatim from Spike, but the student does not cite Spike. As a result, readers will assume that the student has come up with these ideas himself.

The student has come up with the idea about the role of empathy on his own, but because nothing in the paragraph is cited, it seems to be part of a whole paragraph of his ideas, rather than the point that he is building from Spike's ideas.

In order to advocate the use of the sitcom *Scrubs* as part of the medical education system, it is also important to look at the current bioethical curriculum. Medical school curriculum does not focus adequately on the

moral issues that doctors face in the clinic. In fact, in more than 3500 hours of training that students undergo in medical school, only about 60 hours are focused on bioethics, health law, and health economics. It is also problematic that students receive this training before they actually go on to their hands-on, clinical training (Persad et al, 2008). Most of these hours are taught by instructors without current publications in the field.

By watching episodes of *Scrubs*, however, medical students would have the chance to watch people and hear their voices, providing a much better test of clinical skills of observation than you can get from reading words on a page. One must see a patient's body language and hear her tone of voice if one is to become a better observer, and watching the patients on television would provide a good opportunity for medical students to do so. Perhaps even more significantly, medical students would be introduced to certain issues, and while the experiences may not be their own, they would be effective in helping them to understand those experiences as they empathize with the characters.

Acceptable version

The student mentions the researchers in each sentence, which makes it clear that all the information in this paragraph has been drawn from Persad et al. The student also uses a clear APA in-text citation to point the reader to the original article.

By introducing Spike's ideas with a clear signal phrase and then directly quoting from Spike's article (and including an APA-style citation), the student creates a clear boundary between Spike's ideas and his own.

In order to advocate the use of the sitcom *Scrubs* as part of the medical education system, it is also important to look at the current bioethical curriculum. Medical school curriculum does not focus adequately on the moral issues that doctors face in the clinic. In fact, according to Persad et al. (2008), only about one percent of teaching time throughout the four years of medical school is spent on ethics. As the researchers argue, this presents a problem because the students are being taught about ethical issues before they have a chance to experience those issues themselves. They also note that more than sixty percent of instructors teaching bioethics to medical students have no recent publications in the subject.

Professor Jeffrey Spike (2008) proposes an unconventional solution: watching *Scrubs*. As he notes, simply in viewing the show, "watching people and hearing their voices provide much better tests of clinical skills of observation than merely reading words on a page"(p. 12). Perhaps even more significantly, medical students would be introduced to certain ethical dilemmas, and while the experiences may not be their own, they would be effective in helping them to understand those experiences as they empathize with the characters.

Inadequate paraphrase

When you paraphrase, your task is to distill the source's ideas in your own words. It's not enough to change a few words here and there and leave the rest; instead, you must completely restate the ideas in the passage in your own words. If your own language is too close to the original, then you are plagiarizing, even if you do provide a citation.

In order to make sure that you are using your own words, it's a good idea to put away the source material while you write your paraphrase of it. This way, you will force yourself to distill the point you think the author is making and articulate it in a new way. Once you have done this, you should look back at the original and make sure that you have not used the same words or sentence structure. If you do want to use some of the

author's words for emphasis or clarity, you must put those words in quotation marks and provide a citation.

Example

Source material

So in *Romeo and Juliet*, understandably in view of its early date, we cannot find that tragedy has fully emerged from the moral drama and the romantic comedy that dominated in the public theaters of Shake>speare's earliest time. Here he attempted an amalgam of romantic comedy and the tragic idea, along with the assertion of a moral lesson which is given the final emphasis—although the force of that lesson is switched from the lovers to their parents. But tragedy is necessarily at odds with the moral: it is concerned with a permanent anguishing situation, not with one that can either be put right or be instrumental in teaching the survivors to do better.

--Leech, Clifford. "The Moral Tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*." *Critical Essays on* Romeo and Juliet. Ed. Joseph A. Porter. New York: G.K. Hall, 1997. 20. Print.

Plagiarized version

This is an inadequate paraphrase because the student has only replaced a few words ("mixture" for "amalgam"; "asserts a moral lesson" for "assertion of a moral lesson"; "impact" for "force") while leaving the rest of Leech's words intact.

In his essay, "The Moral Tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*," Clifford Leech suggests that rather than being a straight tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet* is a mixture of romantic comedy and the tragic idea, and that it asserts a moral lesson which is given the final emphasis. The impact of the moral lesson is switched from the lovers to the parents (20).

Acceptable version #1 (Adequate paraphrase with citation)

In this version, the student communicates Leech's ideas (and cites Leech with an MLA in-text citation), but does not borrow language from Leech.

In his essay, "The Moral Tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*," Clifford Leech suggests that there is more to Romeo and Juliet than simply a gloom-and-doom tragedy of two people destined to die for their illicit love. According to Leech, *Romeo and Juliet* is part romantic comedy, part tragedy, part morality tale in which the moral lesson is learned at the end. But this moral lesson comes with a twist: Since the lovers are dead, their parents experience the consequences of their actions (20).

Acceptable version #2 (Direct quotation with citation)

In this version, the student uses Leech's words in quotation marks and provides a clear MLA in-text citation.

In his essay, "The Moral Tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*," Clifford Leech suggests that there is more to *Romeo and Juliet* than simply a gloom-and-doom tragedy of two people destined to die for their illicit love. According to Leech, in *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare "attempted an amalgam of romantic comedy and the tragic idea, along with the assertion of a moral lesson which is given the final emphasis—although the force of that lesson is switched from the lovers to their parents" (20).

Uncited paraphrase

When you use your own language to describe someone else's idea, that idea still belongs to the author of the original material. Therefore, it's not enough to paraphrase the source material responsibly; you also need to cite the source, even if you have changed the wording significantly. As with quoting, when you paraphrase you are offering your reader a glimpse of someone else's work on your chosen topic, and you should also provide enough information for your reader to trace that work back to its original form. The rule of thumb here is simple: Whenever you use ideas that you did not think up yourself, you need to give credit to the source in which you found them, whether you quote directly from that material or provide a responsible paraphrase.

Example

Source material

The form of military compensation also limits the ability of military families to adapt to financial crises, potentially forcing them to turn to creditors. Much of military compensation comes in the form of non-fungible in-kind goods and services, rather than a traditional paycheck. Military health care, future tuition assistance, military housing, military food, access to commissaries, and access to military recreational facilities and entertainment are all important components of the compensation package for military personnel. Military recruiters understandably use these side benefits as a way of explaining and justifying relatively low military pay. Nevertheless, the non-fungible nature of non-cash compensation prevents military personnel from converting a significant portion of their resources to overcome income shocks and unexpected expenses.

--Graves, S.M., & Peterson, C.L. (2005). Predatory lending and the military: The law and geography of "payday" loans in military towns. *Ohio State Law Journal 66* , 27.

Plagiarized version

This student has drawn these ideas directly from Graves and Peterson and has not given them credit. Although she paraphrased adequately, she is still responsible for citing Graves and Peterson as the source of this information.

Besides the problem of low wages, however, military members are also faced with the reality that much of their compensation is not paid in cash. While civilians can allot their cash earnings to pay for, say, car repairs, a military household cannot convert their illiquid medical, housing, food, or tuition assistance benefits into cash to cover unexpected expenses. As a result, many military personnel find that the amount and the type of compensation they receive are not conducive to smoothing temporary spikes in expenditures.

Acceptable version

In this version, the student eliminates any possible ambiguity about the source of the ideas in the paragraph. By naming the authors whenever the source of the ideas could be unclear, the student clearly attributes these ideas to Graves and Peterson.

According to Graves and Peterson (2005), military members are faced not only with low wages, but with the reality that much of their compensation is not paid in cash. While civilians can allot their cash earnings to pay for, say, car repairs, a military household cannot convert their illiquid medical, housing, food, or tuition assistance benefits into cash to cover unexpected expenses. Graves and Peterson further explain that many military personnel find that the amount and the type of compensation they receive are not conducive to smoothing temporary spikes in expenditures.

Uncited quotation

When you put source material in quotation marks in your essay, you are telling your reader that you have drawn that material from somewhere else. But it's not enough to indicate that the material in quotation marks is not the product of your own thinking or experimentation: You must also credit the author of that material and provide a trail for your reader to follow back to the original document. This way, your reader will know who did the original work and will also be able to go back and consult that work if he or she is interested in learning more about the topic. Citations should always go directly after quotations.

Example

Source material

More interested in the legal and moral aspects of world order than in the economic agenda supported by Hamiltonians, Wilsonians typically believe that American interests require that other countries accept basic American values and conduct both their foreign and domestic affairs accordingly. This school has much deeper roots farther back in American history than is sometimes recognized.

--Mead, Walter Russell. *Special Providence*. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.

Plagiarized version

It's not enough for the student to indicate that these words come from a source; the source must be cited.

Wilsonians take the position "that American interests require that other countries accept basic American values and conduct both their foreign and domestic affairs accordingly." An analysis of President Obama's foreign policy goals, as articulated in his inaugural address, reveals strong Wilsonian tendencies.

Acceptable version

Here, the student has cited the source of the quotation using an MLA in-text citation.

Wilsonians take the position "that American interests require that other countries accept basic American values and conduct both their foreign and domestic affairs accordingly" (Mead 88). An analysis of President Obama's foreign policy goals, as articulated in his inaugural address, reveals strong Wilsonian tendencies.

Using material from another student's work

In some courses you will be allowed or encouraged to form study groups, to work together in class generating ideas, or to collaborate on your thinking in other ways. Even in those cases, it's imperative that you understand whether all of your writing must be done independently, or whether group authorship is permitted. Most often, even in courses that allow some collaborative discussion, the writing or calculations that you do must be your own. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't collect feedback on your writing from a classmate or a writing tutor; rather, it means that the argument you make (and the ideas you rely on to make it) should either be your own or you should give credit to the source of those ideas.

So what does this mean for the ideas that emerge from class discussion or peer review exercises? Unlike the ideas that your professor offers in lecture (you should always cite these), ideas that come up in the course of class discussion or peer review are collaborative, and often not just the product of one individual's thinking. If, however, you see a clear moment in discussion when a particular student comes up with an idea, you should certainly cite that student. In any case, when your work is informed by class discussions, it's courteous and collegial to include a discursive footnote in your paper that lets your readers know about that discussion. So, for example, if you were writing a paper about the narrator in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and you came up with your idea during a discussion in class, you might place a footnote in your paper that states the following: "I am indebted to the members of my Expos 20 section for sparking my thoughts about the role of the narrator as Greek Chorus in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*."

Questions of collaboration often arise in math and computer science courses, in which it is considered appropriate to talk through your ideas with other students, but often not considered appropriate to work together on specific problems or code. When in doubt about whether it is appropriate to collaborate on work

for any course, you should always consult your instructor.

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