



PLAGIARISM

As a Meramec student, you have probably learned about plagiarism through an English course or other courses, which require writing. The *English Faculty Handbook* states, "Plagiarism is a serious academic offense. A student who deliberately or unintentionally submits as his or her own work an assignment which is in any part taken from another person's work, without proper acknowledgement, is guilty of plagiarism." You may plagiarize for various reasons:

- You may not understand the concept of plagiarism.
- You may not know how much of an original passage to change or what elements to change.
- You may be tempted to plagiarize to hide the weaknesses of your paper's thesis or writing style.
- You may plagiarize out of desperation, recopying text rather than writing a clear paraphrase or summary. Remember that each person's writing style is distinctive; an observant reader of any paper can detect a shift in style and word choice.

What is plagiarism?

Plagiarism comes from a Latin word meaning "kidnapping." *The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* defines plagiarism as giving "the impression that you have written or thought something that you have in fact borrowed from someone else." Plagiarism can include improper handling of borrowed information, lack of acknowledgement, or both.

Borrowed material may be original ideas or opinions, calculated statistics, or discoveries by another person. **Some students mistakenly think that only borrowed material directly quoted in their writing needs to be acknowledged.**

Actually, all borrowed material--whether quoted, paraphrased or summarized--needs to be documented so that the original author receives credit. Documentation means that you use an appropriate way to acknowledge all pertinent information (author, title, date, page number) about your source. **For the most up-to-date documentation rules, ask for the MLA (Modern Language Association) or APA (American Psychological Association) handouts from the College Writing Center.**

Normally, the possibility for plagiarism occurs when you're doing library research for an assignment. Like most students, you might worry that your whole composition will be nothing but borrowed information (especially since you're doing research to learn more about a topic). However, what you have written independently and what is considered *common* or *general* knowledge won't need to be documented.

What is common knowledge?

Common knowledge is factual information known widely by educated people. For example, the date of William Shakespeare's death, titles of his plays, and location of his Globe Theater are considered common knowledge that need not be documented. Check how information is treated in standard references, such as encyclopedias. Normally, information in an **unsigned** encyclopedia entry is considered general or common knowledge. Information in a **signed** encyclopedia article usually contains opinions or judgments and therefore cannot always be considered common knowledge. However, information about a topic that appears without credit in **several** sources, signed or unsigned, is definitely common knowledge and does not need to be documented.

- If you are unsure whether information might be general knowledge, give the author credit as a matter of courtesy. In short, when in doubt, play it safe!

How do I avoid plagiarism?

Four basic methods to handle borrowed material are available to you as a writer. With practice comes skill in knowing when to use one method or the other. Remember that **all four** methods still require you to document or list complete information about the original source.

1. *You may directly quote a passage.* A direct quote is a good choice when the original material is so well stated that a paraphrase would destroy the impact of the original statement. Too many or too lengthy direct quotes detract from a paper and imply that you've done very little original thinking. Be selective when using a quote and choose only the most important sections to quote directly.

2. *You may paraphrase borrowed material.* A paraphrase is about the same length as the original passage and is a good choice when the original contains a lot of important information. Paraphrasing is an essential writing skill to learn because you must understand the information in the original source, changing the words and sentence structure without distorting the meaning of the original.

A successful paraphrase

- accurately restates the meaning of the original,
- differs in sentence structure from the original,
- contains only the ordinary words or phrases of the original,
- changes the stylistic expressions or places them in quotation marks.

In general, when you paraphrase, feel free to use

- specific numbers from the original,
- special terms that have no common synonyms,
- simple words that have no practical substitutes.

Reminder: Sometimes even a single word from a source deserves quotation marks if it represents the author's style, viewpoint, or particular slant on the subject.

3. *You may mix a quotation with a paraphrase.* This method works well when only part of the original passage (for its style and content) is worth retaining word for word. Try for a smooth blend of both quoted and paraphrased material. (Begin your paraphrase/quote with a phrase like "According to Sigmund Freud" to alert the reader that several sentences will be a mix of quotation and paraphrase.)

4. *You may summarize the original passage.* This method permits you to focus on important points and omit minor details. A summary is usually about *one-third* the length of the original. Summarizing allows you easily to change the structure and vocabulary of the original passage as you put the information in your own words.

How do I apply all these methods?

As an example of the four methods just discussed, we've quoted an original passage by David Osborne from *The Rinehart Handbook for Writers*:

Original passage:

"At the moment, we have a clear lead in the race to commercialize space. We have the space shuttle, and we will probably have a space station by 1995. But the experience of the past fifteen years is cause for concern. We have developed one new technology after another--from videocassette recorders to machine tools to semiconductors--only to watch the Japanese take the market from us."

1. A sample direct quote:

As David Osborne observes, "We have developed one new technology after another--from videocassette recorders to machine tools to semiconductors--only to watch the Japanese take the market from us" (57).

2. A sample paraphrase:

In the attempt to make space commercially profitable, America is presently in the lead. The space shuttle and the strong possibility of a space station are evidence of our successful technology. However, developing technology is not enough. In the past, we have developed the technology but have lost the market to Japan (Osborne 57).

3. A sample mix of quotation and paraphrase:

According to David Osborne, America leads "the race to commercialize space." The space shuttle and the strong possibility of a space station are evidence of our successful technology. However, developing technology is not enough. In the past we have been successful "only to watch the Japanese take the market from us" (57).

4. A sample summary:

Although America has developed superior technology in the commercialization of space, we may, as we have in the past, lose the market to the Japanese (Osborne 57).

Note that certain words and phrases in our examples are used without quotation marks, since there are no easy substitutes for words like

- United States
- America
- Japan or Japanese
- space shuttle
- technology
- commercialization

Note that every example gives credit to David Osborne as the original author of the borrowed information.

A WORD OF WARNING

Composition instructors have recently begun to discuss “plagiaphrasing,” an attempt by inexperienced writers to paraphrase the original quote without changing enough. Students know that they need to rephrase the original quote but haven’t had enough practice to do it correctly.

Notice in the “plagiaphrase” below that the writer sticks too closely to the original sentence structure and vocabulary. Only the **boldfaced** words are different. *Notice that the writer does not credit Osborne as a source, mistakenly thinking that the passage doesn’t require documentation if it has been changed “enough.”*

Original passage:

“At the moment, we have a clear lead in the race to commercialize space. We have the space shuttle, and we will probably have a space station by 1995. But the experience of the past fifteen years is cause for concern. We have developed one new technology after another--from videocassette recorders to machine tools to semiconductors--only to watch the Japanese take the market from us “(Osborne 57).

“Plagiaphrased” passage:

*At the **present**, we have a **definite** lead in the **contest** to commercialize space. We have the space shuttle, and we will **definitely** have a space station by 1995. But the experience of the past fifteen years is **grounds** for concern. We have **initiated** one new technology after another--from **VCR’s** to semiconductors--**just** to **see** the Japanese **snatch** the market from us.*

How do I avoid plagiarizing?

These hints should help you write a smooth passage that avoids plagiarizing:

1. Read the passage you want to summarize at least three times to make sure you understand it completely.
2. Put the passage aside or turn your copy face down so that you're not tempted to use the vocabulary or sentence structure of the original.
3. Write the summary in your own words.
4. Check your summary or paraphrase carefully to be sure it does not follow the original sentence structure or vocabulary too closely.
5. Give credit to your source, using the author's name and page number (as shown in David Osborne citations on pages 3 and 4).

Information for this College Writing Center handout was compiled from:

Carter, Bonnie, and Craig Skates. *The Rinehart Handbook for Writers*. New York: Holt, 1988.

Hunt, Douglas. *The Riverside Guide to Writing*. Boston: Houghton, 1991.

Weidenborner, Stephen. *Writing Research Papers*. New York: St. Martin's, 1982.