

## USING SOURCES IN YOUR WRITING

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### What is plagiarism? Why is it regarded as cheating? And how can I avoid it?

According to this university's definition, "Plagiarism occurs when another person's writing or other work is copied or reproduced without acknowledgement". Put simply, your assignments must be your own work, and they must be expressed largely in your own words. Sometimes students are confused about the meaning of plagiarism, so please make sure that you understand the explanation that follows. With each assignment you submit, you will be asked to sign a cover sheet acknowledging that you have read this explanation; that you understand it; and that your assignment does not contain any plagiarised material. It is important for you to be clear about what this means, because there are penalties for plagiarism, ranging from loss of marks to exclusion from your course (for repeated offences). Therefore, if you are unsure about any of what you are reading here, ask your subject coordinator for clarification.

### What counts as plagiarised material?

- Anything that you copy from another student (you are encouraged to study with your peers, but you are expected to write your assignments separately. Note one exception to this rule: in some subjects, you may be asked to submit a group project in which all members of the group take joint responsibility for the text, and receive the same mark.)
- Anything that you have already submitted in an assignment for another subject (even though this is your own work, re-using it counts as plagiarism because you are not demonstrating any new learning for the subject in which you are re-using it, so you haven't really earned any marks the second time).
- Anything that you learn from a source and include in your essay without "referencing" (that is, showing where it came from). This includes written sources, film, CDs, the internet – whatever sources you use. (Sometimes people think it is all right to cut and paste material from the internet without showing where it came from, but this is NOT acceptable.) It applies to words from a source, and also to other materials, including visual images, graphics, and sound. When you write something for assessment, you are being judged on what you have learned and what you have thought. So, if you copy what somebody else has written, without referencing to show that somebody else wrote it, then you are getting marks based on the quality of their work, not yours.

### Using your sources (a 'source' is any material from which you learn information or ideas)

This **DOES NOT MEAN** that you should not use information and ideas from your reading. Your writing is supposed to be your own original work, but that doesn't mean that you have to come up with facts that nobody else knows, and it doesn't mean that nobody else's ideas should be in your essay. They **MUST** be there, in fact, because university courses invite you to engage with other people's ideas about the subjects you study. You have to read and respond to published sources; and you will be marked on your ability to understand and use these sources in your assignments. All of this material has to be referenced to show your reader where it came from, and you don't need to be anxious that, if your essay has lots of references, it will look as if you had no ideas of your own. What is original about your work is

- the way you relate ideas and information from the sources to the question you have been asked;
- the way you explain the ideas, and your choice of examples and evidence;
- your testing of other people's ideas against evidence, and against the ideas of others;
- your judgement of the strengths and limitations of other people's thinking;
- your ability to ask questions arising out of your encounters with other people's ideas;
- your ability to apply the ideas of others in new contexts; and
- your ability to construct answers of your own.

Using sources in your writing is a bit like weaving: you use threads from various different places, but the new pattern that you weave is your own.

There is no contradiction, therefore, between the requirement that your work should be original, and the requirement that you should discuss the work of others. All of the elements of originality described above are quite compatible with giving a reference in each and every place that you draw on the work of others. The only things you do not need to reference are your own ideas and observations, and facts which are very widely known (for example, the Second World War ended in 1945; or the pulmonary artery carries blood towards the lungs); (and if you are in doubt about those, the safest thing is to give a reference for them).

### **Expressing ideas in your own words**

You may wonder, then, whether it is acceptable just to assemble a series of quotations from the things you have read? In fact, this is never enough for an assignment, because the things you read were not written to answer the question your lecturer has asked you to work on. They will be useful to you in constructing your own answer, but they have not done it for you. Another reason that just assembling quotations is not satisfactory is that your marker cannot tell whether you have understood what you are quoting unless you comment, yourself, in your own words. It may be that you have understood it, and that you feel the original wording is much better expressed than anything you could manage in its place; but the marker needs to see what you think the material means, and that is only possible if you explain it yourself.

Certainly, there will be times when it is appropriate to quote another person's words in your assignment – that is, to copy them word for word (and your tutors will talk more about this). You should quote when it is important for your reader to see exactly how the original writer expressed something. This might be because there is an attitude or a character in the original that would be lost if you re-worded it. Or, it might be because the wording itself is something that you need to comment on, perhaps to explain why those words were used. If there is no reason why your reader needs to see the original wording, however, you are expected to give information and explain ideas in your own words. This is not easy if you are looking at the original source; but it is easier if you look up from your reading at the end of a section that you want to use and ask yourself, "If I had to explain this to someone who hasn't read it, how would I do that? What would I say?"

### **How much quotation is too much?**

This partly depends on the nature of the subject. For example, in English literature essays, you are likely to quote frequently from the novel or story you are discussing, because the point you are making concerns the effect of particular words used by the narrator or by a character. As evidence for your point, therefore, you must show these words to the reader and comment on how they work. In an Art History essay, by contrast, most of the essay will often consist of your own observations of what you see in a painting or sculpture, so you would not need to quote very much from sources. In a Science assignment that requires you to apply scientific knowledge to a particular case study, you would not need to quote very much, if at all. Since the amount of quotation that's considered appropriate varies from discipline to discipline, it's a good idea to check your understanding with your tutor.

### **What you MAY NOT do**

Sometimes students hope that if they copy from a source but change a word here and there – take one out, and put a synonym in its place – that will be considered "their own words" rather than quotation, and will not be plagiarism. (For example, "Occasionally students hope that if they reproduce a source but alter a word in places..."). To do this is still considered plagiarism, however, because the sentence is substantially the same. This doesn't mean that you have to invent a new language! – just that when you discuss something you have read, it should be different enough that it is clear you have thought about it, in the language you already know, rather than just borrowed it. It is also considered plagiarism if you just re-arrange the order of words or phrases in a copied sentence. (For example, "If you just re-arrange the order of words, it is also considered plagiarism".) For more, and longer, examples, visit the internet source "Plagiarism: What it is and How to Recognise and Avoid it", at <http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/wts/plagiarism.html> (Writing Tutorial Services, Indiana University,

Bloomington, Indiana). Here you will find an original paragraph; a re-written version that is still considered plagiarism, and the reasons why; and two possible versions that are not considered plagiarism, and the reasons why not.

You may be wondering how you will manage to come up with different ways of saying the same thing. Certainly, this improves with practice, and your tutors will provide opportunities to practice it. When you discuss the reading in tutorials, you will be expressing the ideas in your own way; and you should also try to do this when you make notes from reading. Again, imagine that you are teaching the ideas to somebody else – they would need a plain, clear explanation in language that is largely familiar. And as you read more in each subject, your academic vocabulary and style of writing will grow with experience.

## Referencing

Whether you quote the words of the original source, or use your own words, in **ALL CASES** you need to give a reference to where the idea or information came from. If you are quoting directly, you put quotation marks around the passage that you copy so that your reader can see that it is copied from the source; and at the end of the sentence, you put the reference. If you are using your own words, don't put quotation marks around them, but put a reference at the end of the sentence in exactly the same way as for a quotation. This shows the reader where you learned the idea or information that you're presenting, at the same time as showing that you are expressing it in your own words. (To make sure that **you** know whose words are whose, be sure to use quotation marks **IN YOUR NOTES** when you copy from a source.)

There are various methods of referencing. Different subjects use different methods, and most of these are likely to be different from the method you were using at school. For this reason, it is important to consult the subject guide for guidelines on referencing **EVERY TIME** you prepare an assignment, to make sure that you are using the method that subject requires. All subjects require you to give each reference twice – first in the essay itself, when you refer to a source, and again in your list of references (or bibliography) at the end of the essay.

There are two general systems of referencing in the essay itself, but for each of these, there are a number of sub-systems. You will find that some subjects require you to give a brief reference, just the author, date, and page number, in brackets at the end of your sentence (Chanock, 2003: 3). Other subjects use, instead, a footnote system, where you put a number at the end of your sentence and then provide a full reference at the bottom of the page.<sup>1</sup> Your subject guide will tell you which system you are to use in that subject, and it will provide guidelines on how exactly you should do it.

When listing your references at the end of the essay, all referencing systems require the same items of information about the source (author, title, date, etc. – check your guidelines). Where they differ is in the format they require; the order of the information; the abbreviations allowed; and the punctuation you must use. Again, your subject guide will tell you what to do.

## Cultural differences

We have noted that the conventions for quoting and referencing may be different from the ones you learned at school. Even more so, if you have been educated in a system overseas that did not require you to show when you are quoting other writers' words, and to reference everything you learned from reading, these requirements may seem strange to you at first. It may be that most educated people in your home country were familiar with the common sources of knowledge, and would not need to be reminded of where you learned your facts and ideas. It might even seem a little impolite to remind them, in this situation. But you will find that, in Australia, it is considered both polite and essential to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> K. Chanock, "Using sources in your writing" (Handout), La Trobe University, Bundoora, 2003, p. 3.