

Biology Writing Resources – Avoiding Plagiarism and Using Source Material

Plagiarism can be defined as the use of another person's wording, phrasing, ideas, or collection of facts as your own. It shows a lack of respect for the value of ideas and knowledge; it is also a form of stealing. Because any such violation of academic integrity is extremely serious, it is important to carefully define not only plagiarism but also the proper use and acknowledgment of source material.

Documentation: The rules for documenting your sources are fairly straightforward. The following items taken from other sources must be acknowledged by documentation:

- Direct quotations
- Ideas from other sources, whether paraphrased or summarized
- Facts that are not considered common knowledge (facts that appear in encyclopedia articles on your topic, such as the dates of important occurrences, are considered common knowledge and usually need not be footnoted)

Whenever you are in doubt about a particular item, document it! Documentation serves an important purpose in addition to preserving academic integrity. Along with your bibliography, it indicates to your reader the extent of your research; it also allows the reader to pursue particular aspects of your topic on his or her own.

Quoting: You must be careful not only to document material taken from other sources but to indicate each and every use you make of another author's wording. For direct quotations, be sure not to omit any words or punctuation. If part of the quotation is irrelevant to your purpose and its omission does not change the meaning of the quotation, you may replace that segment with an ellipsis (three spaced periods for an omission at the beginning of a sentence or in the middle; four spaced periods for one at the end of a sentence). Place brackets around any word or comment you add within the quotation. (Quotations should be used sparingly, only for quite specific reasons, such as because of the importance or striking quality of the wording or facts, or because of the speaker's particular authority on your topic; they should not be used as convenient filler.)

Paraphrasing and Summarizing: At times, you will be paraphrasing or summarizing an author's idea. Any paraphrases or summaries that you do make should be completely in your own words and sentence structure. The surest means for achieving this end is not to look at the original while writing. Inserting synonyms for an author's words into his or her sentence structure is just as much plagiarism as unidentified word-for-word quotations. Integrating paraphrases and summaries fully into your own style has the virtue of demonstrating your clear comprehension of the subject matter; it also makes for a more unified and readable essay. Note that when paraphrasing or summarizing, you will still cite the author's name and page number as a way to acknowledge your use of the source.

The following example of poor (plagiaristic) and proper paraphrasing along with commentary on the example is excerpted from H. Ramsey Fowler's The Little, Brown Handbook (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1980), pp. 484-5:

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Original: In each case I have tried to show that all the action in a "Jamesian novel" may be taken as a result of philosophical differences of opinion among the principle characters, and that these differences in turn are explainable by reference to the characters' differing social backgrounds.

Poor

Paraphrase: The action in a "Jamesian novel" comes from philosophical differences of opinion between characters. These differences can be explained by examining the characters' differing social backgrounds (Crews 8).

The paraphrase uses several expressions verbatim from the source, without change and without quotation marks: "action in a 'Jamesian novel'"; "philosophical differences of opinion"; "the characters' differing social backgrounds." Thus even though the writer acknowledges the use of the author's work (indicated by the parenthetical citation at the end of it), he plagiarizes because he does not also acknowledge the use of the author's words with quotation marks. The improved paraphrase below captures and acknowledges the author's meaning without resorting to a plagiaristic manner of expression.

Improved

Paraphrase: In Henry James's novels, the characters live out philosophies acquired from their upbringing and their place in society (Crews 8).

In this revised paraphrase, although the writer retains Crews's essential meaning, he restates that meaning in a sentence that is clearly his own construction, designed to fit his larger purpose.

Crews, Frederick C. *The Tragedy of Manners: Moral Drama in the Later Novels of Henry James 1957*. Hamden: Shoe String Press, 1971.