

Citing Sources

Crediting Research and Avoiding Plagiarism



Whenever you write a research paper, you have to acknowledge where you've obtained your information. This is very important for two reasons: first, to give your readers a means to verify the claims you've made in your paper, and second, to give credit to the people whose information you are using. Taking information from someone else without properly identifying where you got it is just like cheating on a test – and just like with cheating on a test, the consequences can be dire.

The difference is that plagiarism – using someone else's ideas without properly crediting them – can be unintentional. In fact, it often is. However, ignorance is not bliss; instructors are under no obligation to be lenient with plagiarism just because you didn't realize you had committed it. This is very important to remember because plagiarism – even unintentional plagiarism – is against Patrick Henry Community College's honor code, and it can result in a failing grade for the assignment or even for the entire class.

The easiest way to avoid plagiarism is to follow a simple guideline: if you looked it up, acknowledge *where* you looked it up. Obviously, the particulars are a bit more intricate (saying "Oh, I saw it on Google!" really doesn't tell your readers anything), but if you adopt an attitude of making sure to credit your sources, you've taken the first step in making sure your paper follows the honor code.

Acknowledging Sources in Your Paper

The only way to write a paper without committing plagiarism is to acknowledge all of the sources of your information. There is a very specific way of doing this, and it consists of two parts: the bibliography page (you may know it as the "Works Cited" page) and the inline citations. Many students make the mistake of thinking that creating a Works Cited page is enough. It isn't; a bibliography tells readers where your information comes from, but it doesn't tell them what comes from where.

For proper acknowledgement, you need to cite sources within the text of the paper itself. This is done with inline citations. Usually an inline citation is just a parenthetical acknowledgement of your source at the end of the sentence you're citing (though it may be indicated by a footnote marker if you're using Chicago/Turabian style).

When to Cite Sources

In general, you should cite a source any time your paper uses information from another source in any form. This includes

- Quotes (word-for-word excerpts from the source)
- Paraphrases (putting the source in your own words or summarizing its essential parts)
- Most facts, figures, and statistics
- Anything from an outside source other than common knowledge

Direct Quotes versus Paraphrasing

One very common mistake people often make when writing a research paper is overusing direct quotes. Some people may have trouble putting things in their own words, while others think that quoting long sections of text word-for-word will increase the length of their papers while requiring minimal effort. This is a misconception, of course; quoting directly from a source actually requires *more* effort than putting something in your own words. This is because direct quotes are only meant to be used when no other words will suffice: that is, the point being made can *only* be made using those exact words. As such, direct quotes need to be exceptionally integrated into the paper, meaning

- They must be adequately introduced
 - Preceded or followed by some introduction of the source material
 - Given with the author's credentials
- They must be short
 - Only include the words that are necessary
- They must be cited
 - Followed by inline citation and end punctuation
- They must be used very sparingly
 - Used only 2-3 times in an average paper unless instructions dictate otherwise

Paraphrasing, on the other hand, is when you put the source material in your own words. Bear in mind that putting sourced statements in your own words does not eliminate the requirement to cite your source. It's also important to remember that a proper paraphrase must be completely changed from the source material. A general guideline is that three or more consecutive words used from the source is a direct quote, but there's no hard rule that constitutes a direct quote as opposed to a paraphrase: even a single word should be quoted directly if it is being used as a key word by the source (For example: *The reporter described the defendant's manner in the courtroom as "defiant" (citation).*) Paraphrased material

- Should be completely reworded from the original
 - Don't just open a thesaurus and change a few words; for something to count as a paraphrase, the sentence structure and wording must be completely different.
- Should be cited
 - Even when you put source material in your own words, you must cite it.
- Should be relevant to your point
 - Just because you've put something in your own words does not mean you shouldn't connect it to the rest of your paper.
- Should not be an entire paragraph
 - Paraphrases, like direct quotes, should be short. Really, you shouldn't paraphrase more than two or three sentences from a source before adding your own thoughts.

Common Knowledge

Common knowledge refers to statements that are so prevalently known within the scope of your topic that they don't need to be attributed to a source. For instance, a paper about hurricanes might make the statement,

“A tropical storm becomes a hurricane when its sustained winds reach 74 miles an hour.” This is common knowledge: it is part of the basic definition of a hurricane and would likely appear without a citation in almost any encyclopedia, dictionary, or other general knowledgebase. Even though you may not have known it before writing the paper, it is so basic to your topic that it doesn’t require a citation. Keep in mind,

- Common knowledge may vary greatly by subject and audience.
- If you’re not sure whether or not the information in question is common knowledge, cite it.
- Direct, word-for-word quotes should always be cited.

Additional Writing Center Resources

- Using Sources
- APA Format: A Quick Guide
- MLA Format: A Quick Guide

Further Reading

- “Is It Plagiarism Yet?” (Purdue University OWL) <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/589/02>