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# Harvard Guide to Using Sources

A Publication of the Harvard College Writing Program

## *Harvard Guide to Using Sources: How to Avoid Plagiarism*

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It's not enough to know why plagiarism is taken so seriously in the academic world or to know how to recognize it. You also need to know how to avoid it. The simplest cases of plagiarism to avoid are the intentional ones: If you copy a paper from a classmate, buy a paper from the Internet, copy whole passages from a book, article, or Web site without citing the author, you are plagiarizing. Here's the best advice you'll ever receive about avoiding intentional plagiarism: If you're tempted to borrow someone else's ideas or plagiarize in any way because you're pressed for time, nervous about how you're doing in a class, or confused about the assignment, *don't do it*. The problems you think you're solving by plagiarizing are really minor compared to the problems you will create for yourself by plagiarizing. In every case, the consequences of plagiarism are much more serious than the consequences of turning in a paper late or turning in a paper you're not satisfied to have written.

"...the consequences of plagiarism are much more serious than the consequences of turning in a paper late..."

The consequences of accidental plagiarism are equally daunting and should be avoided at all costs. Whether or not you intended to plagiarize, you will still be held responsible. As a member of an intellectual community you are expected to respect the ideas of others in the same way that you would respect any other property that didn't belong to you, and this is true whether you plagiarize on purpose or by accident. The best way to make sure you don't plagiarize due to confusion or carelessness is to **1) understand what you're doing when you write a paper** and **2) follow a method that is systematic and careful as you do your research**. In other words, if you have a clear sense of what question you're trying to answer and what knowledge you're building on, and if you keep careful, clear notes along the way, it's much easier to use sources effectively and responsibly and, most of all, to write a successful paper. If you have questions about plagiarism at any point in your research or writing process, *ask*. It's always better to ask questions than it is to wait for an instructor to respond to work that you have turned in for a grade. Once you have turned in your final work, you will be held responsible for misuse of sources.

**With these principles in mind, here are some guidelines for conducting research responsibly:**

- **Keep track of your sources; print electronic sources**

While it's easy enough to keep a stack of books or journal articles on your desk where you can easily refer back to them, it's just as important to keep track of electronic sources. When you save a PDF of a journal article, make sure you put it into a folder on your computer where you'll be able to find it. When you consult a Web site, log the Web address in a separate document from the paper you're writing so that you'll be able to return to the Web site and cite it correctly. You should also print the relevant pages from any Web sites you use, making sure you note the complete URL and the date on which you printed the material. Because electronic sources aren't stable and Web pages can be deleted without notice, beware of directing your readers to sources that might have disappeared. Check when the Web site you're using was last updated and update the URLs as you work and once again right before you submit your essay. If an electronic source disappears before you submit your work, you will need to decide whether or not to keep the source in your paper. If you have printed the source and can turn it in with your paper, you should do so. If you have not printed the source, you should consult your instructor about whether or not to use that source in your paper.

The library has several helpful resources for managing your sources, including [RefWorks](#).

- **Keep sources in correct context**

Whenever you consult a source, you should make sure you understand the context, both of the ideas within a source and of the source itself. You should also be careful to consider the context in which a source was written. For example, a book of essays published by an organization with a political bias might not present an issue with adequate complexity for your project.

The question of context can be more complicated when you're working with Internet sources than with print sources because you may see one Web page as separate from an entire Web site and use or interpret that page without fully understanding or representing its context. For example, a definition of "communism" taken from a Web site with a particular political agenda might provide one interpretation of the meaning of the word—but if you neglect to mention the context for that definition you might use it as though it's unbiased when it isn't. Likewise, some Internet searches will take you to a URL that's just one Web page within a larger Web site; be sure to investigate and take notes on the context of the information you're citing.

- **Plan ahead**

Research can often turn out to be more time-consuming than you anticipate. Budget enough time to search for sources, to take notes, and to think about how to use the sources in your essay. Moments of carelessness are more common when you leave your essay until the last minute and are tired or stressed. Honest mistakes can lead to charges of plagiarism just as dishonesty can; be careful when note-taking and when incorporating ideas and language from electronic sources so you always know what language and ideas are yours and what belongs to a source.

- **Don't cut and paste: File and label your sources**

Never cut and paste information from an electronic source straight into your own essay, and never type verbatim sentences from a print source straight into your essay. Instead, open a separate document on your computer for each source so you can file

research information carefully. When you type or cut and paste into that document, make sure to include the full citation information for the print source or the full URL and the date you copied the page(s). For Web sources, make sure to cite the page from which you're taking information, which may not necessarily be the home page of the site you're using. Use logical and precise names for the files you create, and add citation information and dates. This allows you to retrieve the files easily, deters you from accidentally deleting files, and helps you keep a log of the order in which your research was conducted. It's a good idea to add a note to each file that describes how you might use the information in that file. Remember: you're entering a conversation with your sources, and accurate file names and notes can help you understand and engage that conversation. And, of course, always remember to back up your files.

- **Keep your own writing and your sources separate**

Work with either the printed copy of your source(s) or (in the case of online sources), the copy you pasted into a separate document—not the online version—as you draft your essay. This precaution not only decreases the risk of plagiarism but also enables you to annotate your sources in various ways that will help you understand and use them most effectively in your essay.

- **Keep your notes and your draft separate**

Be careful to keep your research notes separate from your actual draft at all stages of your writing process. This will ensure that you don't cut language from a source and paste it into your paper without proper attribution. If you work from your notes, you're more likely to keep track of the boundaries between your own ideas and those in a source.

- **Paraphrase carefully in your notes; acknowledge your sources explicitly when paraphrasing**

When you want to paraphrase material, it's a good idea first to paste the actual quotation into your notes (not directly into your draft) and then to paraphrase it (still in your notes). Putting the information in your own words will help you make sure that you've thought about what the source is saying and that you have a good reason for using it in your paper. Remember to use some form of notation in your notes to indicate what you've paraphrased and mention the author's name within the material you paraphrase. You should also include all citation information in your notes.

When you decide to use paraphrased material in your essay, make sure that you avoid gradually rewording the paraphrased material from draft to draft until you lose sight of the fact that it's still a paraphrase. Also, avoid excessive paraphrasing in which your essay simply strings together a series of paraphrases. When the ideas taken from your sources start to blend in deceptively with your own thinking, you will have a more difficult time maintaining the boundaries between your ideas and those drawn from sources. Finally, whenever you paraphrase, make sure you indicate, at each logical progression, that the ideas are taken from an authored source.

- **Avoid reading a classmate's paper for inspiration.**

If you're in a course that requires peer review or workshops of student drafts, you are going to read your classmates' work and discuss it. This is a productive way of

exchanging ideas and getting feedback on your work. If you find, in the course of this work, that you wish to use someone else's idea at some point in your paper (you should never use someone else's idea as your thesis, but there may be times when a classmate's idea would work as a counterargument or other point in your paper), you must credit that person the same way you would credit any other source. On the other hand, if you find yourself reading someone else's paper because you're stuck on an assignment and don't know how to proceed, you may end up creating a problem for yourself because you might unconsciously copy that person's ideas. When you're stuck, make an appointment with your instructor or go to the Writing Center for advice on how to develop your own ideas.

- **Don't save your citations for later**

Never paraphrase or quote from a source without immediately adding a citation. You should add citations in your notes, in your response papers, in your drafts, and in your revisions. Without them, it's too easy to lose track of where you got a quotation or an idea and to end up inadvertently taking credit for material that's not your own.

- **Quote your sources properly**

Always use quotation marks for directly quoted material, even for short phrases and key terms.

- **Keep a source trail**

As you write and revise your essay, make sure that you keep track of your sources in your notes and in each successive draft of your essay. You should begin this process early, even before you start writing your draft. Even after you've handed in your essay, keep all of your research notes and drafts. You ought to be able to reconstruct the path you took from your sources to your notes and from your notes to your drafts and revision. These careful records and clear boundaries between your writing and your sources will help you avoid plagiarism. And if you are called upon to explain your process to your instructor, you'll be able to retrace the path you took when thinking, researching, and writing, from the essay you submitted back through your drafts and to your sources.

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