

Strategies to Avoid Plagiarism

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<https://www.amherst.edu/campuslife/deanstudents/acadhonesty/plagiarism>

Your professors may recommend various guides to the use of sources, such as The Modern Language Association Guide, Gordon Harvey's Writing With Sources, The Chicago Manual of Style, and the guidebook of the American Psychological Association. The Amherst College Library's excellent Web page, "How to Cite," offers lots of information on attribution, including the proper way to cite Internet sources, in-class notes, insightful conversations with friends and advisors, even radio and TV programs.

The material you read for class contains footnotes and bibliographies that show you how to make proper attributions. When in doubt, ask your professor. Once upon a time, professors were college students writing research papers, learning how to do footnotes, to use quotations effectively, to assemble bibliographies. They can help you if you ask. The Writing Center and Quantitative Skills Center can also help you figure out how to use quotations effectively, and point you to good resources.

Responsibility and Inspiration

By far the best preventative measure against plagiarism is the student's engagement with academic assignments. A student who is curious, energetic, and inspired will want to assert his own voice, not slog along dragging the lead weight of another person's work. Nor will he wish to leave his integrity open to question.

Engagement is not always easy. Some assignments are inspiring and others are boring, unimaginative exercises. But a seemingly boring assignment may perk up if a student does the following: (1) goes to the professor and talks it over candidly, seeking a way in to the assignment that allows for more detective-work, criticism, reflection, or creativity; (2) starts a working draft early enough to let it grow and acquire more depth and character; (3) assembles enough research to be able to winnow out the useful from the irrelevant; (4) works on the writing to make it as lively and energetic if possible.

Writers who use quotations effectively do not surrender their thoughts or their personalities to them. They begin and end paragraphs with their own words. They see their writing as a form of teaching or conversation, not as a freight-load of inert information. Even in writing long research papers or honors theses, good writers are more like moderators of discussion than they are mouthpieces for learned elites. They are in charge of the discussion, and can call upon one of the learned elites when they need to.

Tricks of the Trade

Writers, believe it or not, do not always love writing; like most human beings, they often love having written more than the act itself. But sometimes a deadline looms. It is tempting to do yet more research and put off writing, but sooner or later, it's writing-time.

Sometimes writing a preface to a paper, a kind of pre-paper, which allows you to talk about your point of view, your frustrations, or your half-formed hypotheses, draws off negative energy, enabling you then to begin the "real" paper. At its best, a pre-paper may also give you an idea you didn't know you had and allow your voice to come through clearly. In a pre-paper, you can begin sentences with "What I really want to say is...." or "I am most interested in...." as a way to say what you really think. Later, of course, you'll take them out.

One trick that writers use to keep their focus steady is to avoid beginning or ending paragraphs with quotations from others. If you subordinate quotations so that they support your points, they will behave themselves and not devour your ideas.

Another bit of advice for using quotations: introduce them by way of a comment; don't plug them in. Just as you would not make raisin muffins by first baking the muffin and then randomly sticking in the raisins, you want your words and others' words to work together. To keep your energy-level up, have fun with quoting in your first draft. Kid around, be unfair, make us laugh. Referring to a well-known New York Times book reviewer, you might say, "Michiko Kakutani engages in her customary take-no-prisoners rhetoric when she says "..." You can tame your words later.

How Do I Paraphrase?

Paraphrasing or summarizing material from a source is a good way to make use of sources without either surrendering to them or failing to demonstrate that you have used them. The key to good paraphrasing lies in your familiarity with the material. In making your own argument, you can emphasize its most important points. But: paraphrased material still requires citation. Here is an example of good paraphrasing:

In *Searching for Memory*, Daniel Schacter points to a subtle problem related to the experience of "false memory." Even when a patient claims to remember an abusive event that is proved to be historically false, that "memory" may be a "metaphor for... [a] distressing experience" requiring careful and compassionate therapy. His insight that "historical truth" and a patient's "narrative truth" may co-exist helps us see the problem of false memory in more helpful, less black-or-white terms than some other participants in the "false memory" debate. (See Schacter, p. 277.)

Here is an example of paraphrasing that stays too close to Schacter's text, and thus requires either revision or more careful use of quotation marks:

In *Searching for Memory*, Daniel Schacter says that memories of ritual abuse or incest may be metaphors for some other distressing experience, even if those memories are historically wrong. Although an incest memory may be false, it may capture something important about the past that needs good therapy to uncover. A patient's narrative truth should not be entirely discarded. (No further citation.)

Notice how closely the second paraphrase follows Daniel Schacter's wording. Schacter's passage reads as follows:

...When a patient remembers growing up in an abusive satanic cult that did not exist, then we have a belief that defies reality. Even if the ritual abuse memory is a metaphor for some other distressing experience, the memory is historically wrong in a way that most memories are not. But what of a woman who was emotionally brutalized..., then remembers incest when none occurred? The incest memory is illusory, and should be regarded as such, but it may capture something important about the past that should not be dismissed. Historical truth can be respected while at the same time doing justice to a patient's narrative truth. (Schacter, *In Search of Memory*, 277.)

In the second paraphrase, the writer has reproduced Schacter's wording in the main points of the paragraph, merely adding a summary sentence. A professor reading this passage might mark it as suspicious.

Common Knowledge

Although few people in the world in 1492 knew that Christopher Columbus had sailed across the Atlantic to San Salvador, that fact is now common knowledge. Even facts that have not been turned into rhymes for schoolchildren are common knowledge in one's academic community. For example, President John F. Kennedy's visit to the Amherst College in October, 1963, shortly before his assassination, is well-known on this campus. If you were writing a research paper on the President's visit, you would need to make proper attributions of any information beyond the general fact of that historic day: for example, quotations from witnesses to Kennedy's arrival by helicopter, or passages from Kennedy's speeches. But the fact of the visit itself requires no citation; nor do events more generally known, such as elections, assassinations, historical events that received wide commentary, and notorious Hollywood scandals. If a fact or event appears undocumented in at least five sources, it is considered common knowledge.