

HOW TO AVOID PLAGIARISM

Many people inadvertently plagiarize because they do not know the rules of ethical information management and attribution. Below are a few of the steps you should take to make sure you do not violate academic ethics in the preparation of a written assignment. *The key to avoiding plagiarism is complete, accurate, and correct documentation (also called citation) of all sources used in preparation of piece of writing.* This handout is not comprehensive. For further information, consult a writing handbook, your professor, and/or a librarian.

STEP I: Understand your professors' expectations, and ask when you are unsure. *Always be sure you know what documentation format (also called citation format) each professor expects you to use* for giving proper credit to the sources you have consulted. The two most commonly required formats at Lakeland are Modern Language Association (MLA) and American Psychological Association (APA). Other common formats are Turabian and Chicago Style.

STEP II: *Make sure you have access to a current source of information on the documentation format your professor requires.* Most writing handbooks (commonly assigned in English composition classes) cover MLA and APA documentation formats. There are also guides to common formats for source citation in the reference section of the library and on line. The Lakeland library website has documentation guides and also links to documentation guides produced by other institutions. In the information age, documentation formats have been changing fairly rapidly to keep up with technological changes, so be sure your source is explaining the most recent version of the format.

STEP III: Information management: **Keep very, very careful track of all the sources you use, where you found them, and how you are using them.** You should be able to track down each and every piece of source material to the exact place within the exact source from which it came.

A. Keep a record of every source you consult and use. You will need a complete listing of all sources at the end of your paper. This list may be called the bibliography or works cited. All types of sources must be documented, whether they are from the web, a social networking site, or a print source; whether they are visual, verbal, or audio; whether they are personal interviews, TV shows, or movies. A common mistake is to think that material found on the Internet is somehow in the public domain, owned by nobody and thus requiring no documentation. *No matter where you found the source, no matter what kind of source it is, it must be cited in your paper.* The best way to keep records of your sources is to designate a place (note cards, a computer document, a piece of paper) where you list each source consulted. You will save problems and time later if you write down the complete citation for each source as soon as you decide it is something you may use. Figure out what kind of source it is; look up the correct format for citing that source in the guide you chose in Step II; and record the correct and complete citation wherever you are keeping your list of sources.

B. Keep track of *where and when* you found each source. If you found a source on the web, be sure you know where it was. Record the web address (URL). If the source was deep within a particular web site, be sure you can get back to it as well as to the home page of the site. If you found a source on a library database, be sure to note which one. Record as well the date you accessed every electronic source you use, whether from the web, a social network, or a database, as electronic material can change very quickly, and what is available in an electronic location the day you visited it may not be there at all, or may not be in the exact same form, the next hour, let alone the next month or year.

If you are using a chapter of a book, or an article in a book that collects a number of articles (often referred to as a reader or anthology), be sure you keep track of where you read that article. The same goes for articles in newspapers, magazines, or scholarly journals. All citation formats will require you to indicate not only the author(s) and names of articles, but also to provide information about the periodical or book in which you found the article.

You will also need to know which page of a source each piece of information you use comes from. This is particularly true for PDF files and non-electronic sources.

C. Keep track of how you are using each piece of information found within a source. The key categories of use are **summary, quotation, and paraphrase**. A **summary** is in your own words and indicates key points made in a section of the source in a form that is significantly briefer than in the original. Some but not all summarized information will need an *in-text citation* (see Step V, below). A **paraphrase** is in your own words, but it very closely follows what is said in a section of the source. You would paraphrase when you did not need the source's exact words but you wanted to convey the exact same ideas. All paraphrases require in-text citations because they owe a very heavy debt to the source. **Quotations** are the source's precise words and always require an in-text citation. You must always give others credit for their words.

The best way to keep track of both the information you are using and how you are using it is to take notes on your sources. Some of your notes will summarize sources (or parts of them); some may paraphrase; some may quote. In each case, write down which source the information came from and whether it is a summary, paraphrase, or quotation. Most writing handbooks suggest effective ways to take notes on sources.

Step IV: Produce a correctly formatted and organized bibliography that lists every source you used. It is critical that the list be complete and consistent with the rules of the format (MLA, APA, other) that your professor requires.

Step V: Make sure you have an in-text citation for every piece of information that requires it. In-text citations are, as the name suggests, inside your paper. They are the means by which readers know which information came from which sources listed on your bibliography. They are as essential as the bibliography. Each documentation system has its own rules for formatting in-text citations and for which information to include in them. See the attached sheet for a list of situations that require in-text citations.

WHEN SHOULD YOU USE IN-TEXT CITATIONS?

- A. Direct quotations:** These are not your words, so you cannot take credit for them.
- B. Paraphrases (when you are closely representing somebody else's sentences or paragraph, but changing some or all of the words):** You may have changed the words, but if you are conveying somebody else's sequence of points and borrowing their reasoning, then you must give them credit.
- C. Any idea or theory that is not your own:** Intellectual honesty demands that we not take credit for the ideas that we have gotten from others.
- D. Any idea or theory that you came up with on your own and then found somebody else had already published:** You may have had the idea before you read it in an article, but you must still give the person who published the idea before you credit, or risk charges of plagiarism. The idea is the intellectual property of the person who published it first.
- E. Anything controversial:** You want to cover yourself. Let your sources take the heat. In addition, a controversial idea is usually the intellectual property of an individual or organization, and they must get credit for it.
- F. All statistics, whether stated in numbers (fifty-one percent of Americans believe the moon is made of cream cheese) or in words (a majority of Americans believe the moon is made of cream cheese):** Always remember what Mark Twain said about statistics: "there are lies, damned lies, and statistics." Statistics do lie. Research methodology is very often flawed. In polls, the question asked often determines the answer given. There are dozens of others ways in which statistics can be deceptive, as there countless potential flaws in any research model. One reason to cite the sources for all statistics is to cover yourself--you are not responsible for the possible flaws in your statistics; rather, your source is responsible. Of course, a good researcher does his or her best to assess the reliability of the statistics being cited.
- G. All results, whether in statistical terms or not, of any kind of research:** Research methodology is often flawed, and the results are the intellectual property of the people who performed the study.
- H. Any "fact" or claim that is not common knowledge among all the experts on your topic:** For example, if all experts on marriage agree that communication is key to a good marriage, there is no need to cite this fact unless you are quoting or paraphrasing a particular source or citing a particular study. But if one of your sources says that the key to a good marriage is having a big fight at least once every three months, and none of your other sources mentions such a point, this is not common knowledge among all the experts on your topic, and it

must be cited. Of course, in this instance as in many that fall under this category, you would also be citing the source because the claim could be controversial.

Note that “fact” is in quotations marks here because we do not always agree on what the facts are. A fact without quotation marks indicates something on which there is universal or nearly universal consensus, at least among all those with any claim to expertise in the particular field. Once upon a time, it was a fact that the earth was flat because everyone or nearly everyone believed that it was flat. Today it is a fact that the earth is round not only because we have good scientific evidence to prove it but also because there is universal consensus that the earth is round. When the “facts” are in dispute, a writer must tread carefully and document, document, document!