To plagiarize means to include, in your paper or presentation, any information or specific language from an outside source (that is, neither common knowledge nor your own personal knowledge) while failing to document (give credit to) that source.

SOURCES AND INFORMATION YOU MUST DOCUMENT

The basic rule is this: whenever you use information, facts, statistics, opinions, graphics, distinctive language, or ideas from outside sources – whenever you use any words or ideas that you have not thought up yourself – you must give proper credit to the source of that material. The keys to giving credit – and avoiding plagiarism – are quoting properly, paraphrasing and summarizing properly, and documenting (citing) properly; for more about these keys, see the handout “Avoiding Plagiarism 102 - Integrating Source Material.”

THE COMMON KNOWLEDGE EXCEPTION

Virtually all the information you find in outside sources requires documentation. However, one major exception is that you do not have to document common knowledge. Common knowledge is widely known information about current events, famous people, geographical facts, or familiar history. Sometimes it’s difficult to determine whether a piece of information is common knowledge. Information that’s common knowledge in one situation – for one audience – might require documentation in another situation, with a different audience. Suppose the topic of a paper is public works projects. A San Franciscan can assume as common knowledge the fact that it’s possible to walk across the Golden Gate Bridge, while a North Carolina student might have to research and document that information. Check out the flow chart on page 2.

Asking these questions can help:

- **Is this information that you know, or that you would expect others to know, without having to look it up?** For example, you know that there are 50 states in the United States, Ottawa is the capital of Canada, the Renaissance followed the Middle Ages in Europe, the current Dalai Lama is in exile from Tibet, and cats and dogs belong to different species. These facts are common knowledge – even if you sometimes have to refresh your memory about them.

- **Is the information readily available in many sources without documentation?** For example, you might not know that the Iraq War began on March 20, 2003. But, a quick look in a few sources confirms that this historical fact is widely stated and never documented. It is common knowledge. However, if you want to give details about the U.S. invasion, you must document the sources that provide those details. Similarly, you know that Martin Luther King, Jr., admired Gandhi’s approach of non-violent civil disobedience – common knowledge that need not be documented. However, if you quote from King’s writings about Gandhi, you must document your source.

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• **Is the information in a general dictionary?** Suppose you are researching the societal function of urban pocket parks and gardens, and you come across a reference to photosynthesis. If you do not remember the details of the process, you can look up the word in a general dictionary to refresh your memory; you do not need to document that information. If, however, you decide to use the dictionary’s definition in your paper, you must then document the source of the definition.

• **Is it a common saying or expression?** Traditional sayings, nursery rhymes, and other widely known expressions do not require documentation if you can write them down from memory. However, if you have looked up the wording, you ought to document the source you used. One caution: Some popular sayings actually come from Shakespeare or the Bible, and should be documented even if you know them by heart.

• **Is this widely known information about authorship or creation?** You need not document that Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* or that Einstein discovered the general theory of relativity. However, if you quote or paraphrase from *King Lear* or write about Einstein’s ideas, you need to document the sources you consulted.

*If you have asked these questions and are still in doubt about whether information is common knowledge, the safest strategy is to provide documentation.* Keep in mind also that many instructors require students to document all the information they learn in their research; that is, if you personally had to look it up, you need to provide documentation.