

AVOIDING PLAGIARISM: RECOGNIZING COMMON KNOWLEDGE & INTEGRATING SOURCE MATERIAL¹

RECOGNIZING COMMON KNOWLEDGE

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; you can skip to page 3 of this handout for more particulars.

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 flowchart on page 2.

Asking these questions can help:

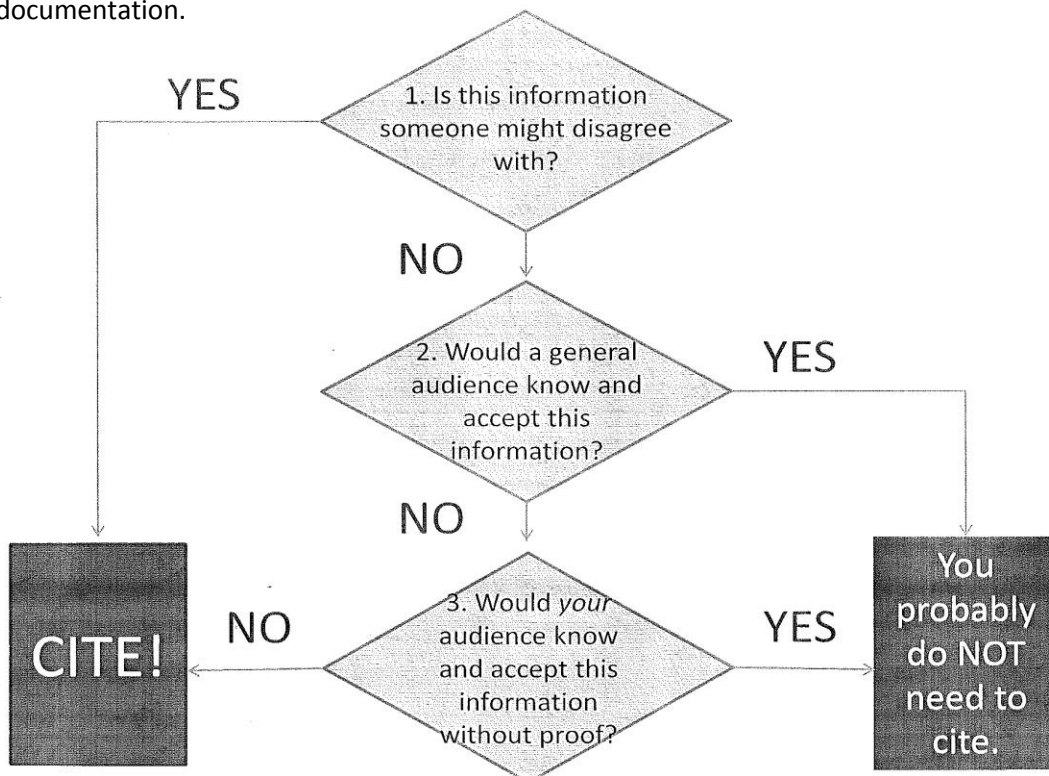
- **Is this information that you know, or that you would expect others to know, without having to look it up?** For example, you would expect most people to know that there are 50 states in the United States, Ottawa is the capital of Canada, the Renaissance followed the Middle Ages in Europe, and cats 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 no one bothers to give a citation. It is

¹ Adapted from Linda Stern, *What Every Student Should Know About...Avoiding Plagiarism*, New York: Pearson Longman, 2006. The Writing Center provides a related handout, "Avoiding Plagiarism 102—Integrating Source Material."

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.

- **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.



INTEGRATING SOURCE MATERIAL & PROVIDING DOCUMENTATION (CITATIONS)

To plagiarize means to include, in your paper or presentation, any information or specific language from an **outside source** while **failing to document (give credit to) that source**.

Essentially, you can integrate material from an outside source into your paper in three ways – through **summary, paraphrase, or quotation**. How you integrate the material can affect how you must document the source for that material and therefore how you avoid plagiarism.

Read on for the guidelines that keep you safe from plagiarism.

WHEN PARAPHRASING OR SUMMARIZING:

A **paraphrase** is a **restatement in your own words**, and using your own sentence structure, of specific ideas or information from a source; paraphrasing is useful when you want to capture certain ideas or details from a source but do not want to quote the source's actual words. A **summary** is a brief description of just the main ideas from your source and should also be **in your own words**.

Guidelines to avoid plagiarizing when you paraphrase or summarize include the following:

- Use your own words **and** sentence structure. You must not repeat the source's words or phrases. (If you *do* repeat the source's words or phrases in your paraphrase or summary, indicate the quoted language with quotation marks.)
- Make sure your readers know when the paraphrase or summary begins and ends.
- Check that your paraphrase or summary accurately restates the source's ideas or information.
- Include an in-text citation, formatted according to the style manual you're using.

WHEN QUOTING:

Quoting a source means using the language of the source **word for word**, to support a statement or idea, to provide an example, to advance an argument, or to add interest to a discussion. The length of a quotation can range from a word or phrase to several paragraphs.

Guidelines to avoid plagiarizing when you quote include the following:

- Copy the material from your source **exactly** as it appears in the original.
- Include an in-text citation, formatted according to the style manual you're using.
- Put **quotation marks** at the beginning and end of the quoted passage, like this:

Writing about the pollution site, Eileen Scott (2012) emailed that she could “smell the fumes every day and they made me sick.”

- If the material you want to quote is long, then leave out the quotation marks and **block indent** the quotation instead, like this:

Discussing the erosion of privacy, Richard Spinello (1997) asks,

What accounts for the government's ineptitude in safeguarding our privacy rights? Is privacy regarded by ordinary citizens and public policy makers as a trivial right unworthy of their attention? Or are we powerless victims of technology that has stripped away our privacy without our ability to recognize what was happening? (p. 9)

EVERY TIME YOU USE AN OUTSIDE SOURCE, whether paraphrasing, quoting or summarizing:

Every time you use an outside source—whether you are quoting, paraphrasing, or summarizing—you need to give credit to—i.e., document or cite—your source in these **two** ways:

- A.** An **in-text citation** or **reference** briefly identifies the source in a format defined by the style manual you're using and points the reader to the complete citation (see item B). A style manual tells you **what** information must be included in the in-text citation. You may have some choices about **how** you incorporate it in your text. For example, if you're using the APA style manual, the in-text citation (in *italics* below) can be split between an introductory **signal phrase** and a **parenthetical citation** at the end of the sentence, or positioned entirely in the parenthetical, as in these examples:

Dr. Isaac Mercer (2015) states that students who performed poorly on final exams were more likely to have deprived themselves of sleep in order to study for their exams (pp. 199-200).

One doctor states that students who performed poorly on final exams were more likely to have deprived themselves of sleep in order to study for their exams (Mercer, 2015, pp. 199-200).

Regardless of location, whether split between the signal phrase and a parenthetical, or all in the parenthetical, all the required elements must be present in your text. This holds true for both APA and MLA style manuals.

- B.** A **complete citation or reference** provides sufficient information for your readers to locate the source for themselves and, like the in-text citation, follows a format defined by the style manual you're using. In most style systems, the complete citation comes at the end of your essay in a list with all your other outside sources. For the source in the examples above, here's how the complete reference would look according to APA requirements:

Mercer, I. (2015). Sleep deprivation in students. *Student Medical*, 2(4), 195-203.

Let's face it—style manual requirements for both in-text and complete citations can be pretty finicky, and it may not always be clear to you what is common knowledge (which doesn't need a citation) and what is drawn from an outside source (which does need a citation). Help is readily available in a Writing Center consultation, or you can check out our handouts:

- "Quotations and Paraphrases"
- "APA In-text References & Sample References List"
- "MLA In-text References and Sample Works-Cited List"
- "Writing a Summary"

Also, you may find the Purdue OWL website helpful.