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Summary:

There are few intellectual offenses more serious than plagiarism in academic and professional contexts. This resource offers advice on how to avoid plagiarism in your work.

Overview and Contradictions

Research-based writing in American institutions, both educational and corporate, is filled with rules that writers, particularly beginners, aren't aware of or don't know how to follow. Many of these rules have to do with research and proper citation. Gaining a familiarity of these rules, however, is critically important, as inadvertent mistakes can lead to charges of **plagiarism**, which is the uncredited use (both intentional and unintentional) of somebody else's words or ideas.

While some rhetorical traditions may not insist so heavily on documenting sources of words, ideas, images, sounds, etc., American academic rhetorical tradition do. A charge of plagiarism can have severe consequences, including expulsion from a university or loss of a job, not to mention a writer's loss of credibility and professional standing. This resource, which does not reflect any official university policy, is designed to help you develop strategies for knowing how to avoid accidental plagiarism. For instructors seeking a key statement on definitions and avoidance on plagiarism, see [Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism: The WPA Statement on Best Practices](#).

(Purdue University students will want to make sure that they are familiar with [Purdue's official academic dishonesty policy](#) as well as any additional policies that their instructors have implemented.)

Intellectual Challenges in American Academic Writing

There are some intellectual challenges that all students are faced with when writing. Sometimes these challenges can almost seem like contradictions, particularly when addressing them within a single paper. For example, American teachers often instruct students to:

Develop a topic based on what has already been said and written

BUT Write something new and original

Rely on experts' and authorities' opinions

BUT Improve upon and/or disagree with those same opinions

Give credit to previous researchers

BUT Make your own significant contribution

Improve your English to fit into a discourse community by building upon what you hear and read

BUT Use your own words and your own voice

For instructor and student documents on preventing plagiarism, please visit [these resources](#) on the Purdue OWL.

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Is It Plagiarism Yet?

There are some actions that can almost unquestionably be labeled plagiarism. Some of these include **buying, stealing, or borrowing a paper** (including, of course, copying an entire paper or article from the Web); **hiring someone to write your paper** for you; and **copying large sections of text** from a source without quotation marks or proper citation.

But then there are actions that are usually in more of a gray area. Some of these include using the words of a source too closely when paraphrasing (where quotation marks should have been used) or building on someone's ideas without citing their spoken or written work. Sometimes teachers suspecting students of plagiarism will consider the students' intent, and whether it appeared the student was deliberately trying to make ideas of others appear to be his or her own.

However, other teachers and administrators may not distinguish between deliberate and accidental plagiarism. So let's look at some strategies for avoiding even suspicion of plagiarism in the first place

When Do We Give Credit?

The key to avoiding plagiarism is to make sure you give credit where it is due. This may be credit for something somebody said, wrote, emailed, drew, or implied. Many professional organizations, including the Modern Language Association and the American Psychological Association, have lengthy guidelines for citing sources. However, students are often so busy trying to learn the rules of MLA format and style or APA format and style that they sometimes forget exactly what needs to be credited. Here, then, is **a brief list of**

what needs to be credited or documented:

- Words or ideas presented in a magazine, book, newspaper, song, TV program, movie, Web page, computer program, letter, advertisement, or any other medium
- Information you gain through interviewing or conversing with another person, face to face, over the phone, or in writing
- When you copy the exact words or a unique phrase
- When you reprint any diagrams, illustrations, charts, pictures, or other visual materials
- When you reuse or repost any electronically-available media, including images, audio, video, or other media

Bottom line, document any words, ideas, or other productions that originate somewhere outside of you.

There are, of course, certain things that do not need documentation or credit, including:

- Writing your own lived experiences, your own observations and insights, your own thoughts, and your own conclusions about a subject
- When you are writing up your own results obtained through lab or field experiments
- When you use your own artwork, digital photographs, video, audio, etc.
- When you are using "common knowledge," things like folklore, common sense observations, myths, urban legends, and historical events (but **not** historical documents)
- When you are using generally-accepted facts, e.g., pollution is bad for the environment, including facts that are accepted within particular discourse communities, e.g., in the field of composition studies, "writing is a process" is a generally-accepted fact.

Deciding if Something is "Common Knowledge"

Generally speaking, you can regard something as common knowledge if you find the same information undocumented in at least five credible sources. Additionally, it might be common knowledge if you think the information you're presenting is something your readers will already know, or something that a person could easily find in general reference sources. But when in doubt, cite; if the citation turns out to be unnecessary, your teacher or editor will tell you.

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Safe Practices

Most students, of course, don't intend to plagiarize. In fact, most realize that citing sources actually builds their credibility for an audience and even helps writers to better grasp information relevant to a topic or course of study. Mistakes in citation and crediting can still happen, so here are certain practices that can help you not only avoid plagiarism, but even

improve the efficiency and organization of your research and writing.

Best Practices for Research and Drafting

Reading and Note-Taking

- In your notes, always mark someone else's words with a big **Q**, for quote, or use big quotation marks
- Indicate in your notes which ideas are taken from sources with a big **S**, and which are your own insights (**ME**)
- When information comes from sources, record relevant documentation in your notes (book and article titles; URLs on the Web)

Interviewing and Conversing

- Take lots of thorough notes; if you have any of your own thoughts as you're interviewing, mark them clearly
- If your subject will allow you to record the conversation or interview (and you have proper clearance to do so through an Institutional Review Board, or IRB), place your recording device in an optimal location between you and the speaker so you can hear clearly when you review the recordings. Test your equipment, and bring plenty of backup batteries and media.
- If you're interviewing via email, retain copies of the interview subject's emails as well as the ones you send in reply
- Make any additional, clarifying notes immediately after the interview has concluded

Writing Paraphrases or Summaries

- Use a statement that credits the source somewhere in the paraphrase or summary, e.g., According to Jonathan Kozol,
- If you're having trouble summarizing, try writing your paraphrase or summary of a text without looking at the original, relying only on your memory and notes
- Check your paraphrase or summary against the original text; correct any errors in content accuracy, and be sure to use quotation marks to set off any exact phrases from the original text
- Check your paraphrase or summary against sentence and paragraph structure, as copying those is also considered plagiarism.
- Put quotation marks around any unique words or phrases that you cannot or do not want to change, e.g., "savage inequalities" exist throughout our educational system (Kozol).

Writing Direct Quotations

- Keep the source author's name in the same sentence as the quote
- Mark the quote with quotation marks, or set it off from your text in its own block, per the style guide your paper follows
- Quote no more material than is necessary; if a short phrase from a source will suffice, don't quote an entire paragraph
- To shorten quotes by removing extra information, use ellipsis points (...) to indicate

omitted text, keeping in mind that:

- In longer quotes where you have omitted sentence in between other complete sentence, maintain terminal punctuation in between the ellipses.
- **Example:** "None of the national reports I saw made even passing references to inequality or segregation. . . . Booker T. Washington was cited with increasing frequency, Du Bois never, and Martin Luther King only with cautious selectivity." (Kozol 3).
- To give context to a quote or otherwise add wording to it, place added words in brackets, []; be careful not to editorialize or make any additions that skew the original meaning of the quote—do that in your main text, e.g.,
 - **OK:** Kozol claims there are "savage inequalities" in our educational system, which is obvious.
 - **WRONG:** Kozol claims there are "[obvious] savage inequalities" in our educational system.
- Use quotes that will have the most rhetorical, argumentative impact in your paper; too many direct quotes from sources may weaken your credibility, as though you have nothing to say yourself, and will certainly interfere with your style

Writing About Another's Ideas

- Note the name of the idea's originator in the sentence or throughout a paragraph about the idea
- Use parenthetical citations, footnotes, or endnotes to refer readers to additional sources about the idea, as necessary
- Be sure to use quotation marks around key phrases or words that the idea's originator used to describe the idea

Maintaining Drafts of Your Paper

Sometimes innocent, hard-working students are accused of plagiarism because a dishonest student steals their work. This can happen in all kinds of ways, from a roommate copying files off of your computer, to someone finding files on a disk or pen drive left in a computer lab. Here are some practices to keep your own intellectual property safe:

- Do not save your paper in the same file over and over again; use a numbering system and the Save As... function. E.g., you might have research_paper001.doc, research_paper002.doc, research_paper003.doc as you progress. Do the same thing for any HTML files you're writing for the Web. Having multiple draft versions may help prove that the work is yours (assuming you are being ethical in how you cite ideas in your work!).
- Maintain copies of your drafts in numerous media, and different secure locations when possible; don't just rely on your hard drive or pen drive.
- Password-protect your computer; if you have to leave a computer lab for a quick bathroom break, hold down the Windows key and L to lock your computer without logging out.
- Password-protect your files; this is possible in all sorts of programs, from Adobe Acrobat to Microsoft word (just be sure not to forget the password!)

Revising, Proofreading, and Finalizing Your Paper

- Proofread and cross-check with your notes and sources to make sure that anything coming from an outside source is acknowledged in some combination of the following ways:
 - In-text citation, otherwise known as parenthetical citation
 - Footnotes or endnotes
 - Bibliography, References, or Works Cited pages
 - Quotation marks around short quotes; longer quotes set off by themselves, as prescribed by a research and citation style guide
 - Indirect quotations: citing a source that cites another source
- If you have any questions about citation, ask your instructor **well in advance** of your paper's due date, so if you have to make any adjustments to your citations, you have the time to do them well

Works Cited

Kozol, Jonathan. *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1992. Print.

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Safe Practices: An Exercise

Read over each of the following passages, and respond on your own or as a class as to whether or not it uses citations accurately. If it doesn't, what would you do to improve the passage so it's properly cited?

1. Last summer, my family and I traveled to Chicago, which was quite different from the rural area I grew up in. We saw the dinosaur Sue at the Field Museum, and ate pizza at Gino's East.
2. Americans want to create a more perfect union; they also want to establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty for everybody.
3. I find it ridiculous that 57% of high school students think their teachers assign too much homework.

Numbers 4, 5, and 6 all refer to the following passage from Martin Luther King's "Letter from the Birmingham Jail":

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes. It is unfortunate that