

AVOIDING PLAGIARISM

The following discussions are taken from *Writing at Yale*, Alfred E. Guy, Jr., and Suzanne Young, the Yale College Writing Center. The first, on why we cite sources, is meant to help you understand the ethical and intellectual issues that underlie the imperative for proper citation. The following sections provide basic guidelines for avoiding plagiarism.

Principles of Citing Sources

When you have questions about specific instances of using sources, we suggest you review these general principles about why scholars acknowledge each other's work.

To Reflect the Intellectual Context

Citing your sources demonstrates your participation in a larger conversation about the topic at hand. If there's one fundamental misunderstanding that many student writers have about acknowledging sources, it's that doing so will lessen the impact of their own contribution. In nearly every case, the effect will be the opposite. Academic scholarship, at its heart, is about the interplay of ideas. Most professors will be much more impressed with your reflection on a pithy quotation than they would be by your turning a pithy phrase itself. Your sources also convey information about the intellectual context of your research. Although the content of a quotation is what's most important, the very sources of the ideas or information you use will help an educated reader understand the implications of your argument. You might get similar information about how a curveball works from a physics textbook or from Tom Seaver's autobiography, but each of these citations lends a different tone to your own ideas.

To Lead Us to Further Research

Academics conceive scholarship as an ongoing and collaborative enterprise. Rather than try to invent a field from scratch, we read what others have discovered and try to build on or extend it in our own work. One scholar's sources can therefore be an invaluable contribution to another's research. So while we read your work looking for your original ideas, we also want help knowing how to pursue related questions and problems. In this way, acknowledging your sources raises the value of your paper inestimably, as it shows readers where they might look to test, explore, and extend your conclusions.

To Give Credit Where it's Due

Most students are familiar with this reason for citing sources: just as you want credit for your writing and ideas, other writers deserve credit for their work. For one thing, recognition is often the only or the primary reward for scholarship, which is not generally a very high-paying line of work. But this economic analogy misses the deeper reason for giving credit. The very project of a university education consists of joining an ongoing conversation about ideas that began in Antiquity. You absolutely cannot participate in this exchange if you pass someone else's words off as your own. Mechanically, it takes only the slightest change to acknowledge your source and then comment on its ideas: add quotation marks and mention the name and you're in business. But these small additions are what distinguish mere copyists from intellectuals.

Occasions for Citing Sources

When must you cite? ALWAYS CITE, in the following cases:

1) When you quote two or more words verbatim, or even one word if it is used in a way that is unique to the source.

Most writers realize that they must acknowledge a source when quoting a memorable phrase or sentence. They'd be sure to credit Mark Twain when quoting: "The coldest winter I ever spent was a summer in San Francisco." And you probably also understand that you do not need to cite words that are very common to your topic. When writing about Hamlet, you do not need to put the words "Hamlet" or "Shakespeare" in quotation marks, or cite a source for them, even though you may have read sources that use these words. But when a single word or two are used in a distinctive way, so that the author is creating a new concept or applying it to a new topic, you must give acknowledge the source. When John Baker redefines the significance of the mirror test by saying that chimpanzees' awareness of their reflection is not full consciousness, but a limited "kinesthetic self-concept," it's clear that those two words, as specialized terms of art, should appear in quotation marks in your paper. Even though neither "kinesthetic" nor "self-concept" is unusual on its own, as a phrase they belong to the author. But even a single, non-specialist term—such as "consilience"—may become tied to an author (in this case, E.O. Wilson) through an influential publication, in which case you should put the single word in quotation marks, at least in your first mention of it in your text.

2) When you introduce facts that you have found in a source.

Facts that are generally accessible (the date of the Declaration of Independence, for instance) need not be cited to a particular source, but once you go up one level of detail on the information ladder, you probably need to cite the source (the number of people who signed the Declaration, for instance). And note that commonly known facts found in a particular or unusual context should be cited, so that the reader knows how your argument may have been influenced by the context in which you found it. For more, see Common Knowledge.

3) When you paraphrase or summarize ideas, interpretations, or conclusions that you find in a source.

One of the decisions you need to make when engaging with a source is whether to quote the source's language directly or to paraphrase it in your own words. Restating a source's idea in your own words may not seem too difficult, but offering a paraphrase that distinguishes your voice from the source's voice *and* furthers your own argument is actually rather challenging. Below are three examples of an attempt to paraphrase the passage from Dennett's *Consciousness Explained*.

The first and second are examples of plagiarism because they both blur the line between the writer's voice and the source idea. The first alters the original without changing its form or content. The second retains long phrases verbatim from the original. Only the third example is an effective and fair paraphrase: The writer marks the boundaries between her voice and the source's

voice, and she puts the source's idea to work in service of her own argument. Reading these examples should help you to see how to make paraphrase an effective strategy for building an argument grounded in sources.

Below is the original passage as it appears on page 39 of Daniel Dennett's *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1991).

Almost all researchers in cognitive science, whether they consider themselves neuroscientists or psychologists or artificial intelligence researchers, tend to postpone questions about consciousness by restricting their attention to the "peripheral" and "subordinate" systems of the mind/brain, which are deemed to feed and service some dimly imagined "center" where "conscious thought" and "experience" take place. This tends to have the effect of leaving too much of the mind's work to be done "in the center," and this leads theorists to underestimate the "amount of understanding" that must be accomplished by the relatively peripheral systems of the brain. For instance, theorists tend to think of perceptual systems as providing "input" to some central thinking arena, which in turn provides "control" or "direction" to some relatively peripheral systems governing bodily motion. This central arena is thought to avail itself of material held in various relatively subservient systems of memory. But the very idea that there are important theoretical divisions between such presumed subsystems as "long-term memory" and "reasoning," (or "planning") is more an artifact of the divide-and-conquer strategy than anything found in nature.

Paraphrase 1

Most cognitive scientists, whether they are neuroscientists or psychologists or artificial intelligence researchers, tend to avoid questions about consciousness by focusing mainly on peripheral and subordinate systems of the mind/brain, which are thought to assist a mysterious center where consciousness and subjective experience happen. The effect of this is to leave too much of the mind's work for the center, and this means that theorists understate how much understanding must be done by the outer systems of the brain (Dennett 39).

Cosmetic changes don't cut it: The writer of this Paraphrase 1 has plagiarized from the original because she has simply replaced the words of the original with synonymous words and phrases, instead of rewriting the key ideas in her own words. She takes the structure of the original for her own, including the phrasing of the original's sentences (the same introductory and main clause structures) and the overall movement from sentence to sentence. This kind of cosmetic changing that leaves the original intact is unacceptable.

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Why (good) paraphrase is important: If you need to stay close to the original, then quote the passage directly. It is often the case, however, that you do not need to include all the information from the original in your own essay. If you do not need all the information in the original, do a fair paraphrase that represents the essence of the original’s idea, but leaves out what is unnecessary to your own project. For example, it is unlikely that, in your own argument, you need to include the list “neuroscientists or psychologists or artificial intelligence researchers”; these titles are part of Dennett’s particular argument (he’s trying to say something about how widespread he thinks this phenomenon is in the sciences). A fair, careful paraphrase allows you to incorporate the essence of a source’s insight without also incorporating the author’s peripheral claims or comments that don’t relate to your argument.

Signal the shift from your own voice to the source’s: The reader assumes that any word or phrase that is not in quotation marks represents your own thinking, unless you signal otherwise. Imagine the faulty paraphrase dropped into a larger paragraph from the writer’s essay and you’ll see how the reader could move from the writer’s argument right into Dennett’s idea without even knowing that a transition in voice had taken place. This is because the writer has not signaled the shift to another’s voice. The only ways to signal this are: a) to quote directly, in which case the quotation marks signal the shift; or b) to announce through a signal phrase that the subsequent idea (though paraphrased in your own words) belongs to someone else: “Dennett points out that when theorists . . .” Always mark the boundary between your own voice and the voice/idea of the source with such a signal phrase. You should also give the page number from which your paraphrase came, but this doesn’t absolve you of the need to represent the idea in your own words and signal the shift in voice from your own to the source’s.

Paraphrase 2

The problem with cognitive science today is that researchers focus on the peripheral and subordinate systems of the mind/brain without clarifying how these are connected to the brain’s center, the place where conscious thought and experience take place. The result is that they leave too much of the mind’s work to be done in some dimly imagined “center.” This fuzziness about whether there is a control center leads them to underplay the mind’s work that must be accomplished by the relatively peripheral systems of the brain (Dennett 39).

Using un-cited language from the original to create a patchwork is plagiarism: It may be more difficult to see why Paraphrase 2 is plagiarism. After all, the writer has indicated many of Dennett's distinctive words and phrases with quotation marks. But as shown below, the writer of Paraphrase 2 has taken phrases verbatim from the original, rearranged them somewhat, and woven them into the fabric of her own writing—without attributing them to the source. This is called “mosaic” or “patchwork” plagiarism. It does not matter that more of this phrasing is her own than was the case in Paraphrase 1; she has still borrowed significant patches of direct language from Dennett without attribution. Remember that using more than two words in a row from a source without attribution is considered plagiarism.

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Paraphrase 2: The problem with cognitive science today is that researchers focus on the peripheral and subordinate systems of the mind/brain without clarifying how these are connected to the brain’s center, the place where conscious thought and experience take place. The result is that they leave too much of the mind’s work to be done in some dimly imagined “center.” This fuzziness about whether there is a control center leads them to underplay the mind’s work that must be accomplished by the relatively peripheral systems of the brain (Dennett 39).

If you don’t use quotation marks, you imply that the language is your own: Although the writer’s rephrasing of the source’s idea suggests that she has a better understanding of it than did the writer of Paraphrase 1, she is still far too close to the original. In order for this to be a legitimate paraphrase, the writer would need to restate the core of the idea in her own words and to craft sentences with a new structure. Even though Paraphrase 2 cites Dennett, the fact that there are no quotation marks leads the reader to think that this is the writer’s own language. The key principle to remember is that where you do not use quotation marks, the reader assumes that you are the author of all the words in your paper.

Paraphrase 3

Dennett points out that when theorists take a “divide-and conquer” strategy by focusing narrowly on a given subsystem of the brain/mind, their theoretical models implicitly assume a center of consciousness that has not been proven to exist. By leaving in place the Cartesian notion of a

control center, the models may underestimate the work that these supposedly “peripheral” systems perform (39).

Take the pith of the original: Paraphrase 3 is a strong and fair paraphrase because it captures the essence of Dennett’s idea – that scientists still assume a “control center” in their research – in the writer’s own words. The sentence structure and flow from sentence to sentence is unique to the writer, rather than following the original too closely. Paraphrase 3 is also shorter than the original – another good sign, since an effective paraphrase takes the pith of the original and leaves behind secondary commentary or asides in the original source.

Signal the boundaries between your voice and the source’s voice: In Paraphrase 3, the writer has carefully signaled the place where the source’s idea begins and ends, so that if we imagine this paraphrase in a larger paragraph of the writer’s own, we would have no doubt about the boundaries between the two voices.

Own the material: Paraphrase 3, through its analytical confidence, shows that the writer truly understands the original and is making use of it. Instead of slavishly following the original, she has assimilated the idea into her own thinking and transformed it through that understanding. The writer of Paraphrase 3 is using her restatement of Dennett’s idea as an occasion to further her own idea about how our conventional notion of consciousness needs to change. This paraphrase is pointed in a direction – the direction of the writer’s argument. We can see this in the way that the writer has distilled the original for her own purposes. And we can also see it in the heightened language of the phrase “supposedly ‘peripheral’ systems,” the dynamic signal phrase “Dennett points out,” and in the writer’s use of her own keyterms, all of which alert us to the writer’s point of view.

Use keyterms to translate the source’s idea into your essay’s idiom: The writer of Paraphrase 3 introduces a term (“divide-and-conquer”) that Dennett uses earlier in the book chapter as a useful metaphor to capture the idea for the reader. And she has introduced a term of her own – “Cartesian notion of a control center” – that is informed by, but not unique to, Dennett’s discussion. A strong paraphrase uses the writer’s own keyterms – keyterms that have appeared earlier in the essay and will reappear after the paraphrase – to summarize the core of the source so that the reader understands how Dennett’s idea contributes to the writer’s unfolding argument. These keyterms help the reader to line up the source idea alongside the other ideas the writer has already introduced into her argument. They contribute to the overall sense that the writer’s ideas are developing in relation to, not separately from, the source’s ideas.

4) When you introduce information that is not common knowledge or that may be considered common knowledge in your field, but the reader may not know it.

If you are familiar with the notion of “common knowledge” from earlier writing experiences, you may have noticed that its definition is easy to state, but can be hard to apply in a particular case. The “common” way to talk about common knowledge is to say that it is knowledge that most educated people know or can find out easily in an encyclopedia or dictionary. Thus, you might not know the date of the most recent meeting of the Federal Reserve, but you can find it out quite easily. Further, the term “common knowledge” carries the sense of “communal” knowledge—it is community information that no particular individual can fairly claim to own. One sign that something is community knowledge is that it is stated in 5 or more sources. So, if it’s known to educated people, or can be easily looked up, or appears in many sources, it is likely to be “common knowledge” and so does not need to be cited.

But here is where things become tricky: As you write papers in college and move deeper into your field of study, what counts as common knowledge becomes much less clear. Within a given discipline, there is a body of common knowledge that an outsider (even an educated college student who doesn’t happen to be in your field) might not know. For example, within psychology, it is common knowledge that chimpanzees recognize themselves in a mirror; in literature, it is common knowledge that James Joyce is a major modernist author. In referring to the mirror test or calling James Joyce a modernist, you wouldn’t need to cite anyone. But as soon as you begin to say something, for instance, about what the results of the mirror test mean for a model of consciousness, you would need to cite a source. The point, then, is to think about your audience: What has been said in the class or repeated in textbooks and other sources often enough to suggest that it is common knowledge within the discipline?

Because the notion of “common knowledge” is ambiguous and depends on context, you should always check with a professor or TF if you have any doubts. Some reference books will say “if in doubt, cite it,” but you don’t want to over-cite, so check with your readers to try to fix the line between common and specialized knowledge.

Sometimes you become so conversant in a subject that you can explain complex theories, methodologies, or historical timelines without reference to a source. You may notice this phenomenon as you research and write your senior essay. At this point, you’re becoming an expert in the field and things may start to seem obvious to you that are not obvious to an intelligent lay reader. You will want to check with your department about the level of expertise you’re expected to assume; you may also want to show your writing to a Residential College Writing Tutor, a Writing Partner, or a friend who’s a good reader. As a senior essay writer, you will probably need to cite less than you used to, but more than you may think.

This advice about “common knowledge” is true for all disciplines—think about your audience and the course attitude, recognize when you’re writing as an expert, and always check with professors if you’re in doubt. The sciences, however, have a somewhat different notion of “common knowledge,” coming partly out of research practice and partly out of more collaborative work

methods. Ideas, findings, and methodologies that are new knowledge (and therefore specialized rather than common knowledge) become old knowledge more quickly in the sciences. The answer, again, is to consider the messages you're getting from the course about what concepts are common or foundational, and to check in with professors or TFs.

5) When you borrow the plan or structure of a larger section of a source's argument (for example, using a theory from a source and analyzing the same three case studies that the source uses).

You may not be used to thinking of the plan of a source as proprietary to its author, but if you follow a source's plan too closely without acknowledging that you saw it there first, you're presenting as your own an analysis that someone else shaped. For example, if use Mark Hauser's discussion of primates' knowledge of other minds from *Wild Minds* and you discuss the same three experiments that he analyzes, then you must acknowledge this debt. The simplest way to do this is to say "Like Mark Hauser, I find the three experiments carried out by X, Y, and Z groups to be useful in considering the extent of chimpanzee awareness." An even better way – because it highlights your distinctiveness as a writer – is to distinguish the different use to which you will put the analysis. If, for instance, you're focusing on primate social skills rather than strictly on their awareness of other minds, you might write: "Mark Hauser examines three experiments carried out by X, Y, and Z for what they can tell us about knowledge of other minds. For my purposes, though, these same experiments shed important light on the social capacities of primates." These statements can come in a discursive footnote or in the main body, although if the statement distinguishes your argument from the source's, it has an important role in the body of the argument.

See Gordon Harvey, *Writing With Sources*, Chapter 3, for an excellent discussion of unfair borrowing of another's plan.

6) When you build on another's method found either in a source or from collaborative work in a lab.

Relying on someone's research method is like #5 above – borrowing a text's plan or structure. If your approach to a problem is inspired by someone else's work on a similar or analogous case, credit the original researcher. Building on the work of others is appropriate and desirable, but methods, like specific words and phrases, are a form of intellectual property.

7) When you build on another's program or on a not-commonly-known algorithm in writing computer code.

Although writing code may seem different from writing papers, the same standards of acknowledgment apply. If you rely on someone else's program, you must credit that person. Some software algorithms are so well known that they rise to the level of Common Knowledge. Programmers use such pieces of code without acknowledgement. But if the code is not well known, someone reading your program might think you've authored parts that are borrowed. For

a useful example of unauthorized code borrowing, see this page of the Princeton University [website](#).

8) When you collaborate with others in producing knowledge.

You may sometimes co-author a paper or other text during college; these opportunities are often more frequent in the professional world. When two or more people all contribute substantially to a piece, they normally list all their names as authors. But there are also occasions when someone gives help that does not rise to the level of co-authorship. If you work with a lab partner to set up an experiment, for instance, but run and analyze the results yourself, you should credit the lab partner in a footnote or by reference within your paper. Similarly, if you and a partner present a scene from a play, and you later write a paper using some of the insights you gained during production, you should credit the other actor.

University life is structured so that your ideas will receive constant testing and refinement in discussion with others. You do not need to cite in your papers every conversation you have about the ideas or evidence. But you do need to develop a judgment about which conversations are incidental and which result in ideas that merit reference in your texts. If you take this warning as an opportunity, and make an effort to reveal the trail of your thinking in footnotes and acknowledgements, you'll soon develop a sense of how to credit collaboration appropriately.