



The Academic Resource Center
At Wheeling Jesuit University
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How Do I Use Sources Without Plagiarizing?

In writing papers for courses at WJU, your professors will often require you to substantiate your ideas with outside support: the authoritative corroboration of published articles and books. The catch here is that those outside sources and their ideas must never be mistaken for your own. This mistake, whether conscious or not, is the kind of mistake that can end what promised to be a beautiful semester—or career. Consider yourself warned: professors feel about plagiarism the way patriots feel about flag burning. You're in some serious trouble if you plagiarize.

First, A Useful Analogy

It may be helpful to think about why we even have to discuss this topic. It can all be traced back to professors assigning research-based writing:

- Because good writing skills are highly valued at Wheeling Jesuit University as one of the educational “products” of liberal arts education
- To underscore the importance of good critical thinking and sound methods for continuing your own education: you're being taught how to learn so that you can keep doing so when you leave WJU.

But the most important reason professors assign research-based writing isn't because they like to see you suffer (remember—they suffer at least as much when they spend their weekends grading the papers they've assigned). An analogy may be useful to help illustrate why faculty want you to write: professors need to know that you are absorbing information in ways other than a multiple-choice or essay exam can reflect.

To measure your knowledge, professors could have each of you sit down with them, one at a time, in their offices for an hour or two, so you can talk through a particular topic that you might otherwise have written about in a paper. Picture yourself in such a conference. Would you walk in with a pile of textbooks and read large sections one after another to the professor and then leave? Despite the clarity of knowing exactly where each piece of information came from, how would your professor know if you actually *understood* anything you'd just said aloud?

Instead, you'd go into that conference with a few notes on the sources of your ideas and an expectation that, most of the time, you'll be communicating with the professor in your own words (even when you're less than totally authoritative or confident in

using your own words to express the concepts of your topic). You'd occasionally give credit to an author for an idea, but the professor, after an hour, would have a pretty good sense either that you know what you're talking about or that you don't.

A research paper ought to perform the same function. Most professors don't have the time to sit down individually with each student in each class for such in-depth conferences. But they don't need to: that's what a research-based essay accomplishes. Or, at least, that's what it can accomplish when plagiarism isn't an issue. Unfortunately, when it becomes an issue, it's usually because students haven't taken enough care with the way they have used and presented the materials or sources they have researched.

Degrees of Plagiarism:

The Unquoted Quote

- ✓ You come across something in an article that says just what you need, and next thing you know, the author's words are in the text of your paper. But:
 - You haven't identified them as the author's words.
 - You haven't put quotes around the author's words.
 - You haven't cited the author's words.
 - You've presented the author's words as your own.

Risks:

- ✓ Your professor knows this topic and may know this author's work as well, recognizing these unquoted words as the author's and not your own.
- ✓ The author writes better, or differently, than you, making the passage stand out as not yours.

Boom, you're caught: now you must explain intellectual theft (another name for plagiarism). It is not enough to use the author's words and then merely cite to give credit. If you've used not only the ideas but also the exact words and phrases the author used, you need to quote the material before citing it. Nothing less will satisfy the plagiarism police.

Hint:

- ✓ Changing a word is not paraphrasing; it is deceit. Read a passage until you understand it, then close the book and then write it in your own words. They won't be as good as the author's, but your professor will know they are yours. At the end of the idea, cite the author.

The Uncited Idea

- ✓ Even if you are expressing the author's idea in your own words, you're going to need to cite the author to give credit for the idea or concept.
- ✓ This does not mean that you have to cite every single thing that you don't know. Just because you didn't know that the Japanese invaded Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 doesn't mean that you need to cite the source that told you. Any source would tell you the same information; thus this would be considered **general or public knowledge**.
- ✓ However, if you come across a source that tells you the invasion of Pearl Harbor was the turning point in the twentieth-century relations between the United States and the Far East, you'll need to cite your source: this is a specific historian's understanding of the invasion, i.e., an opinion.
- ✓ Any analytical position (i.e., opinion) must be cited.
- ✓ All statistics must be cited.

A Few Words to the Wise

- ✓ To acknowledge outside sources, do not cite and quote everything. This is your paper; you're not a medieval scribe, copying other's words and ideas.
- ✓ A research paper is not an opportunity to take all your note cards and, in essence, tape them to the paper one after another until you've used them all.
- ✓ Have a vision of what you want to say in a paper, a paragraph, or a sentence, and always see if you have the words to say it yourself before resorting to the author's own words.
- ✓ Cite where ever appropriate; quote when necessary.
- ✓ Well-placed quotes give *your* ideas greater resonance. Too many quotes, whether they are well placed or not, tend to give your paper *away*: it's no longer yours.
- ✓ You should strive to take control of the ideas in the paper and make them your own, and use outside support as a way of having the recognized authorities on the topic say, "You know, this student is absolutely *right*."