

Avoiding Plagiarism *

As you develop subheads and additional structuring devices for your argument, it is crucial to keep in mind the concept that you are contributing to an ongoing conversation with other scholars, critics, and people concerned about your topic. Every single one of your sources is an important participant, and when you are writing a research-based argument using a large number of texts, you need to know how to work with those sources appropriately and effectively. We like to think of working with sources as responding to people whose work we **cite**—or quote—as a way of including them in the dialogue. Think to yourself, “I speak my part, I refer to another person’s view, and I provide a citation of the statement.” With research papers, you are having a conversation with an entire room of people, introducing each person in turn, and serving as the moderator.

This notion of including your sources as people, as the cast of characters for your research paper, can help you avoid **plagiarism**, or using another person’s idea as your own. The etymological origin of *plagiarism*, according to scholars Peter Morgan and Glenn Reynolds, concerns stealing someone’s work. In classical times, imitation was not a crime. But with the invention of printing technology, copyright law, and a cultural emphasis on intellectual property as profitable came a concern about taking someone else’s ideas—and hence their earning potential—whether intentionally or unintentionally. The consequent demand for originality in writing, which continues in academic and professional circles today, is linked to profit margins, and explains why plagiarism remains a punishable act. Understanding the history and significance of using other ideas as your own, you can better avoid the danger of taking someone’s work as your own.

In addition to watching out for plagiarism for historical, economically based reasons, there is also an even more compelling, ethical reason for keeping the conversation model in mind. As you work with sources, realize that the claims you are able to make are in fact based on the foundation provided by others. Identifying your sources thus becomes a writing strategy that you need to implement out of respect for those who

The writing of history is a rich process of building on the work of the past with the hope that others will build on what you have done. Through footnotes you point the way to future historians.

—Doris Kearns Goodwin

→ YOUR
ETHOS

have come before you. By acknowledging their names, ideas, and words, you contribute to a body of knowledge by graciously thanking those who have paved the way. So while there are legal issues related to intellectual property, copyright law, and “fair use” that you need to know about, if you keep the *respect principle* in mind, it is unlikely that you’ll fall into the trap of inadvertently “stealing” someone’s work.

You can get started on including your sources by name in your research paper by listing them right in your detailed outline at appropriate places. Include direct quotations where possible; **don’t** forget to cite your sources for both **paraphrase** and **quotations**. **Make sure you include the full names of your sources;** cite them as people and put in page numbers wherever possible to practice responsible and respectful writing strategies.

Student Writing ✦

Look at Matt Niles’s detailed research outline including sources and quotations for his project on Abercrombie and Fitch. www.ablongman.com/envision064

COLLABORATIVE CHALLENGE

Watch Michael Moore’s *Bowling for Columbine* (2002). Together with two or three peers, create an outline for one section of the film. In other words, compose your best approximation of the outline that the film editors used, so that you can show Moore’s strategic insertion of “primary” or “secondary” sources. Once you have finished, look at your outline and consider the following questions: Where does the film use primary sources? Where does it use secondary sources? How does Moore convey his own opinion? How does he respond to the secondary sources and then assert his own point of view? Have each person in the group play the role of a different character in the film in order to see the way in which the sources are real, live people.

“The term ‘plagiarism’ came from the word *plagiarius*, which literally meant ‘kidnapper.’”

—Peter Morgan and Glenn Reynolds



A Closer Look

Purdue’s Online Writing Lab’s page on plagiarism offers not only definitions but exercises designed to help writers identify and avoid citation problems.

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