



Academic Support Center

Avoiding Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the representation of a source's words or ideas as one's own. Plagiarism occurs when a writer fails to supply quotation marks for exact quotations; fails to cite the sources of his or her ideas; or adopts the phrasing of his or her sources, with minor changes in grammar or word choice.

ACCORDING TO THE RIVIER UNIVERSITY HANDBOOK:

Plagiarism and cheating are serious breaches of academic honesty. In general, plagiarism is defined as the presentation of someone else's work in whatever form: copyrighted material, notes, film, art work, reports, statistics, bibliographies, and the like, as one's own, and failing to acknowledge the true source. Quoting word-for-word, or almost so, or using the argumentation of another source without acknowledging this dependence also constitutes plagiarism. Cheating is defined as the giving or attempting to give or to receive unauthorized information or assistance during an examination or in completing an assigned project. Submission of a single work for two separate courses without the permission of the instructors involved is also a form of cheating.

If students are unsure whether a specific course of action would constitute plagiarism or cheating, they should consult with their instructor in advance.

Penalties for plagiarism and cheating vary with the degree of the offense and may take the form of the following academic sanctions:

- the grade of F for the work in question;
- the grade of F for the course;
- notification of the divisional dean and/or Associate Vice President for Student Success of the misconduct of the students;
- recommendations that the student be suspended or dismissed from the University.

In academic writing, the following standards are expected:

- Writers who use the exact words of a source will use quotation marks at the beginning and end of the quotation, so the reader can know where the voice of the source begins and ends.
- Writers must use parenthetical references, footnotes, or endnotes to cite the source, so the reader can consult that source if he or she chooses.
- In addition to acknowledging the sources of words, writers must also acknowledge the sources of ideas, even when they are not quoting word for word.
- Writers may not paraphrase a source by using its original phrases and sentences, with only a few minor changes in grammar or word choice—even when the source is cited.

When do I need quotation marks?

If you take words from a source, you need to put those words in quotation marks. The cut-off is generally three words; that is, if you have three words in a row from your source, use quotation marks. Otherwise, they're unnecessary. But that might also depend on the nature of the words. If you're writing three ordinary words that both you and the author happen to have used, the quotation marks would seem silly (e.g., Ebert likes the new movie, "but others say" it isn't as good.). If you use even one very distinct word or if you're borrowing an unusual usage of a more ordinary word, you might want to credit the source, since you would have been unlikely to use that word in that way on your own.

When do I need a citation?

Every quote needs a citation, either in parentheses or as a footnote or endnote (the decision about which format to use for your citation depends on the class and the teacher). But you also need to use citations to give credit for ideas or facts that you took from a particular author. So you might need a citation even if you don't need quotation marks.

What about "common knowledge?"

The problem with common knowledge is that what's commonly known in one discipline is not commonly known in others, and what's commonly known by experts in a field (like your teacher) is not commonly known by novices (like you). One way to think about common knowledge is to notice which facts seem to be the same in all the sources: if everyone agrees on the year in which the Declaration of Independence was signed, you probably don't need a citation for that even if *you* weren't sure about it until you did your research. If certain facts are difficult to track down or treated differently in your various sources, you'll definitely want to cite the source for those facts. Hard and fast "facts" are more likely to be common knowledge than broader ideas: reasonable experts would agree on the year when President Obama took office while disagreeing on the causes of his victory. Cite your source for the causes, but you may not need a citation for the year. And *definitely* check with your teacher; his or her definition of common knowledge is the one that matters for your paper in that class.

What if there's a quote inside of my quote?

Use double quotation marks around the entire excerpt, with single quotation marks around the quote inside the quote (e.g., "The attitude among tax cheats seems to be 'I won't get caught.'")

Should I paraphrase instead of using direct quotations?

Paraphrases are preferred in some disciplines while quotes are preferred in others—check with your professor on his/her preferences.

Be careful when you paraphrase. Novices in a field tend to find sentences that seem to include useful information and try to say the idea from that sentence in new words, in order to avoid extensive quoting. Such a paraphrase is likely to use basically the same sentence structure with

a few words and phrases replaced by synonyms—a result which many faculty would consider to be plagiarism, although it is sometimes more accurately described as “patchwriting.” To avoid patchwriting, try not to paraphrase individual sentences. Instead, read your entire source or at least a two or three-page section from the source. Put the source aside and think about what the author was trying to say, as if you wanted to explain it to your mother. Write that. You might also write down some of the information that supports that statement, again without looking back at the original source. What you’ve done now is much more likely to be in your own words, rather than a mix of your language and the author’s original sentence.

How can I know if my paraphrases are OK?

Read it out loud to yourself. Does it sound like you? Are you saying things that you’ve learned about the topic and saying them in ways that you might say them if you were sitting in class, writing an essay test, rather than writing a paper at home with your sources spread around you? If it passes the read-aloud test, your chances are pretty good that it’s your own work. If it doesn’t sound like you or if you’re not sure what some of the phrases mean, you’re almost certainly in trouble. In that case, you need to spend more time on the topic until you understand it well enough to say it in your own words.

When do I need a reference page?

If you’ve used citations in your paper, you need a reference list of some kind unless your instructor tells you otherwise. Every source that’s cited in your paper should be listed on your reference page. Conversely, if you found sources that you didn’t cite in your paper, you normally are not allowed to include them on your reference page.

Anything else I need to know?

When in doubt, the absolutely best advice is always to ask your instructor.