7.1: An Overview of Quotations

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Figure 7.1 Citation Needed

One of the most important skills you can develop as a student is the ability to use outside sources correctly and smoothly. Academic knowledge builds on the knowledge of others. When we cite others through our quotations and paraphrases, we start with ideas established by others and build upon them to develop our own ideas.

Specifically, this section will offer answers to these questions:

1. **What is a quotation?**

2. **When should I quote?**
3. How long should a quotation be?

4. What is a paraphrase?

5. When should I paraphrase?

6. What is effective paraphrasing?

7. When does paraphrasing become plagiarism?

8. How do I use signal phrases to introduce quotations and paraphrases?

9. How do I make a quotation work with the grammar of my own sentence?

10. How do I make a quotation work with the grammar of my own sentence if I am not quoting a complete sentence?

11. What punctuation should I use with quotations?

12. What is plagiarism?

13. Why should I cite?

14. How can I avoid plagiarism?

15. What is common knowledge?

16. What is MLA?

17. How do I format references?

18. What do I do if my source differs from the basic pattern for a reference?

19. How do I format in-text citations?

1. WHAT IS A QUOTATION?

A quotation is one way you may make use of a source to support and illustrate points in your essay. A quotation is made up of exact words from the source, and you must be careful to let your reader know that these words were not originally yours. To indicate your reliance on exact words from a source, either place the borrowed words between quotation marks or if the quotation is four lines or more, use indentation to create a block quotation.

Once you have determined that you want to use a quotation, the following strategies will help you smoothly fit quotations into your writing. We will discuss these strategies in more detail later in this chapter.

- Signal phrases help you integrate quoted material into your essay.
- Quotations must be made to work within the grammar of your sentences, whether you are quoting phrases or
2. WHEN SHOULD I QUOTE?

Quote when the exact wording is necessary to make your point. For example, if you were analyzing the style choices in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, you would quote because it would be important to illustrate the unforgettable language or to use exact wording in a discussion of word choice and sentence structure. You would also quote if the exact wording captures information, tone, or emotion that would be lost if the source were reworded. Use quotations to assist with conciseness if it would take you longer to relate the information if you were to put it into your own words. Finally, if you cannot reword the information yourself and retain its meaning, you should quote it.

Source: It has begun. It is awful—continuous and earthquakeing.

Quoting to preserve emotion: One nurse described an exchange between the two sides as “awful—continuous and earthquakeing” (Burton 120).

3. HOW LONG SHOULD A QUOTATION BE?

Quote only as many words as necessary to capture the information, tone, or expression from the original work for the new context that you are providing. Lengthy quotations actually can backfire on a writer because key words from the source may be hidden among less important words. In addition, your own words will be crowded out. Never quote a paragraph when a sentence will do; never quote a sentence when a phrase will do; never quote a phrase when a word will do.

Source: It has begun. It is awful—continuous and earthquakeing.

Quoting everything: One nurse described an artillery exchange between the two sides. She wrote, “It has begun. It is awful—continuous and earthquakeing” (Burton 120).

Quoting key words: One nurse described an artillery exchange between the two sides as “awful—continuous and earthquakeing” (Burton 120).

4. WHAT IS A PARAPHRASE?

A paraphrase preserves information from a source but does not preserve its exact wording. A paraphrase uses vocabulary and sentence structure that is largely different from the language in the original. A paraphrase may preserve specialized vocabulary shared by everyone in a field or discipline; otherwise, the writer paraphrasing a source starts fresh, creating new sentences that repurpose the information in the source so that the information plays a supportive role in its new location.
5. WHEN SHOULD I PARAPHRASE?

Paraphrase when information from a source can help you explain or illustrate a point you are making in your own essay, but when the exact wording of the source is not crucial.

**Source:** The war against piracy cannot be won without mapping and dividing the tasks at hand. I divide this map into two parts: that which anyone can do now, and that which requires the help of lawmakers.

**Paraphrase:** Researchers argue that legislators will need to address the problem but that other people can get involved as well (Lessig 563).

If you were analyzing Lessig’s style, you might want to quote his map metaphor; however, if you were focusing on his opinions about the need to reform copyright law, a paraphrase would be appropriate.

6. WHAT IS EFFECTIVE PARAPHRASING?

**Effective paraphrasing** repurposes the information from a source so that the information plays a supportive role in its new location. This repurposing requires a writer to rely on her own sentence structure and vocabulary. She creates her own sentences and chooses her own words so the source’s information will fit into the context of her own ideas and contribute to the development of her thesis.

**Source:** Citizens of this generation witnessed the first concerted attempt to disseminate knowledge about disease prevention and health promotion, downplaying or omitting altogether information about disease treatment.

**Effective Paraphrase:** Murphy pointed out that in the first half of the nineteenth century, people worked hard to spread information about how to prevent disease but did not emphasize how to treat diseases (415).

7. WHEN DOES PARAPHRASING BECOME PLAGIARISM?

A paraphrase should use vocabulary and sentence structure different from the source’s vocabulary and sentence structure. Potential plagiarism occurs when a writer goes through a sentence from a source and inserts synonyms without rewriting the sentence as a whole.

**Source:** Citizens of this generation witnessed the first concerted attempt to disseminate knowledge about disease prevention and health promotion, downplaying or omitting altogether information about disease treatment.

**Potential plagiarism:** People of this period observed the first organized effort to share information about preventing disease and promoting health, deemphasizing or skipping completely information about treating diseases (Murphy 141).

The sentence structure of the bad paraphrase is identical to the sentence structure of the source, matching it almost word for word. The writer has provided an in-text citation pointing to Murphy as the source of the information, but she is, in fact, plagiarizing because she hasn’t written her own sentence.
8. HOW DO I USE SIGNAL PHRASES TO INTRODUCE QUOTATIONS AND PARAPHRASES?

Use signal phrases that mention your source to help your reader distinguish between the source and your own ideas. Do not drop quotes into your paper with no setup or explanation. This is your paper and your arguments must be supported; this includes showing how the quote or paraphrase connects to and proves your ideas. A signal verb introduces the quote that is coming and indicates your stance towards the material.

Figure 7.2 Some Sample Signal Verbs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledge</th>
<th>Emphasize</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admit</td>
<td>Illustrate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Note</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argue</td>
<td>Observe</td>
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<td>Assert</td>
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<td>Claim</td>
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<td>Comment</td>
<td>State</td>
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<tr>
<td>Compare</td>
<td>Suggest</td>
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<tr>
<td>Complain</td>
<td>Summarize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe</td>
<td>Write</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Use different verbs of expression to avoid being monotonous but also because some verbs are better for setting up the point you are making. For example, to stress weakness in a source’s argument, you might choose to write that your source admits or concedes a point.

**Paraphrase with signal phrase:**

As the author points out, quotations are great, but sometimes paraphrases are better (DeVries 3).
Quotation with signal phrase:

In her diary, the nurse lamented that "one of the most stabbing things in this war is seeing the lines of empty motor ambulances going up to bring down the wrecks who at this moment are sound and fit" (Burton 413).

Some signal phrases do not make use of verbs but rely on signal phrases like according to, in the opinion of, or in the words of.

9. HOW DO I MAKE A QUOTATION WORK WITH THE GRAMMAR OF MY OWN SENTENCE?

Each quotation should be an element inside one of your own sentences and should not stand alone.

Example of an incorrect placement of quotation:

The author wrote about conditions for nurses during World War I. “One of the most stabbing things in this war is seeing the lines of empty motor ambulances going up to bring down the wrecks who at this moment are sound and fit” (Burton 441).

Notice that the quotation stands alone. It is not an element within one of your own sentences. Some beginning writers might try to correct the problem by changing the period after “World War I” to a comma. However, that simply tacks one sentence to the end of another and creates a punctuation error. Instead, each quotation must work within the grammar of one of your sentences.

One way to make a quotation work with sentence grammar is to place it after a verb of expression.

The author states, “One of the most stabbing things in this war is seeing the lines of empty motor ambulances going up to bring down the wrecks who at this moment are sound and fit” (Burton 498).

10. HOW DO I MAKE A QUOTATION WORK WITH THE GRAMMAR OF MY OWN SENTENCE IF I AM NOT QUOTING A COMPLETE SENTENCE?

A quoted phrase can play any number of roles in the grammar of a sentence: verb, subject or object, adjective or adverb. Look at the example below and pretend that there are no quotation marks. Would the sentence still be grammatical? Yes. That shows that the quoted material works with the grammar of the sentence.

The nurse makes the ambulances sound like tow trucks going to retrieve demolished vehicles when she writes that it was horrible to watch “empty motor ambulances going up to bring down the wrecks” of men (Burton 72).

To integrate a quotation into a sentence, omitting words from the source is acceptable if you follow two rules: use ellipses (…) to signal the omission and avoid distorting the source’s meaning. It is also acceptable to adjust capitalization and grammar provided that you follow two rules: use brackets [ ] to signal the change and, again, avoid distorting the source’s meaning.
Lessig argues against the position that “[f]ile sharing threatens… the ability of creators to earn a fair return from their creativity” (Lessig 203).

When he wrote his book, nearly everyone in the music industry felt that “[f]ile sharing threaten[ed]… the ability of creators to earn a fair return from their creativity” (Lessig 203).

11. WHAT PUNCTUATION SHOULD I USE WITH QUOTATIONS?

Place quotation marks at the start and the end of direct quotations unless the quotation is long enough to justify the use of the block quotation format (four lines or more).

The in-text, or parenthetical, citation shows your reader where your quotation or paraphrase ends. In-text citations are inserted after the final quotation marks. An in-text citation is not found in the words that you are quoting; it is something you create to identify the source for your readers.

If the quotation immediately follows a verb capturing the act of expression, place a comma after the verb:

As the author wrote, “A free culture has been our past, but it will only be our future if we change the path we are on right now” (Lessig 287).

Under limited circumstances, a colon (:) can be used to introduce a quotation. The quotation must re-identify or restate a phrase or idea that immediately precedes the colon.

Lessig reached a radical conclusion about copyrighted material: “It should become free if it is not worth $1 to you” (251).

12. WHAT IS PLAGIARISM?

Plagiarism is using someone else’s work without giving him or her credit. “Work” includes text, ideas, images, videos, and audio. In the academic world, you must follow these rules:

- When you use the exact words, you must use quotation marks and provide a citation.
- When you put the information into your own words, you must provide a citation.
- When you use an image, audio, or video created by someone else, you must provide a citation.

Plagiarism could happen with a sentence, a paragraph, or even just a word! For example, Stephen Colbert, of the television show The Colbert Report, made up the word “truthiness,” meaning something that sounds like it should be true. If you say in a paper something has a ring of “truthiness,” you should cite Colbert. If someone else’s words catch your interest, you should cite them.

Figure 7.3 Colbert in May 2009
Key Takeaway

Plagiarism is a serious academic offense. Penalties can range from failing the assignment to failing the course to being expelled. See the VWCC Student Policies webpage for more information about academic misconduct and penalties.

Writing at Work

Plagiarism isn’t just a problem in the academic world. There are many examples of people who plagiarized at work and faced severe consequences. Jonah Lehrer, an author and staff writer for The New Yorker, fabricated quotes and copied previous work for his book Imagine. Once his plagiarism was revealed, his book was removed from bookstores and he was forced to resign from his job.
13. WHY SHOULD I CITE?

Whenever you use sources, it is important that you document them completely and accurately. You make your work more useful to your reader through complete and careful documentation, so you should think of documentation as essential rather than as an “add on” tacked on at the last minute.

When asked why you should cite your sources, many students reply, “So you don’t get accused of plagiarizing.” It is true that you must provide citations crediting others’ work so as to avoid plagiarism, but scholars use citations for many other (and more important!) reasons:

- To make your arguments more credible. You want to use the very best evidence to support your claims. For example, if you are citing a statistic about a disease, you should be sure to use a credible, reputable source like the World Health Organization or Centers for Disease Control (CDC). When you tell your reader the statistic comes from such a source, she will know to trust it— and thereby trust your argument more.

- To show you’ve done your homework. You want to make it clear to your audience that you’ve researched your subject, tried hard to inform yourself, and know what you are talking about. As you dive deeper into your research, you will probably find certain authors are experts on the topic and are mentioned in most of the articles and books. You should read these experts’ works and incorporate them into your paper.

- To build a foundation for your paper. Great breakthroughs in scholarship are accomplished by building on the earlier, groundbreaking work of others. For example, Isaac Newton’s law of universal gravitation would not have been possible without Johannes Kepler’s law of planetary motion. What articles, books, and texts, inspired you to create your argument? You are not the first person to ever consider this issue. You want to provide references to the works which led to your thesis.

- To allow your readers to find the sources for themselves. Someone interested in your topic may be inspired to read some of the sources you used to write your paper. The citation within the paper tells readers what part of your argument is addressed by a particular source, and the full citation in the bibliography provides the information needed to track down that original research.

Key Takeaway

Citing sources doesn’t just save you from plagiarizing, it also adds credibility to your arguments, helps you build a strong foundation for your work, and helps your readers locate more information about your topic.

14. HOW CAN I AVOID PLAGIARISM?

Don’t procrastinate. Students who rush make careless mistakes, such as forgetting to include a particular citation or not having all the information needed for documentation. Students under pressure may also make poor choices, such as not documenting sources and hoping the professor won’t notice. Your professor will notice.

Take careful notes. You need to be very clear in your notes whether you are writing down word-for-word what you found somewhere else, or if you are jotting down your own idea. You should take down all the information you will need to create your citations.

Cite your sources. Whenever you quote, paraphrase, summarize, or share an unusual fact, tell your reader where the
information came from.

**Document at the same time you draft.** As you begin drafting, prepare a correctly formatted Works Cited page that captures the information also needed for in-text citations. Insert citations into your paper as you are writing it. If you cite-as-you-go, you won’t consume time looking up information all over again at the end, and you make it less likely that you will misidentify or omit necessary documentation.

**Get comfortable with the required citation style.** The most commonly used citation styles are APA, MLA, and Chicago/Turabian. While they share many similarities, they also have differing requirements about what and when to cite. In English, we use MLA style. See section number 16 for more information about MLA citations.

Figure 7.5 Citations

**Ask your professor.** If you’re not sure about citing something, check with your instructor. Learning when to cite, how to lead-in to sources, and how to integrate them into your sentence structures and ideas takes place over time and with feedback.

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**Key Takeaway**

Don’t put off creating your citations until the last minute. Cite as you go and don’t be afraid to ask for help if you need it along the way.

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**15. WHAT IS COMMON KNOWLEDGE?**

Common knowledge is information that is accepted and known so widely you do not need to cite it:

- **Common sayings or cliches.** Examples: Curiosity killed the cat. Ignorance is bliss.
- **Facts that can be easily verified.** As you are conducting your research on a topic, you will see the same facts repeated over and over. Example: You are writing a paper on presidential elections, and you want to mention that Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980. Although you might not have known this fact before your research, you have seen it multiple times and no one ever argues about it.
- **Facts that you can safely assume your readers know.** Examples: Richmond is the capital of Virginia. The North
won the U.S. Civil War. Fish breathe using gills.

Not all facts are common knowledge. You will still need to cite:

- **Facts that surprise you or your reader.** Example: Michelangelo was shorter than average (Hughes and Elam 4).
- **Facts that include statistics or other numbers.** Example: As of June 2009, forty-two states had laws that explicitly ban gay marriage, and six states have legalized it (U.S. Department of Labor).
- **If you use the exact words of another writer, even if the content could be considered common knowledge.** Example: Lincoln’s first campaign dates to “1832, when he ran as a Whig for the Illinois state legislature from the town of New Salem and lost” (Lincoln 451).

**Tip**

Common knowledge can be course-specific. For example, the number of bones in the leg could be considered common knowledge in an athletic training course. However, if you are using that fact in an English paper, you cannot assume your professor would have that knowledge, and you would need to cite it.

**Key Takeaway**

Deciding if something is common knowledge is tricky and can vary depending on your course and your topic. When in doubt, ask your professor for advice.

**16. WHAT IS MLA?**

Different fields prefer different methods of documenting the use of sources. In English, the citation style is called MLA, from the initials of the Modern Language Association. When it comes to documentation, learn to notice and apply the particular style that you are asked to use. Brown Library has online citation guides (http://infoguides.virginiawestern.edu/citations) for several styles.

**Writing at Work**

Citations aren’t just for research papers and schoolwork. Any time you use outside sources, including in a speech or PowerPoint presentation, you should cite your sources. When you give credit to others, your work is strengthened!

**17. HOW DO I FORMAT REFERENCES?**

**References** record bibliographic information about sources that have been cited in the text. The necessary information is author, title, and details about publication (when the source was published and who published it). The order of the information and the punctuation, abbreviation, and spacing conventions may differ depending on the documentation style, but the purpose of the references will be the same: to allow a reader to easily track down your sources.

**Basic MLA style reference for a book:**

Author(s). *Title of the Book*. Publisher, Date.
Example:


Basic MLA style reference for a journal article:

Author(s). “Title of the Article.” *Title of the Journal*, Volume number, Issue number. Date, including month or season if you have it, Page numbers. *Database Title*, URL/Link to the article.

Example:


Basic MLA style reference for a webpage:

Author(s). “Title of the Webpage.” *Title of the Website*, Date, including day and month if you have it, URL/Link to the webpage.

Example:


18. WHAT SHOULD I DO IF MY SOURCE DIFFERS FROM THE BASIC PATTERN FOR A REFERENCE?

The basic pattern is easy to recognize, but it is impossible to memorize all the variations for different sources. Some sources are available online; some sources are audiovisual instead of print; some sources have translators and editors. These and other details find their way into references. Learn to consult resources that illustrate some of the variations, and then ask yourself which examples seem closest to the source you are trying to document. Creating helpful references for your readers requires attention to both the basic pattern and to details, as well as problem-solving skills and creativity.

Tip (with many more examples of correct MLA citations for different materials. Librarians and Writing Center Consultants at Brown Library can also help you create MLA citations for sources that don’t follow the basic pattern.

19. HOW DO I FORMAT IN-TEXT CITATIONS?

In-text citations point readers toward a source that a writer is using in her own article or essay. They are placed inside your paragraphs, a position that explains why they are called “in-text.” In-text citations are also called parenthetical citations because information identifying the source will be placed inside parentheses ( ). A writer using MLA style will provide the following in-text information for her readers:
Example: In the first half of the nineteenth century people worked hard to spread information about how to prevent disease but did not emphasize how to treat diseases (Murphy 141).

Key Takeaways

- Different fields require different citation styles. In English, we use rules developed by the MLA.
- Don’t panic when it comes to learning MLA. Just find an example that closely matches your source and use the pattern to help you decide what to do.
- Librarians and [Writing Center](http://infoguides.virginiawestern.edu/writingcenter) Consultants can help you figure out how to cite a source that doesn’t match the common examples.

Additional Links

- [Annotated MLA Sample Paper](https://tinyurl.com/qzv2afu), Purdue Online Writing Lab
- [Citation InfoGuide](http://infoguides.virginiawestern.edu/citations), Brown Library
- [MLA Examples](https://tinyurl.com/ycanqqzx), VCU Writes!, Virginia Commonwealth University
- [Exploring Academic Integrity](https://tinyurl.com/ya3ckaxs), Indiana University Libraries

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