7.4: Citations and Plagiarism

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.
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.
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.

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.

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.

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.

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:

https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Composition/Book%3A_Let%27s_Get_Writing_(Browning_DeVries_Boylan_Kurtz_and_...
• **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.

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**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!

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**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:


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

Brown Library has some MLA examples on our MLA InfoGuide (https://tinyurl.com/y9fxlz7d). Virginia Commonwealth University maintains a VCU Writes! website (https://rampages.us/vcuwrites/) 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.

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:

- Author’s last name or the name of the organization that created the source, unless it is previously mentioned in the
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