

Avoiding Plagiarism

For a comprehensive resource on academic integrity more broadly, **check out our interactive module.**

What is plagiarism?

Plagiarism is the unauthorized use of someone else's thoughts or wording. Students might commit it by incorrectly documenting sources, failing to cite sources altogether, or simply relying far too heavily on external resources. Plagiarizing does not give due credit to whoever first came up with the language and/or idea.

Plagiarizing undermines your academic integrity and betrays your responsibilities to your audience. Intentional or not, the result is that some or all of another author's ideas are represented as your own. It's like lip-synching to someone else's voice and accepting the applause and rewards for yourself.

Plagiarism also includes misusing informal, unpublished material, such as re-using the same paper for more than one course, or "buying" a paper from another student. If it feels like cheating or an easy way out, stop and think of the serious repercussions you could incur.

Because it is intellectual theft, plagiarism is considered by all post-secondary institutions as an academic crime, with punishment ranging anywhere from a failure on a particular paper to dismissal from the course or expulsion from university.

Avoid plagiarism by following and understanding standard **citation formats**, learning how to **take notes** effectively, and properly **incorporating sources** within your own insights, so that it is clear which sources you consulted to support and supplement your own discussion.

The heart of avoiding plagiarism is to make sure you give credit where it's due.

When do I need to cite?

You need to cite when:

- you use or refer to somebody else's words or ideas from a journal, book, newspaper, song, TV program, film, web page, letter, magazine, newspaper, discussion forum, lecture, speech, or any other source.
- you use information gained through interviewing another person.
- you copy the exact words or a unique phrase from somewhere.
- you reprint any diagrams, illustrations, charts, pictures and photographs.
- you use ideas that others have given you in conversations or over email.

No need to cite when:

- you are writing your own experiences, your own observations, your own insights, your own thoughts, or your own conclusions about a subject.

- you are using “common knowledge”—folklore, common sense observations, shared information within your field of study or cultural group.
- you are compiling generally accepted facts.
- you are writing up your own experimental results.

During the writing process

When researching, note-taking, and interviewing:

- mark everything that is someone else’s words with a big “Q” (for “quote”) or with big quotation marks.
- indicate in your notes which ideas are taken from sources (“S”) and which are your own insights (“Me”).
- record all of the relevant documentation information in your notes, while you take notes, so you don’t have to hunt for it later.
- keep all of your notes in case you need to show your documentation process later.

When paraphrasing and summarizing:

- write your **paraphrase or summary** without looking at the original text, so you rely only on your memory.
- check your version against the original for content, accuracy, and mistakenly borrowed phrases.

When quoting directly:

- keep the source’s name near the **quote** in your notes, and in your paper.
- select only quotes that make the most impact in your paper—too many direct quotes may lessen your credibility and interfere with your style.

When quoting indirectly:

- keep the source’s name near the text in your notes, and in your paper.
- **rewrite** the key ideas using different words and sentence structures from the original.

In the finished paper

Check against your notes to make sure that anything you’ve used is acknowledged using some combination of in-text citation, footnotes, bibliography, and/or quotation marks, according to the [citation style](#) you are following. Make sure that anything you have cited in your paper is included in your reference list, and vice versa.

When paraphrasing and summarizing

- Begin your summary with a **phrase** crediting the source: e.g., According to Jonathan Kozol...
- Put any words or phrases that you can’t or don’t want to change in quotation marks: e.g., “Savage inequalities” exist throughout our educational system (Kozol).

When quoting directly

- **Mention** the person's name at the beginning of the quote, the middle, or the end.
- Put quotation marks around the text that you are quoting.
- Indicate added phrases in brackets ([]) and omitted text with **ellipses** (. . .).

When quoting indirectly

- Avoid quoting indirectly when possible; go to the original source for a quote; a [librarian](#) can help you.

Material is probably "common knowledge" if...

- You find the same information undocumented in several other sources.
- You think it is information that your readers will already know.
- Anyone could easily find the information with general reference sources.

Which citation style should I use?

Citation style guides tell you how to follow very specific rules for documenting your research sources. You're expected to know which guide is appropriate for your writing assignment and follow its rules exactly. Common citation style guides include the MLA (Modern Languages Association) guide, the APA (American Psychological Association) guide, and the Chicago Manual of Style, but there are others.

Many academic departments expect students to use a particular citation style—for example, English departments commonly expect their students to use MLA style. However, some departments don't have a specific citation style that they expect you to use, or sometimes professors within the same department will have different citation style expectations. If your professor has not explicitly told you to use a specific citation style, here's what you can do:

1. Check the course website; perhaps the style guide is listed there.
2. Ask the professor or TA for whom you're writing which citation style they expect you to use.
3. If your professor or TA says there is no preferred style guide for the course, you could:
 - a) visit the Queen's Library website for a [list of style guides](#) and their associated areas of research. Choose a guide that seems best suited to your needs, or
 - b) check some established, reputable journals in your area of research, and see which style they use.

Whatever you do, follow your chosen style guide exactly, and do not mix and match style guides; stay consistent.

Also see online guides to referencing in [APA](#), [ASA](#), [MLA](#), [Chicago](#), and other [useful citation style links](#) listed at the Queen's University Library.

Citation software is a helpful and efficient way for you to manage your sources as you research. Queen's Library has a [useful guide to citation software](#).

References

Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*. Crown Pub.

This module was adapted from the [Purdue University Online Writing Lab](#).