

Working with academic literature

How to join the conversation and avoid plagiarism

Imagine the following. You enter a dining hall, get your meal, and sit down at a table where people are engaged in a lively conversation. You listen for a few minutes and then decide to join in by picking up on one of the conversational threads. Following the etiquette of good conversation, you would not repeat someone else's idea, passing it off as your own. Instead, you would credit the original speaker, building on this idea by giving it a new twist, or using it to launch your own perspective.

The conventions of a dinner conversation resemble those of a scholarly conversation. When you compose a paper, a lab report, a presentation, or a film, you add your voice— your ideas, your point of view—to a conversation that is in progress. When you acknowledge and cite your sources, you act as a responsible member of the scholarly community. (Adapted from Kenneth Burke, as cited in Dartmouth Institute for Writing and Rhetoric, 2015)

Engaging in academic work is not just like a conversation; it *is* a conversation, albeit one that takes place in journal articles, books, classrooms, and conferences rather than in informal settings like the dining hall described above. The important thing to be aware of is that *academic “conversations” have very specific rules and conventions which apply to any coursework you produce at university*. Understanding the broad logic of this conversation, as well as specific rules about when and how to use sources, will enable you to produce high quality work at university and avoid any suggestion of plagiarism¹.

Understanding universities: the centrality of ideas

Ideas are the lifeblood of everything that happens at universities; they serve as the basis of both productive academic careers and student success. Because of this, basic academic integrity requires that students and staff alike are rewarded for their own efforts rather than the work of others.

It is no wonder, then, that there is such a strong interest in transparency about where ideas have come from or whom they “belong” to; researchers and writers understandably want credit for the fruits of their work. Similarly, when markers are assessing your work they need to know which ideas are yours and which have come from other sources.

There is more than transparency at stake, however. Explicitly putting your ideas into conversation with others in your field is also one of the hallmarks of strong academic work. When markers see that you have correctly used and referenced your sources, you not only get credit for referencing properly, they are also able to assess whether you are engaging with and contributing to the most important conversations in your discipline.

Culture clash: academia versus the internet

These academic conventions differ radically from what you may be used to if you have spent time on the internet. The online world is characterized by phenomena such as open source software, wikis (most notably Wikipedia), and crowdsourcing, all of which create an exciting world of possibilities characterized by sharing, fluid and ongoing editing, and phenomena like the “remix”. On the flip side, the anonymity and technological prowess that undergird this world also enable trolling, spam, hacking, and piracy.

Regardless of your views on the promise or peril of the internet, be prepared to enter a different culture when you enroll at university. Anonymity is non-existent, and “sharing” usually equates to cheating². To draw another rough parallel between these disparate worlds, not identifying and correctly attributing sources of information at university more closely resembles piracy than it does a wiki or remix.

Academic norms around referencing and attribution may feel old-fashioned, but for the time being they create a controlled environment in which ideas can be evaluated and advanced in a rigorous, honest and transparent way. Not only that, they are a non-negotiable requirement you must adhere to in order to avoid plagiarism.

¹ In brief, plagiarism is defined as representing another person's words or ideas as your own.

² Assessment that is explicitly designated as group work is a notable exception.

When to reference to avoid plagiarism

The term “plagiarism” refers to prohibited practices that range from incorrect referencing (such as when a paraphrase, even if referenced, is too similar to the original text) to fraud (when you present someone else’s ideas as your own). Given the wide range of severity of these infractions, sanctions can vary from losing a few marks, to failure on a particular piece of work, to possible expulsion from the university in the most serious cases.

While that may sound alarming, the good news is that plagiarism can be easily avoided. To state the obvious, practices such as cutting and pasting passages or whole essays from the internet into your work, paying someone else to write an essay for you, or handing in the same piece of assessment in more than one class constitute fraud and are strictly prohibited.

On the other end of the spectrum, to avoid making honest mistakes that may nonetheless comprise plagiarism:

- Familiarise yourself with the specific conditions in which a reference is required. In general, you must include a reference whenever you use or refer to someone else’s ideas, but that broad principle can sometimes be difficult to put into practice. Our handout on “When to Reference” (available at <http://www.lps.canterbury.ac.nz/lsc/documents/handouts/When%20to%20reference%20handout.pdf>) provides examples of the seven most common cases in which referencing is required.
- Learn and consistently apply the rules of the referencing style you are required to use, for instance, APA or MLA. If you are unsure about which style applies to your discipline, ask your lecturer or visit the UC Library web page *Citations and Referencing* at <http://library.canterbury.ac.nz/services/ref/style.shtml>. The latter also provides links to explanations of how to apply the most commonly-used styles.

Please note: it is important to cultivate the habit of paraphrasing, and to use direct quotations only when the author’s precise wording is significant. See the ASC paraphrasing handout (<http://www.lps.canterbury.ac.nz/lsc/documents/paraphrasing.pdf>) to ensure you make adequate alterations, as changing only a few words still constitutes plagiarism.

Improve your skills

For a quick review of the main principles of plagiarism, view this short video created by the UC Library:

<https://goo.gl/WqDsDI>.

To ensure you are able to apply what you have learned, take the online tutorial on “Avoiding Plagiarism offered by the University of Leicester at <http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/study/plagiarism-tutorial>. It takes 20-30 minutes to complete and is subject-specific, so it will give you information directly relevant to your field of study.

For a more thorough treatment of this subject, see *Cite them right: the essential referencing guide* by Richard Pears & Graham Shields (2013).

References

Dartmouth Institute for Writing and Rhetoric. (2015). *Sources and Citations at Dartmouth*. Retrieved from <https://writing-speech.dartmouth.edu/learning/materials/sources-and-citations-dartmouth>.

Pears, R. & Shields, G. (2013). *Cite them right: the essential referencing guide* (9th ed.). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.