

# How to Avoid Plagiarism

## Does everything have to be cited?

You must provide a citation for any facts, ideas, or data that you took from another source. The only time you do not need to cite is when the fact or idea is "common knowledge" (see below). You also have to provide a citation for any images, graphs, maps, sound files, etc. unless you created them yourself.

## Common Knowledge

The term "common knowledge" refers to facts or ideas which are widely known or widely agreed upon. For example:

- Ottawa is the capital of Canada
- Pierre Elliott Trudeau died on September 28, 2000

Because the above facts are widely known, you do not have to cite the source where you found them. On the other hand, the following statement about Pierre Elliott Trudeau is not a widely known fact. It is an author's opinion, and a citation is required:

"In his sixteen years of office, Pierre Elliott Trudeau made himself a nuisance by inserting the tentacles of government where they had no place to be: in the private lives of the citizens" (McDonald, 1995, p.13).

Common knowledge can be tricky. Students quite reasonably say, "I don't know if this is widely known or agreed upon." If you are unsure whether a fact or idea is common knowledge, cite your source! Generally, most of the information in your paper will not fall into the common knowledge category.

## Citing Sources: Information to Record

Creating accurate citations starts at the note-taking stage. Identify which citation style guide you must follow because it will indicate the information you will need to record to create proper citations. Although every citation style is different, there are some standard elements to record:

- Title (if you are using an article, you should also record the title and volume/issue number of the journal in which the article appears)
- Author
- Publication date
- Publisher or source
- Start and end pages (for articles and book chapters)

For online sources such as web pages, you should record this additional information:

- The date you accessed the site (not all citation styles require this, but it is a good practice to keep a record)
- The URL

## Note-Taking

### Why is it important?

Note-taking is an important skill to develop. For one thing it will help you organize the information you gather during your reading and research, which will make writing your paper easier. For another, proper note-taking can help prevent plagiarism. If you take notes carefully you can track:

- details about your source (author, title, page, etc.)
- which information came from which source
- which words in your notes are direct quotes, which ideas are your own, etc.

### How to Create Proper Notes

There is more than one way to take notes as you read. This section demonstrates one effective method. In the method below:

- the source is clearly identified (author, title, page, etc.) with all the information required to write the citation
- the quotation marks and square brackets make clear which words are direct quotes, which ideas are your own, etc.

## Sample Notes for a Research Paper

All required information about the source of the article has been recorded in the APA citation format.

Sterngold, A. (2004) *Confronting Plagiarism. Change*, 36(3), 16-21.

The quotations marks are around the author's words.

Sterngold points out that writing term papers should be "one of the most challenging projects students undertake in college because it requires strong research, writing, and critical thinking skills to carry out successfully" (19).

The page number of the quotation is recorded.

He argues that colleges should focus on helping students develop these skills because "these skills are prized by graduate schools and employers in today's knowledge-based professions. Indeed, acquiring strong research and writing skills may be more important to students' future careers than acquiring subject-matter expertise that may become outdated soon after the students graduate or that may become irrelevant when students switch jobs and careers" (19).

[Excellent point about students developing research and writing skills for the work place - will try and find more articles that discuss this point.]

Suggestion: Use square brackets to distinguish your comments from those of the author.

