Academic Integrity

Writing the Research Paper
“Academic Integrity” is an impressive-sounding phrase. What does it mean?

While the phrase can refer to a broad spectrum of actions, most of the time we use it to mean “don’t plagiarize,” or don’t pass off others’ ideas and information as your own. In other words, acknowledge the specific information that you get from sources, whether those sources are online or printed articles or books, interviews, online discussions, video tapes or lectures. Your reader should be able to distinguish your own ideas and information from your sources’ ideas and information at all times.

As you may have realized from the explanation above, there’s an additional dimension to academic integrity. Academic integrity involves not only acknowledging your sources, but also creating your own ideas.

Academic integrity, explained in this way, sounds relatively simple. But the particular applications are a bit more tricky. This information identifies and offers strategies to solve some of the most common academic integrity problems that you may encounter in the process of writing a research paper:

1. relying too heavily on others’ information in a research paper,
2. relying too heavily on others’ words in a paraphrase or summary,
3. citing and documenting sources incorrectly, and
4. relying too heavily on help from other sources.
Problem #1:

But it’s supposed to be a research paper!

You read all of the assigned chapters in the textbook. You researched a number of online databases, found and read additional articles on an issue presented in the textbook, in preparation for writing your research paper. You now have all of this information “in your head,” and you simply sit down and write the research paper using all of your new knowledge, making sure to put a “works cited” list at the end including all of the sources that you read.

Here’s a different scenario. You researched a number of online journal articles related to your assigned paper topic. You cut and pasted many relevant portions of those articles into your paper, and you identified the sources within and at the end of the text.

You get the paper back with comments that say, “This is not a research paper.” “What are your own ideas?” “What are your sources?” and “Don’t plagiarize.” What went wrong?

Remember that the emphasis in a research paper is on your own thoughts, shaped and validated by data from experts in the field. A college-level research paper is not just a series of quotations strung together, or a series of paragraphs cut and pasted from online resources, or a series of summaries of the different sources that you read (a series of summaries is called a review of literature in the field, in which you re-word information to show that you understand it; it’s not a research paper). A college-level research paper is intended to show not only how well you can find and understand appropriate sources, but also how well you can use and think about the information in those sources to make your own informed judgments about a topic or an issue.

Remember, too, that a reader needs to be able to distinguish your own ideas from your sources’ ideas. A research paper cannot simply include a lot of information massed together without accurately identifying where that information came from – you or one of your many expert sources. You need to identify specific information from your sources and document it, both within the paper and in a list of sources at the end.
You can translate this explanation into a process of approach to the research paper assignment, a process of approach that will help you maintain academic integrity:

1. Complete your background reading, jotting down general information and your own thoughts as you read.


3. Create your thesis, main idea statement or research question which reflects your own thinking and offers your own argument to prove.

4. Do more directed, specific research to find expert sources to back up your own argument. Be alert to evidence that does not support your position and address that as well.
   - Read and take notes carefully, remembering these two concepts:
     1. Identify, in your notes, whether you’ve quoted, summarized or paraphrased.
     2. Reproduce a quotation exactly as it appears in the original text.
   - Record the page numbers or other identifiers of your information (e.g., screen number, title, author and/or publication date in an online source). You will need identifiers when you document sources in the research paper. The conventions of academic research writing require that you document a direct quotation, a summary and a paraphrase – any information specific to that source – whether or not you quote that information directly or re-word it in a summary or paraphrase.

5. Record additional source information needed in the list of sources at the end of the paper (author, title, publisher, place of publication, date of publication, span of pages for a journal article, Web address, date of access, etc.).

6. Distinguish your own from others’ information as you write the first draft of your research paper. In the final draft, use a standard documentation format to identify the sources of information within the paper, in addition to listing those sources at the end.

For more information on the processes of academic research and research writing, go to: www.esc.edu/Library. “Research How To’s” offer a multitude of research aids, from “Quick Tips for New Users” to a “Six-Step Approach to Research.” You can connect with the college’s Writing Resource Center and click on the annotated resource lists for “Academic Writing Process” and “Research Writing.”
Problem #2:

I cited my sources when I paraphrased and summarized; what went wrong?

Just as it doesn’t show integrity to rely too much on others’ ideas in a research paper, it doesn’t show integrity to rely too much on others’ words in a paraphrase or summary, both of which ask you to rewrite others’ ideas in your own language. Rewriting others’ ideas in your own language is an important skill for maintaining consistent style in a research paper that integrates ideas from many sources. A paraphrase is a direct translation of the author’s ideas into your own language. A summary is a condensed translation of only the author’s main ideas into your own language. Again, both seem simple. But in practice, you need to be careful not to plagiarize inadvertently as you translate, as you can see from the following samples (taken from the Empire State College Undergraduate Catalog).

Quotation:

“Plagiarism, forgery, misrepresentation and other dishonest or deceptive acts constitute grounds for academic warning or dismissal from the college. Mentors should first discuss suspected unethical acts with the student. Suspected cases should be brought to the attention of the center or program director in a timely way by a tutor, mentor, student, evaluator or other individual aware of the behavior. The center dean or program director may discuss the case with the student, student’s mentor or other people deemed appropriate. The center dean or program director will refer cases requiring further review to the center or program academic review committee for consideration. A student has the right to present his or her case in person to the center or program academic review committee. If warranted, a warning or dismissal will be issued by the center dean or program director on the recommendation of the center or program academic review committee. If a student disagrees with the decision of the center dean or program director, he or she may make a final appeal of the case to the college’s vice president for academic affairs. If a student is dismissed from the college, readmission is subject to the approval of the center dean or program director and may not occur sooner than three months after the dismissal is issued.”  
(Empire State College Undergraduate Catalog 69).

(citation in MLA – Modern Language Association – format)

Paraphrase that inadvertently plagiarizes:

(retains too much of the source’s language and sentence structure)

The Empire State College Undergraduate Catalog (2005) states that the college has a policy that describes the different instances under which students may be withdrawn from the college. These instances include plagiarism, forgery, misrepresentation and other instances that show dishonest or deceptive practice.

(citation in APA – American Psychological Association – format)

Paraphrase that retains academic integrity:

According to a policy in the Empire State College Undergraduate Catalog (2005), the college may take punitive action (including dismissal) against students who act fraudulently. Fraudulent action includes using the words or ideas of others without proper attribution, falsifying documents, or depicting the work of others as one’s own.

(citation in APA – American Psychological Association – format)

Summary that retains academic integrity:

The Empire State College Undergraduate Catalog (2005) states that the college may dismiss students who in any way present others’ work as their own (69).

(citation in MLA – Modern Language Association – format)
How do you avoid inadvertent plagiarism? Write the paraphrase or summary in stages, a process that’s especially important when paraphrasing or summarizing a complex passage. Do a direct translation of the author’s words first, a translation which probably will retain the author’s sentence structure. Set this translation aside. Then do a second-stage translation to present the author’s ideas in your own way, making sure to make the wording and sentence structure your own. And always avoid plagiarism by citing the source.

For more information and self-check exercises on paraphrase- and summary-writing, visit www.esc.edu/Library and link to the Writing Resource Center. In the search box, type in “summary.” There you will find the link to “Writing Summaries and Paraphrases” including an explanation and sample exercises.
Problem #3: Isn’t it enough to mention my sources during and at the end of my research paper? What difference do documentation formats — parentheses and periods — make?

Using a documentation format is like speaking or writing grammatically. A documentation format, like grammar conventions, provides a code that all speakers of a certain language agree to follow in order to make communication easier. “Speakers of the language” in this case are members of an academic community in a certain field of study. So while it is of primary importance to know when to document a source, it’s also very important to know how.

The problem is that there are many different “hows,” depending on the field of study — too many to mention here. The two most well-known “hows” are formats of the Modern Language Association (MLA, used in the humanities) and American Psychological Association (APA, used in the social sciences). There are some general principles that both the MLA and APA formats use:

1. Cite the source of a quotation within the paper by putting information in parentheses:
   • the author’s last name and the page number in parentheses at the end of the quotation (MLA), or
   • the date of publication and the page number in parentheses at the end of the quotation (APA).

   Of course, the quotation itself needs to be reproduced exactly and needs to begin and end with quotation marks.

2. Cite the source of a paraphrase or summary within the paper by mentioning the author at the start, so the reader can distinguish where your own ideas end and the source’s ideas begin. Put the page number in parentheses at the end of the summary or paraphrase (MLA), or put the publication date in parentheses after the mention of the author’s name (APA). The paraphrases and summary in problem #2 offer examples of citations using MLA and APA formats.

3. At the end of the paper, alphabetically list the sources that you used, according to authors’ last names. Only list those sources from which you quoted, paraphrased, or summarized; do not include the sources that you read as background material but didn’t use in the paper itself.
Consult a standard style manual for more particulars about format. Note that there are other formats as well, for example, those that use footnotes or endnotes instead of the MLA or APA in-text citations. Remember to ask beforehand which format to use, and always consult your tutor if you have a question about using a standard format.

Using a standard format is easy if you know which format to use and if you have a good style resource to consult – you don’t have to memorize all of the periods and parentheses. Simply find the appropriate example in the style manual (a journal article, a book with two authors, an online source, etc.) and replace the sample’s information with your source’s information, retaining the format.

For more information on documentation formats, link to www.esc.edu/Library. Also connect to the Writing Resource Center, which has many links and self-check exercises under the “Documenting Sources” link. The Empire State College Bookstore (www.esc.edu/Bookstore) stocks A Writer’s Reference, by Diana Hacker, which includes explanations of many documentation styles.
Problem #4:

But I thought it was good practice to get some outside help!

It is. It’s important for you, as a writer, to get a reader’s reaction. (Is there enough information here? Is the second paragraph clear?) And it’s important for you, as a student, to consult your tutor if you have general questions about course concepts or particular questions about the writing assignment. But it’s also important to stop there. Both course tutors and casual readers can help you understand and clarify your own ideas; they should not create those ideas for you. If a helper does create ideas, and if you use those ideas and that language as your own, you will not be acting with integrity. Passing off ideas or language created by others, without documenting the source, is a form of plagiarism. Even when you work collaboratively with other students, you need to identify and give credit to specific ideas that are not your own. It’s important for all assignments to reflect your own thinking, understanding, and form of expression.

If you’re uncertain about plagiarism – what it is, and how it happens – go to the Empire State College library at www.esc.edu/Library. Under the heading “Get Started,” you will find “More Help.” From there you can access “Academic Integrity and Avoiding Plagiarism” and quiz your understanding of academic integrity, read about recognizing and avoiding plagiarism, and more.

There are many sources available to help you approach your academic work with integrity. The main thing to remember is that you always need to create your own ideas and then acknowledge other sources’ ideas that you use to support your own.
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