

Documenting Sources

Whenever you take material from a source, whether you transpose it into your own words or not, you need to document the source. Failure to document is *plagiarism*, which literally means *kidnapping*: passing off something as your own when it is not.

Documentation serves two main purposes. First, it gives proper acknowledgement to the writer whose ideas or research you are using. Scholarship is a group enterprise; scholars always acknowledge their debt to others in the field, and expect that future writers will acknowledge their contribution. Second, documentation shows your reader that your information comes from a reputable source, and it enables the reader to locate the source for further information. So careful and accurate documentation shows that you are a responsible member of the academic community.

These are the kinds of material that need to be documented:

1. All direct quotations, however short.
2. All borrowed ideas, whether or not you quote them directly.
3. Specific facts, such as the results of a published study.

These are the kinds of material that do not need to be documented:

1. Your own original observations, ideas, comments, arguments, interpretations, and conclusions.
2. Specific facts that can be regarded as "common knowledge" in a field. For example, it is common knowledge that World War II ended in 1945. As a rule of thumb, if you find the same fact in three or more of your sources, you can assume it is common knowledge. If in doubt, however, document.

Many students worry that they will have to document virtually every statement in their research essay. Note, however, that the first category of material that does *not* need to be documented covers the primary content of the essay: the thesis statement, the controlling ideas of the paragraphs, and any further comments you make on your sources or conclusions you draw from them. Material that *does* need documentation is always supporting material, not primary content.

When you take notes for your essay, these two practices will help you avoid involuntary plagiarism and document accurately:

1. Make clear distinctions between notes which copy a source word for word, notes which paraphrase or summarize a source in your own words, and notes recording your own ideas. Some researchers colour-code their notes; others simply use prominent quotation marks around direct quotations and square brackets around their own ideas. Other notes are assumed to be paraphrase or summary. If you quote key words within a paraphrase, be sure to use quotation marks.
2. Record the page from which paraphrased or quoted material was taken. If the passage continues on a new page, indicate the page break. On a separate card, record all the information you will need for your *Works Cited* list. Last-minute trips to the library are tiresome and frustrating.

Systems of documentation attempt to identify the source of a paraphrase or quotation without interrupting the flow of the text too markedly, and to supply the reader with complete bibliographical information on sources in a concise standardized style. Sources themselves and the way in which they are used vary from one field to another, and various systems have evolved in response to the needs of different fields. Two systems currently in wide use across North America are the MLA or Modern Language Association style (standard in English and some other Humanities disciplines) and the APA or American Psychological Association style (standard in Psychology and used in certain other Social Sciences). These systems are similar in that they both use parenthetical documentation (or citation of the source right in the text). However, there are a number of differences between them.

You should use the system recommended by your instructor; if your instructor does not specify a system, choose one for yourself (probably the one standard in your field of interest) and use it consistently.

See handouts: *820.9.4 APA Style* for details of the APA style
 820.9.5X MLA Style for details of the MLA style