

## Avoiding “Plagiarism” Problems

“Plagiarism means the appropriation, buying, receiving as a gift, or obtaining by any means another person’s work and the unacknowledged submission or incorporation of it in one’s own work. This includes appropriation of another person’s work by the use of computers or any other electronic means.”

*(Statement taken from UND 1999-2001 Academic Catalog, p. 36.)*

The statement sounds so definite, but sometimes plagiarism may not seem nearly as easy to define in practice. We can agree that buying or “borrowing” a paper written by someone else and turning it in as your own work is an example of plagiarism. However, other practices that your professor describes as plagiarism may not seem so clear to you. In part, this is because standards for source use are not as absolute as we sometimes imagine they are. This handout is intended to be used as general guidance, rather than to serve as an authoritative discussion of what’s right and wrong.

### ***When do I need quotation marks?***

If you take words from a source, you need to put those words in quotation marks. Many faculty say that the cut-off is three words; that is, if you have three words in a row from your source, use quotation marks. Otherwise, they’re unnecessary. But that might also depend on the nature of the words. If you’re writing three ordinary words that both you and the author happen to have used, the quotation marks would seem silly (e.g., Ebert likes the new movie, “but others say” it isn’t as good...). If you use even one very distinct word or if you’re borrowing an unusual usage of a more ordinary word, you might want to credit the source, since you would have been unlikely to use that word in that way on your own.

### ***What if there’s a quote inside of my quote?***

Use double quotation marks around the entire excerpt, with single quotation marks around the quote inside the quote (e.g., “The attitude among tax cheats seems to be ‘I won’t get caught.’”)

### ***When do I need a citation?***

Every quote needs a citation, either in parentheses or as a footnote or endnote (the decision about which format to use for your citation depends on the class and the teacher). You also need to use citations to give credit for ideas or facts that you took from a particular author; so, you might need a citation even if you don’t need quotation marks. Also, cite any information that a reader may question or want to research further.

### ***What about “common knowledge”?***

The problem with common knowledge is that what’s commonly known in one discipline is not commonly known in others, and what’s commonly known by experts in a field (like your teacher) is not commonly known by novices (like you). One way to think about common knowledge when you’re a novice is to notice which facts seem to be the same in all the sources: if everyone agrees on the year in which the Declaration of Independence was signed, you probably don’t need a citation for that even if *you* weren’t sure about it until you did your research. If certain facts are difficult to track down or treated differently in your various sources,

you'll definitely want to cite the source for those facts. Hard and fast "facts" are more likely to be common knowledge than broader ideas: reasonable experts would agree on the year when President Clinton took office while disagreeing on the causes of his victory. Cite your source for the causes, but you may not need a citation for the year. And *definitely* check with your teacher; his or her definition of common knowledge is the one that matters for your paper in that class.

### ***Can't I paraphrase instead of using quotations?***

Sure. In fact, paraphrases are preferred in some disciplines while quotes are preferred in others. But paraphrases can be tricky. Novices in a field tend to find sentences that seem to include useful information and try to say the idea from that sentence in new words, in order to avoid extensive quoting. Such a paraphrase is likely to use basically the same sentence structure with a few words and phrases replaced by synonyms—a result which many faculty would consider to be plagiarism, although it is sometimes more accurately described as "patchwriting." To avoid patchwriting, try not to paraphrase individual sentences. Instead, read your entire source or at least a two or three-page section from the source. Put the source aside and think about what the author was trying to say, as if you wanted to explain it to your mother. Write that. You might also write down some of the information that supports that statement, again without looking back at the original source. What you've done now is much more likely to be in your own words, rather than a mix of your language and the author's original sentence.

### ***How can I know if my paraphrases are OK?***

Read it out loud to yourself. Does it sound like you? Are you saying things that you've learned about the topic and saying them in ways that you might say them if you were sitting in class, writing an essay test, rather than writing a paper at home with your sources spread around you? If it passes the read-aloud test, your chances are pretty good that it's your own work. If it doesn't sound like you or if you're not sure what some of the phrases mean, you're almost certainly in trouble. In that case, you need to spend more time on the topic until you understand it well enough to say it in your own words.

### ***When do I need a reference page?***

If you've used citations in your paper, you need a reference list of some kind unless your teacher tells you otherwise. Every source that's cited in your paper should be listed on your reference page. Conversely, if you found sources that you didn't cite in your paper, you normally are not allowed to include them on your reference page (although formats vary in these details: check with your teacher).

### ***Anything else I need to know?***

There's lots of information out about this general topic. Depending on your discipline, there may be a handbook that faculty in your field rely on to answer all their questions about source use. If so, it's probably worthwhile to buy a copy of that book. There are also lots of handbooks, including the *UND Comp Guide*, that supply more detailed information. But, again, remember that the details of the rules for quotations, citations, etc. may vary slightly depending on the field. ***When in doubt, the absolutely best advice is always to ask your own teacher.***