

AVOIDING PLAGIARISM

Avoid plagiarism. It is a sort of literary sin a writer commits when using the words or ideas of another person without acknowledgment. The academic penalty for plagiarism, particularly the conscious, wilful kind, can be severe; but, beyond that, it is really a matter of personal integrity to give credit where credit is due.

When, without full and proper acknowledgment, a writer quotes someone's "wording or particularly apt phrase," paraphrases "another's argument," or adopts someone else's "line of thinking," he or she is guilty of plagiarism.¹

Note the double quotation marks and documentation (author's name and page number) in the preceding sentence. You, too, must acknowledge, by means of such text references, your borrowing of someone else's words, ideas, data, or other information (even if you paraphrase or summarize rather than quote). If you suspect you are plagiarizing, you probably are, as your instructor will easily recognize. Ironically, it is easier and more impressive to show off your well-chosen sources than to try to conceal them.

It is important to realize that paraphrased, summarized, and quoted sources *must* be acknowledged *in exactly the same way* with parenthetical text references and works cited entries. Expressing someone else's idea in your own words does not make it yours.

First-year students sometimes say, "But my whole essay is based on my reading. Does that mean every sentence must contain a parenthetical reference?" The short answer is "Yes"—if every sentence indeed contains a new and different source of material. But that is unlikely. Often a whole paragraph will draw upon one source, which can be acknowledged quite economically (see below for an example). Moreover, the beginning paragraph, setting out the thesis; the topic sentences and the conclusions drawn in the middle paragraphs; and the final, wider discussion in the ending paragraph, should all consist of the original words and ideas of the essay writer.

¹ Joseph Gibaldi, *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 5th ed. (New York: MLA, 1999) 30. Reproduced with permission.

Source materials, whether quoted, paraphrased, or summarized, have a supporting role, largely in the middle paragraphs. As the essay writer, you must be seen to be in charge of this material, selecting it, introducing it, organizing it, discussing it—and acknowledging it. See below for examples of what and what not to do.

Sample Source Material

The passage quoted below is taken from an essay by C oil n Owens on the James Joyce short story "Araby," in a series anthology of literary essays on well-known stories. Approached carefully and critically, such essays can provide a useful stimulus as you begin your examination of a particular work. But they should *never* be a substitute for your own careful reading of the text and your own thinking; and they should *always* be properly acknowledged.

Read the passage, and then compare and contrast the two sample essay paragraphs that follow. The first plagiarizes the passage while the second acknowledges it properly.

This is a story of the loss of innocence and the frustration of first love. The young boy's exaggerated expectations about the emotional rewards of his devotion to the little girl are cruelly deflated. He interprets the disappointing circumstances of his journey as a sign of the hollowness of the ideals with which he undertook that quest. He thus connects the frivolous banter among the young people and his own earlier brief conversation with Mangan's sister and thinks that he has perceived the banal reality behind the romantic image. Yet his perceptions in each case are unreliable: His immaturity causes him to overreact in each direction. The story, then, shows that the temptations to both the romantic inflation and to the cynical devaluation of experience are but two sides of the same false coin.²

² C oil n Owens, essay on "Araby," *Masterplots II: Short Story Series*, ed. Frank N. Magill, 10 vols. (Pasadena, CA: Salem, 1986) 107. Reproduced by permission of the publisher, Salem Press, Inc. Copyright,  , 1986, Salem Press, Inc.

Plagiarized Version

Araby is a story about the loss of innocence and frustrated first love. The boy exaggerates his feelings for Mangan's sister and later they are deflated. He thinks the disappointments of his journey are a sign of the hollowness of his ideals when he went on his quest. Yet his ideas are unreliable and he overreacts. The story shows that romanticizing and devaluing experience are both false.

This short paragraph contains no acknowledgment whatsoever of the source of the ideas it presents; and it contains nothing original either. Owens's ideas are re-presented in simplified (sometimes oversimplified and distorted) form in the same order as they appear in the original passage. The writer does not challenge, discuss, or enlarge upon any key points. Some words and phrases are really quotations but are not acknowledged as such. (The short story title lacks distinguishing quotation marks, as well.) The paragraph is inadequate in its paraphrase and incorrect as both paraphrase and quotation because acknowledgments are missing. It represents a common type of plagiarism, revealing a hapless dependency on an external source that the writer is probably too embarrassed to reveal. Now consider the following.

Properly Acknowledged Version

Cóilín Owens identifies a major theme of "Araby" in describing it as a story about "the loss of innocence and the frustration of first love" (107). The unfolding events show how the boy's romantic hopes are dashed when he sets out to prove his love for Mangan's sister on a journey Owens rightly refers to as a "quest." But Owens overlooks a key point in his assessment of what the boy's experience signifies. He says that the boy's "perceptions" are "unreliable," both in his "romantic inflation" of his feelings and in

his later disillusionment (107). Yet the description of the sordid settings; of the careless indifference of the adults the boy encounters; and of the darkness, literal and figurative, in which he stands at the end, all derive from the perceptions of the adult narrator looking back at his younger self. The implication is that the boy learned a painful but truthful lesson about the society in which he was living.

There is room for disagreement about the interpretation offered here, but at least the source material is properly acknowledged and is used to develop an argument rather than just being silently appropriated. As an essay writer, you are not obliged to agree with the expert opinions you find expressed in your sources. You may, of course, use such opinions to lend authoritative support to your own. Here, however, the writer has taken a critic's opinion as a point of departure in order to develop a personal thesis (which could be enlarged upon in the rest of the essay).

Observe that the writer has introduced the source by name in the first sentence of the paragraph, and has supplied a page number in parentheses to indicate the location of the quotation, which is identified by double quotation marks. (The page number would also be required if the writer had paraphrased Owens instead of quoting him.) The short story title is identified by double quotation marks, too.

Notice also that the source's name is introduced twice more, reminding the reader that a particular critic's views are being discussed. The original page number is reintroduced towards the end of the paragraph, and the reader understands that any intervening quotations or paraphrases are from the same page. (If intervening quotations or paraphrases were from different pages, additional parenthetical page numbers would be needed.) The final sentence, a conclusion drawn from the preceding discussion, expresses the essay writer's own ideas in the essay writer's own words. These ideas were developed in the context of expert opinion, quoted and paraphrased, and the process was opened up to the reader's view. The essay writer's own "voice" is heard throughout. By such simple means is plagiarism avoided.

Since paraphrase, summary, and quotation are vital components of essay writing, and since they are all susceptible to plagiarism, they deserve separate consideration.

Paraphrase

This term signifies the restatement of a short passage in other words.

Why Paraphrase?

1. You are more concerned with the original author's points than with the actual words—substance rather than style.
2. Too much quotation clutters the page; paraphrase provides variety, an alternative way of incorporating a source.
3. Your own expression, or “voice,” should dominate the essay (very important).

How to Paraphrase

1. Use mainly short passages of paraphrase (one or two sentences), combining them with quotations and your own comments.
2. It is not acceptable to repeat the original and merely alter or cut a few words; instead, rephrase all the information *in your own words*.
3. Handle a key word, startling phrase, highly technical, or untranslatable term by *quoting* it.
4. Maintain a similar level of diction; the paraphrase should not be a watered-down version of the original.

You should paraphrase the more routine material in the original source, and quote only the most striking, significant statements. They will then stand out against a background of paraphrase. If you quote too much, the impact of individual quotations is weakened. You should therefore differentiate the more important statements (quotations) from the less important (paraphrases).

Summary

A summary is a condensation of a longer passage. A whole book could be summarized in a sentence, a chapter in a paragraph. The Owens passage quoted previously might be summarized as follows:

Owens claims that the young boy in “Araby” deceives himself because he is too immature to understand the true nature of his feelings for Mangan’s sister.

This version is not only condensed but is expressed in language different from that of the original.

Quotation

The term *quotation* refers to your use of the *actual words* of another person, whether from a printed text, a lecture, an electronic source, etc. You must distinguish his or her words from your own by using quotation marks or other conventions (described below in “Quoting Effectively”).

The presence of quotations, together with paraphrases and summary statements, all accompanied by appropriate documentation, will lend credibility and the force of authority to the main points of your essay.

Often-individual sentences will contain three kinds of language: your own words (introducing the topic, drawing conclusions, etc.), paraphrase or summary (source material expressed in your words), and direct quotation (word for word from the original). These three make a powerful combination.

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