

Why it is necessary to show where words and ideas of others are used in your writing

What is “documentation”?

When you use information from other authors in your writing, you must be honest about revealing your sources. To do this, various formal methods of acknowledging where you gathered information have been developed. These methods are called “documentation.” (See separate handouts on the various documentation styles. They give the details on how to document.)

What is “plagiarism”?

Plagiarism (pronounced PLAY-jar-ism) means using the words and ideas of another person as if they were your own. This includes both using the exact words or the ideas of another.

Why is plagiarism wrong?

Writers value their work. To steal words and ideas that are another writer's property is grossly unfair. It is intellectual theft. In the past few years, in cases that made headlines, a university president and a newspaper reporter had to resign because of plagiarism. Plagiarism also prevents students from finding the most important ideas of all—their own.

All colleges, schools, and universities, including Austin Community College, consider plagiarism a scholastic offense and punish students for it. To avoid such charges, you must document your writing.

Plagiarism and the Net

The Internet can be a useful source of information for writing papers. However, because you might be using the same computer to search the Internet and write your paper, it is very easy to plagiarize web sites. But remember—the Internet's convenience and ease-of-use means that your professor might also be using the Internet to see if you've plagiarized an online source.

The Internet makes it easier to steal other's ideas *and* to get caught at it!

All word and ideas that you use from other sources, electronic or print, must be documented.

How documentation works

There are several specific styles of documentation, but all have the same idea: When you borrow another's information, you explicitly say in your paper what is borrowed and where it is from. (See examples in the box.)

Use quotation marks and document your source when you use another writer's exact words. You also need to document when you borrow ideas. You are still borrowing ideas from another author if you change some of the words, which is called “paraphrasing.” If you fail to document paraphrased writing, you will be guilty of plagiarism. A bibliography or Works Cited listing is a complete list of the sources—books,

articles, web pages, email, interviews, videos, lectures, etc.—that you used in preparing your paper. It appears at the end of your writing.

Remember, by documenting your sources, you will protect yourself from charges of plagiarism.

Do I have to document everything?

One of the hardest parts of documentation is deciding how far to go in documenting sources. If you mention that Los Angeles suffered an earthquake in January 1994, do you have to show where that information came from? No. This is considered “common knowledge,” even if you didn't really know that for sure on your own. This can get tricky. When in doubt it is probably a good idea to include the documentation.

Ask a librarian or your instructor for advice on specific situations.

Common knowledge requires no documentation:

The Sun is composed primarily of hydrogen and helium.

Quotations require documentation:

“Theoretical studies have indicated that the temperature at the center of the Sun is about 1.5×10^7 K.” (“Our Sun” 128).

Work Cited

“Our Sun.” *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Astronomy*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1977. Print.

Paraphrasing requires documentation:

The sun's inner temperature is thought to be 1.5×10^7 K (“Our Sun” 128).

Work Cited

“Our Sun.” *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Astronomy*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1977. Print.