1.12 Using sources & avoiding plagiarism

What is plagiarism?

You are plagiarising when you copy material from sources, either using the original text or your own words, without correctly acknowledging these sources. If you do this, you are stealing other people's work and ideas, and it is a practice which is unacceptable in British academic culture. If you are found out (which is almost certain), at best you will fail the assignment; at worst, there have been cases of students thrown out of university.

So how can I avoid it?

When you are doing research, you must make a careful record of the details of each source you use. For example, if you are consulting a book, you must record:

- Author
- Year of publication
- Title
- Pages referred to
- Publisher
- Place of publication

If you have found something on the Internet, you must record:

- Author of document
- Year of publication
- Title of document
- Institution of origin (if applicable)
- Full URL (Internet address)
- Date of your access to it

If you miss any of the above information, your reference list will be incomplete.

When making notes, make very clear what ideas come from your sources, and what ideas are your own. For example, use different colour pens. If you don't do this, there is a very great risk of plagiarizing when you actually come to writing the assignment.

Check in your department which citation system to use. There are several systems, the most common being the "Harvard" (author-date) method. You must then make absolutely sure how the system works and then use it consistently.

[Library Referencing Guide](#)

How can I write my assignment without using outside sources?

You can't. And that's not the point. Your tutors want you to refer to a wide range of sources: that's one of the main reasons for giving you an assignment to write. What you have to do is use these sources in the correct way. Don't worry if your text is full of references to other works - it should be (however, remember that you are also expected to discuss the sources and use them to answer your question, don't just use sources without explaining them). Make sure that your references are from reliable sources and have relevant information for your assignment.

So what is the correct way to use my sources?

There are two normally accepted ways of using information from your sources:

- Quoting
- Summarising

If you do either of these two things, you must always:

- Acknowledge/cite your source (ie, make a reference to it) in your text
- Include a full reference to this source in your list of references at the end of your work.

As previously mentioned, there are several different systems used for acknowledging your sources. In the examples which follow, the Harvard Method has been used, but your faculty may prefer a different one.

Here's more detail on how to do it:

Quoting

A quotation is when you copy text word for word from your source, maybe because it is something you can't put into your own words, or because the original states the idea in a very clear and concise way, or because you simply want some variety in your text. When quoting, remember the following:

- Don't forget to put quotation marks at the beginning and at the end of the quote!

- Make sure you copy the quote exactly. This is harder to do than it sounds, but mistakes in a quote leave a bad impression.
- Don't make your quote too long: usually a line or two is enough. If you want to make a longer quote, it might be more appropriate as an appendix, or as a summary instead, or it should be indented (see below).
- Make sure your quote "flows" into the rest of your text, and be careful with the punctuation.

Don't just put a quote in for the sake of it. It must be an integral part of you writing.

Here are some examples of quotations in action:

Kenworthy (1987) concludes that "a teacher who demonstrates concern for learners' pronunciation will stand a good chance of instilling a similar concern in learners themselves". This view...

Willis (1996: 10), for example, supports learners being "exposed to a variety of approaches in order to broaden their learning styles".

We are overwhelmed in our data by examples of what Channell (1994) has termed "vague language".

"Franchising is the most successful business innovation of the century" (Chanderpaul 1994: 234).

Notice that in examples 2 and 4, page numbers are given (**this is required for quotations from textbooks**) and that in the first three examples, the author's name is incorporated into the writer's text. Full details of the references are given in the reference list.

It is best to present a longer quotation as follows:

According to Cook (1997):

> Corpora are only partial authorities. The cumulative language experience of an individual, though less amenable to systematic access, remains far larger and richer. Even a three hundred million word corpus is equivalent to only around three thousand books, or perhaps the language experience of a teenager. This assertion...

Note that the quote is "indented", and sometimes in a smaller font. Quotation marks are not used.

Summarising

Summarising is saying the same as your source but in your own words. The source must always be acknowledged, as with a quotation.

You should try to get away from the original language as much as possible: it is not enough to simply change one or two words. However, at the same time, you need to be **very** careful not to change the meaning.

Summarising is an opportunity to show your tutor that you are in control of your material. A successful summary means that you have thought carefully about what you have read and are able to use the information correctly in your assignment. You can also use summarising to refer to the information from several sources at the same time.

It is a difficult technique to master, especially if English is not your first language. Many students worry that their writing is not going to be as good as the original: well, it probably isn't, but that doesn't matter. What is important are your ideas, your arguments, your ability to answer the question or to fulfil the task. If you make some grammar and spelling mistakes, but what you are saying is still clear, then it is not necessarily a serious problem but can still cost you marks. It is more of a problem, of course, if your errors create confusion or contradict what you are trying to say (for example, it can be easy to miss the word "not" unless you proofread carefully).

In either case, it is your responsibility to become sensitive to the type of mistakes you make in English, and to take conscious steps to improve these areas. Finally, don't forget that when it comes to examinations, your own vocabulary is the only vocabulary you can use, so the more practice you get in using it beforehand, the more confident you will be on examination day.

Basic techniques for successful summarising

1. Quickly read through the text to get an idea of what it's about (the beginning and the end are usually the best places to get a general idea).

2. Decide if any parts of it would be useful for your purposes.

3. Read the relevant parts in more detail in order to understand the meaning more clearly and to analyse the function of the text (are they main or supporting points? are they examples? causes? effects? advantages or disadvantages? fact or opinion?)

4. Without looking at the source, make some notes of the points useful for you.

5. Check that your notes agree with the original.

6. Write up the paraphrase or summary from your notes (not the original) in order to try and ensure that the construction and wording are different from the original and that the writing is personal to you and fits in with the rest of your text.

7. Check that you have kept the same meaning and tone.

Introducing a quotation or summary

Reporting verbs

You need to be careful with the verb you use to introduce a quotation or summary, as it indicates the function of the original text and also sometimes your opinion of it.

Look at these examples:

Bradley and Hill (1987) **reported that** middle managers' attitudes were "uniformly unfavourable" towards quality circles because they saw them as a threat to their professional expertise and prerogatives.

Similarly, in the US car industry, Wood (1992) **found that**, despite a range of Quality of Worklife initiatives in General Motors plants, "most managerial prerogatives remain firmly intact."

Mendelssohn (1994) **argues that** the great pyramids were built as a method of creating an integrated human community the size of a state.

Davis and Lawrence (1989) **suggest** three stages of matrix evolution.

In a recent study, Child (1996) **claims that** that there are four levels in the hierarchy of the organisation.

Howells (1990) **found** distinctive styles of decision-making in Marks and Spencer.

Child (1996) **concludes that** resources move from the productive to the non-productive sector within organisations as well as across them.

Research by Guest (1979) **shows that** the supervisor's life is remarkably similar to that of the senior manager.

Peter (1993) **points out** that it is much better to be pulled up in an organisation than to push yourself up.

Davis (1995) **identifies** aspects of how the grapevine works.

Centre for Academic Success
Birmingham City University
0121 331 7685   success@bcu.ac.uk
bcu.ac.uk/cas

Pearce and Robinson **state that** "social considerations involve the beliefs, values, attitudes, opinions and lifestyles of those people in a firm's external environment".

Despite much evidence to the contrary, Lewis (1993) **questions** the prominent position given to the verb.

Jones (1997) **considers** the high occurrence of lexical chunks.

We are overwhelmed by what Channell (1994) **terms** "vague language".

As **observed** by Evans (1996), students prefer to study individually.

Note, however, that the author's name is not always incorporated into the sentence. Here are a few examples:

Our intuition can still tell us facts about the language which cannot be evidenced by a corpus (Widdowson 1990).

It is unrealistic to expect learners to acquire native-speaker English when they simply do not need it (Rampton 1990).

However, "none of the six interviewees believed that peer evaluation led to awareness of themselves as real readers". (Sengupta 1998)