Managing Your Sources: Quoting, Paraphrasing, Summarizing and Avoiding Plagiarism

Direct quotations, paraphrasing, and summarizing are the three ways you can incorporate source material into your paper. This handout will help you understand how to manage your research process and incorporate source material into your paper without plagiarizing. (Note: All examples in this handout are cited in MLA style.)

How to Use Source Material
When writing an essay that utilizes sources, you will have to decide how these sources will function in your paper. As noted in Diana Hacker’s *A Writer’s Reference*, “Not every source must directly support your thesis; sources can have other functions in a paper” (347). Some of the other functions that Hacker suggests are: providing background information for your topic; explaining terms or concepts for the reader; providing evidence for your argument; or providing counterarguments or alternative interpretations. As you read your source material, think about how each source might function in your paper.

Keeping Track of Your Sources
As you collect information from your sources, you will need to keep track of where your source material came from, and take notes in an appropriate way to avoid plagiarism. Here are some tips for good recordkeeping while conducting the research process:

1. Keep a running list of every source you consult. Don’t worry about proper formatting initially; just make sure you write down enough information so that you can find the details when you are ready to compile your bibliography.
2. As you make your list of sources, write a few brief sentences summarizing for yourself how you believe you will use this source in your paper. Consider the functions for source material previously mentioned: supporting your thesis, giving background, explaining terms or concepts, providing counterarguments, etc.
3. Keep notes in your own words. The easiest way to do this is NOT to look at your source material as you take notes.
4. If you choose to include direct quotes in your notes, be sure to put quotation marks around them. Otherwise, you may unintentionally include unattributed quotes in your paper, which is a form of plagiarism.
Quoting
There are times when a direct quotation is the best way to incorporate information from your source. When the author phrases an idea in a particularly compelling way (such as Patrick Henry’s “Give me liberty or give me death!”), a direct quotation captures the force of that particular writer’s meaning. Or perhaps a direct quotation captures a particular vivid metaphor chosen by the writer. For example:

Rychnovsky explains that as humans expand residential areas into mountain ranges, the cougar’s natural habitat “is falling swiftly to the developer’s spade” (40).

Choose your direct quotations wisely, to maximize their effect. Be sure to put quotation marks around direct quotes, to copy them exactly as they appear in the original source, and to cite them appropriately with the documentation style of your choice.

Summarizing
When summarizing, you reduce and restate the main idea of a chapter, paragraph or even an entire text into a single paragraph or a few sentences. Summarizing can be done entirely in your own words or through a combination of your own words and direct quotations. Use summaries when you have a significant amount of information that you want to present in fewer words than the original source.

Here’s an example of an original passage followed by inappropriate and appropriate summarizing:

Original:
“The fact is, a large number of chocolate companies do not even make their own chocolate, but commission specialist manufacturers to create particular recipes. Only the large and extremely well established companies — such as Lindt, Cadbury, Nestlé or Hershey — make their own chocolate. Other companies, known as ‘coaters’ in the industry, buy their chocolate mix or ‘couverture’ from companies such as Barry Callebaut of Belgium or Nestlé, and use it to coat the fruit, fondant, toffee or nut centres of their chocolates. The product is by no means inferior: even a premium chocolate manufacturer like Godiva can be a ‘coater’” (Richardson 232-233).

Poor Summary:
Many chocolate companies do not make their own chocolate, but instead use “coaters” or companies that use their own recipes to coat their chocolate products (Richardson 232-233).

(Notice that this summary uses phrases and syntax directly from the original without quotation marks, making it a poor attempt at a summary.)
**Appropriate Summary:**
In most cases, smaller chocolate manufacturers do not produce their own chocolate but receive materials from “specialist manufacturers” that they use to coat their own products (Richardson 232-33).

**Paraphrasing**
Like summarizing, paraphrasing is written in your own words. The difference is that a paraphrase is approximately the same length as the original. As in a summary, you may choose to combine direct quotations with your paraphrase. Be sure not to alter the meaning of the original as you re-state the idea in your own words. Paraphrases must be attributed to their original source, following the procedures of the particular documentation style you are using.

A common mistake when paraphrasing is to use the original sentence structure of the source, simply substituting your own words for key phrases. This in fact is a form of plagiarism because you have “borrowed” the writer’s sentence structure rather than creating your own. Remember that a true paraphrase is written in your own writing style, using your own words.

Here’s an example of an original quotation, along with an example of poor and appropriate paraphrasing:

**Original:**
“It is not necessary to be an expert to appreciate good chocolate. If someone truly prefers their Hershey Bar or Cadbury Bar over a high-cocoa dark chocolate, this does not make them a peasant” (Richardson 237).

**Poor Paraphrase:**
Just because you’re not an expert doesn’t mean you can’t appreciate good chocolate. Someone who prefers a Hershey Bar rather than an expensive dark chocolate isn’t necessarily unsophisticated (Richardson 237).

*Notice that this paraphrase contains much of the syntax and words of the original. This is a type of plagiarism, even though the writer has appropriately cited the author and page number in parentheses using MLA style.*

**Appropriate Paraphrase:**
A love of good chocolate is not just for gourmets; a person’s preference for ordinary chocolate does not make him or her a member of the lower class (Richardson 237).
**Plagiarism**

Plagiarism occurs when a writer does not correctly cite the source and/or does not correctly paraphrase or summarize the information from the original source. To avoid plagiarism, write your paraphrases and summaries carefully, and indicate the source of your information through in-text citations (using the appropriate conventions of the documentation style of your paper).

Many instances of plagiarism by students are unintentional. Whether you intend to plagiarize or not, the consequences in an academic setting can be severe (such as failing the assignment, or even the course). Some common reasons why students plagiarize:

1. **Bad note taking habits:** Students who are not careful to attribute direct quotations in their notes may end up plagiarizing unintentionally, by including these unattributed quotations in their text and representing them as their own words. See the section above on “Keeping Track of Your Sources.”

2. **Inappropriate paraphrasing or summarizing techniques:** Students who are not careful when paraphrasing and summarizing may inadvertently use words and sentence structures from the original source rather than their original wording and writing style. See the examples above for proper paraphrasing and summarizing techniques.

3. **Panic:** Sometimes students plagiarize because they have waited until the last minute and are desperate to produce their assignment. Intentional plagiarism sometimes occurs under these circumstances. Rather than plagiarize to cover yourself, it’s much better to contact your professor, let them know you’re behind, and assess the consequences of turning your paper in late. Remember that your professors are familiar with the style of writing that most students will produce and with most of the sources you will be using, and so they are very likely to recognize poorly attributed source material for what it is.

Never hesitate to ask your professor or a writing center consultant if you have any questions about your paraphrasing or summarizing strategies or if you need help developing good note taking habits while researching.