



USC

Trojan Integrity

A Guide for
Avoiding Plagiarism

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An Undergraduate's Guide for Avoiding Plagiarism

Introduction

The following information, with minor modifications, is excerpted from the *Student Guide to the Expository Writing Program*. **Students should assume these general principles apply to all courses at USC unless an individual instructor gives explicit alternate instructions for his or her assignment.**

By its very nature, writing involves both individual and collaborative activity. Even when a piece of writing has but one author, that author employs a language system that is shared with others and draws upon ideas and values that are not his or hers alone.

Indeed, one of the most important parts of becoming a writer within the academic community is learning how to balance the obligations of individuality and collaboration.

As a college writer, you are expected to use writing to develop and assert your own ideas and beliefs—to think for yourself. At the same time, however, you are expected to integrate the thinking of others and place your own criticisms and arguments within the context of academic discourse. This double obligation provides a framework in which to discuss plagiarism.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the unacknowledged and inappropriate use of the ideas or wording of another individual.

Plagiarism undermines the intellectual collaboration — the exchange of ideas — that should mark academic discourse because it permits the writer to avoid any genuine involvement with the concepts or opinions of others.

Because the false discourse of plagiarism corrupts values to which the university community is fundamentally committed — the pursuit of knowledge, intellectual honesty — plagiarism is considered a grave violation of academic integrity and the sanctions against it are correspondingly severe. The sanctions recommended by the university range from a grade of “F” in the course to suspension from the university.

Most simply, plagiarism can be characterized as “academic theft.”

As defined in the University Student Conduct Code (published in each year’s edition of *SCampus*), plagiarism includes:

- “The submission of material authored by another person but represented as the student’s own work, whether that material is paraphrased or copied in verbatim or near verbatim form;”
- “The submission of material subjected to editorial revision by another person that results in substantive changes in content or major alteration of writing style;” and
- “Improper acknowledgment of sources in essays or papers.” (§11.11)

It is important to note that the Student Conduct Code applies the above standards to *any* written

work submitted by a student, whether a draft or a final version.

Avoiding Plagiarism

Because of the serious penalties for plagiarism, you should ensure that any writing you submit represents your own assertions and abilities and incorporates other texts in an open and honest manner.

The best way to avoid plagiarism is to be careful to document your sources, even when you are only making use of data or ideas rather than an actual quotation.

In academic assignments, writing is assumed to be the original words and thoughts of the student unless otherwise noted (*i.e.*: material from other sources is clearly and properly cited).

The following pages of this guide contain examples of situations where writers must be careful to avoid plagiarism, as well as advice and resources that may be of use when writing academic papers at USC.

Properly Documenting Outside Sources

This section of the Trojan Integrity guide provides three examples to illustrate some of the finer points of avoiding plagiarism.

In each case, original source material is presented along with both a correctly and an incorrectly documented use of the source.

Remember: Improper documentation of your sources is not simply sloppy work, it is plagiarism!

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Example 1:
Repeating Another's Words
Without Acknowledgment

Sometimes, paraphrasing another writer's words is an effective tool for supporting a thesis. One must be cautious, however, and ensure that all such references are properly documented as, the following example illustrates.

Original Source

“The television commercial is the most peculiar and pervasive form of communication to issue forth from the electric plug....The move away from the use of propositions in commercial advertising began at the end of the nineteenth century. But it was not until the 1950's that the television commercial made linguistic discourse obsolete as the basis for product decisions. By substituting images for claims, the pictorial commercial made emotional appeal, not tests of truth, the basis of consumer decisions.”

(From Neil Postman. Amusing Ourselves to Death. New York: Penguin, 1985. 127-128.)

Plagiarized

- Television commercials have made language obsolete as a basis for making decisions about products. The pictorial commercial has substituted images for claims and thereby made emotional appeal, rather than tests of truth,
- the basis of consumer decisions.

Although the writer has changed, rearranged, and deleted words in his version, the text is essentially the same as the original source. In paraphrasing, you take the writer's ideas and put them in your own words.

It is **not** a process of substituting synonyms or rearranging the order of words. Even if the version above gave credit to Postman for his ideas, the passage would **still** be considered plagiarized.

✓ **Correct**

- **Postman argues that television commercials do not use language or “tests of truth” to help viewers decide whether to buy a product. Instead, they rely on images to create an emotional appeal that influences consumers’**
- **decisions (127-128).**

In the correctly paraphrased and documented version above, **most of the ideas** have been paraphrased or restated in the writer's own words.

Quotation marks have been placed around a key phrase that is taken directly from the original source.

In addition, the name of the author refers readers to a corresponding entry in the Works Cited page, and the page number indicates the location of the information in the source cited.

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Example 2
**Presenting Another Writer's Argument or
Point of View Without Acknowledgment**

While it is essential to use your own words in your academic writing, it is just as important to cite another author's specific ideas on a subject.

Original Source

“The changes in larger society, as well as their reverberations in the family, call into question basic assumptions about the nature of American society, its family arrangements, and Americans themselves. A “cultural struggle” ensues as people debate the meaning of change. One of these periods of cultural upheaval occurred in the early decades of the nineteenth century; a second occurred in the decades just before and after the turn of the twentieth century. For the last thirty years, we have been living through another such wave of social change.

Three related structural changes seem to have set the current cycle of family change in motion: first, the shift into a “postindustrial” information and service economy; second, a demographic revolution that not only created mass longevity but reshaped the individual and family life course, creating life stages and circumstances unknown to earlier generations; third, a process I call “psychological gentrification,” which involves an introspective approach to experience, a greater sense of one’s own individuality and subjectivity, a concern with self-fulfillment and self-development. This is the change misdiagnosed as narcissism.”

(From Arlene Skolnick. Embattled Paradise. New York: Basic Books, 1991. 11.)

⊗ Plagiarized

- Three periods of cultural upheaval in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have caused major changes in American society. The first occurred during the beginning of the nineteenth century, the second during the decades before and after 1900, and the third has been underway for the last thirty years. Three structural changes occurring during the current
- upheaval are primarily responsible for changes in American families. These include the development of a postindustrial information and service economy, demographics changes (including longer life spans that have created new and different life stages), and an increased
- sense of individuality including a desire for self-fulfillment and self development.

The writer of the passage above correctly paraphrases Skolnick's ideas but does not give her credit for her ideas or line of argument.

A reader must be able to understand without much difficulty that the ideas you are stating were originated by another author.

It is also important that a reader be able to locate the book, article, or other source where the ideas were stated by that author.

✓ Correct

- According to Skolnick, three periods of cultural upheaval in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have caused major changes in American society. The first occurred during the beginning of the nineteenth century, the second during the decades before and after 1900, and the third has been underway for the last thirty years. Three structural changes occurring during the current upheaval are primarily responsible for changes in American families. These include the development of a postindustrial information and service economy, demographics changes (including longer life spans that have created new and different life stages), and an increased sense of individuality including a desire for self-fulfillment and self development (11).
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Here, the writer references the original author, Skolnick, before presenting the ideas.

Readers can then look up the title of Skolnick's book on the Works Cited page at the end of the paper and find her original ideas on page 11 of that book (the number indicated at the end of the paragraph).

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Example 3
**Repeating Another Writer's Particularly
Apt Phrase or Term Without Acknowledgment**

When researching a subject, one often finds that authorities on that subject have created their own terms to describe certain aspects of it.

While using these terms in an academic paper is not incorrect, it is another instance when vigilance must be exercised in properly citing the source.

Original Source

“Three related structural changes seem to have set the current cycle of family change in motion: first, the shift into a “postindustrial” information and service economy; second, a demographic revolution that not only created mass longevity but reshaped the individual and family life course, creating life stages and circumstances unknown to early generations; third, a process I call “psychological gentrification,” which involves an introspective approach to experience, a greater sense of one’s own individuality and subjectivity, a concern with self-fulfillment and self-development. This is the change misdiagnosed as narcissism.”

(From Arlene Skolnick. Embattled Paradise. New York: Basic Books, 1991. 11.)

Plagiarized

- The large number of “self-help” books published each year attest to Americans’ concern with self-improvement and achieving more fulfilling lives. This process might be
- described as “psychological gentrification.”

✓ Correct

- **The large number of self-help books published each year attest to Americans' concern with self-improvement and their desire to have a more fulfilling life. Skolnick labels this process as "psychological gentrification" (11).**
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As the example above illustrates, putting quotation marks around a borrowed word or phrase is not sufficient documentation.

You must also acknowledge the author and give the page numbers so a reader can consult the original source and locate the word or phrase.

In the original source, Skolnick takes credit ("a process I call") for coining the term "psychological gentrification." Quotation marks in the original appear to be used for emphasis. Phrases in quotations should be cited unless they have become common usage (e.g., "postindustrial" in the original source above).

Electronic Resources

Increasingly, students rely on electronic resources (the Internet, World Wide Web, on-line documents, etc.) as reference materials.

It is important to remember that electronic resources must be cited and, when appropriate, quoted, in the same manner as traditional printed resources.

While canons of style for citing electronic resources are incomplete and evolving, the following should be of assistance to students:

Li, X., and Crane, N.B. (1996) *Electronic styles: a handbook for citing electronic information*. Medford, N.J.: Information Today.

<http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/writing/tools/citation.html>

<http://www.apastyle.org/elecref.html>

http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cup/cgos/idx_basic.html

Resources

Your professor. Instructors may require more specific standards for documenting source materials in written assignments. Any questions or uncertainty about proper citation should be addressed to the instructor of the course, either during established office hours or by arrangement.

The Writing Center. Part of The Writing Program, the Writing Center (THH 310, 740-3691) offers tutoring for writing papers and improving writing skills for students at all levels.

SCampus. All students should have received a copy of this student guidebook which contains the Student Conduct Code, other policies applicable to students, and information about university resources available to assist students in their pursuit of academic success. *SCampus* is available in printed form at Topping Student Center or electronically at <http://www.usc.edu/go/scampus>.

Summary

Students should be aware that the information contained in this booklet addresses general standards taught by The Writing Program concerning plagiarism and citation of sources.

Individual instructors in all university courses may specify additional requirements for their assignments. Likewise, some academic departments or schools may articulate standards that vary from those stated in this guide.

In either case, the instructor responsible for an assignment should be consulted when students have questions regarding standards for that assignment.

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