

MLA: How to Use Sources

This guide to MLA (Modern Language Association) citation style covers how to use sources and avoid plagiarism.

Why Do You Need To Use Sources?

You need to use sources to participate in ongoing academic conversations. To ensure that your discussions are engaged, relevant, and reliable, you have three options:

1. Use **summary** to give an **overview** of what has already been said on a topic so that you can take a position in response.
2. Use **paraphrase** to focus on specific **details** of an idea or argument so that you can respond to it or draw on it for support.
3. Use **quotation** to represent the **exact wording** of somebody's idea so that you can discuss possible interpretations and implications of the phrasing.

How Do You Know What You Need to Cite?

Many students fail to participate in academic conversations when they assemble quotations without interpreting and/or responding to the ideas expressed in them. Your work is judged on your independent use of available research, how you have integrated and applied it, and to what use you have put it. It is not enough just to transfer data or information into your text.

You have to interpret source material to make knowledge.

Summary and paraphrase are often preferred in academic writing because they make it easier to integrate the ideas of others into your own work.

How Do I Know What I Need to Cite?

You need to cite the **arguments** you are responding to. In order to accurately represent the ongoing conversation, you need to explain who has said what, why, and to what effect. “Facts” can be arguments if they are open to dispute.

Generally speaking, your conclusions are more reliable when readers can check the accuracy of your sources. If, however, something can be found in more than one source (some instructors say three), it might be considered common knowledge within the field of research. If something is considered common knowledge, you do not need to cite it.

How to Summarize In MLA

Because a summary is a condensed version – in your own words – of a whole work or an overarching argument, you should:

- Identify the main points.
- Condense the message.
- Maintain the emphases of the original.
- Expect your summary to be shorter than the original.
- Avoid plagiarism by signalling at the beginning of the summary whose work you are referring to and by citing the source in the list of references at the end of your paper.

Remember, direct quotation isn't the only use of sources that requires citation!

Example Summary

Original Text/Quotation:

"The big picture is about knowledge building: each piece of reported research adds to the collective construction of knowledge. Research serves as the foundation on which new contributions to knowledge are built. Without citation, there is no reliable and organized system for knowledge building, no mortar for securing the foundation" (Walker and Taylor 9).

Summary:

Walker and Taylor point out that the real purpose of citation is to create a shared knowledge base (9).

- Names of the authors signal where the summary begins.
- The authors' names are not repeated to avoid redundancy.

List of References:

Work Cited

Walker, Janice R., and Todd Taylor. *The Columbia Guide to Online Style*. New York: Columbia UP, 1998. Print.

- Use “Works Cited” for a list of two or more items.
- If reference is longer than one line, use hanging indents. In MS Word, highlight the text and click “CTRL + T” or select “hanging” in the paragraph formatting options. To see this properly formatted, download the [pdf](#).

How to Paraphrase In MLA

Because a paraphrase is a detailed, accurate rendition—in your own words—of a text, you should

- Restate the entire message in your own words following the original
- Reproduce the emphases of the original
- Expect your paraphrase to be as long as the original or longer
- Avoid plagiarism by signalling at the beginning of the paraphrase whose work you are referring to and by giving a page reference where the paraphrase ends. Be sure to include the source in the list of references at the end of the paper.

Example Paraphrase

Original Text/Quotation:

"The big picture is about knowledge building: each piece of reported research adds to the collective construction of knowledge. Research serves as the foundation on which new contributions to knowledge are built. Without citation,

there is no reliable and organized system for knowledge building, no mortar for securing the foundation" (Walker and Taylor 9).

Paraphrase:

Walker and Taylor emphasize that the real reason why we cite sources we have consulted is to contribute to the creation of shared knowledge. The research of others is the base on which new understanding is established. If we did not cite the work of others, there would be no accepted method "for knowledge building" (9).

- Names of the authors signal where the paraphrase begins and the page reference shows where it ends.
- Quotation marks show where the original wording has been used.

List of References:

Work Cited

Walker, Janice R., and Todd Taylor. *The Columbia Guide to Online Style*. New York: Columbia UP, 1998. Print.

How to Use a Quotation In MLA

There are four main points to remember with a quotation:

- Lead up to it.
- Signal that it is a quotation by using quotation marks or indentation in the case of block quotations.
- Cite the quotation.
- Elaborate on its significance

The last point is very important. A quotation does not speak for itself. Comment on its significance; don't just insert it to prove that you have done research.

Example Quotation

The second, less obvious, reason behind documentation of sources is that citation is necessary in order show how knowledge is formed. Citations document how our collective knowledge base has taken shape over the years. Walker and Taylor, the authors of *The Columbia Guide to Online Style* explain it this way:

The big picture is about knowledge building: each piece of reported research adds to the collective construction of knowledge. Research serves as the foundation on which new contributions to knowledge are built. Without citation, there is no reliable and organized system for knowledge building, no mortar for securing the foundation. (9)

When you cite somebody else's work, you show where you got your understanding of a given topic, and whose ideas you are building on. If, however, you pass off other people's work as your own, your intellectual dishonesty affects not only your own university career but also the foundation for the —organized accumulation of academic knowledge (Walker and Taylor 10).

- Leading up to the quotation (beginning of paragraph) helps the reader understand its relevance.
- Authors' names signal the start of cited material.
- No quotation marks needed around quotation because the indentation signals that this is a direct quotation. Only the page number is given since the rest of the information has already been provided.
- No indentation after quotation since this is a continuation of the paragraph.
- Quotation marks in last line signal that this is a quote.

List of References:

Work Cited

Walker, Janice R., and Todd Taylor. *The Columbia Guide to Online Style*. New York: Columbia UP, 1998. Print.

How to Integrate Sources

Your citations both show your readers how you have created knowledge and invite them to engage with a point of view or to distance themselves from it.

For this interaction to take place, the citation must be integrated properly.

- **Signal** your use of source material.
 - Use quotation marks for direct quotes.
 - Use a lead-in, such as the author's name, to signal that you are paraphrasing or summarizing.
 - Use pronouns to refer back to the authors in extended paraphrases.
- **Document** the reference according to the style guide preferred by your department.
- **Integrate** the reference smoothly into your text.
- **Comment** in detail on the significance of the citation. It does not speak for itself.

To signal how you evaluate a source use verbs such as “claims,” “finds,” and “states.” Choosing these verbs carefully will help you build a clear argument.

Negative Evaluation

- Signal verbs: claims, implies, assumes, etc.
 - Ex. Booth, Colomb, and Williams **imply** that students actually have a real interest in entering into a dialogue with their sources (12). That viewpoint is very much contested by my experience.

Positive Evaluation

- Signal verbs: finds, shows, demonstrates, etc.
 - Ex. Booth, Colomb, and Williams **find** that when we look up a fact or an idea, we become involved in a debate with the writer of the source we consult (12).

Non-Evaluative

- Signal verbs: states, reports, studies, etc.
 - Ex. "Every time we consult a source, we join and by joining, sustain a conversation that may be decades, even centuries old," say Booth, Colomb, and Williams (12).

Inappropriate Summary and Paraphrase

Failure to cite summarized and paraphrased material is one of the most common causes of plagiarism.

The following text examples from Troyka, Buckley, and Gates' *Handbook for Writers* show how easily plagiarism can occur when you summarize or paraphrase a text (552-555).

Original:

Unfortunately, different countries have different ideas about exactly how close is close. It is easy enough to test your own "space reaction": when you are talking to someone in the street or in any open space, reach out with your arm and see where the nearest point on his body comes. If you hail from western Europe, you will find that he is at roughly fingertip distance from you. In other words, as you reach out, your fingertips will just about make contact with his shoulder. If you come from eastern Europe, you will find that you are standing at "wrist distance". If you come from the Mediterranean region, you will find that you are much closer to your companion, at little more than "elbow distance."

Inappropriate (Plagiarized) Summary

Different countries have different ideas about exactly how close is close. West Europeans prefer to be at arms' length from the person they are talking to while east Europeans prefer **wrist distance** and the Mediterranean like **elbow distance** (Morris 131).

Appropriate Summary

Expected amounts of space between people when they are talking differ among cultures: in general, people from western Europe prefer fingertip to shoulder distance, from eastern Europe wrist to shoulder, and from the Mediterranean elbow to shoulder (Morris 131).

Inappropriate (Plagiarized) Paraphrase

Regrettably, different nations think differently about exactly how close is close. Test yourself: **When you are talking to someone in the street or in any open space**, stretch out your arm to measure how close that person is to you. If you are from western Europe, you will find that **your fingertips will just about make contact with the person's shoulder**. If you are from eastern Europe, your wrist will reach the person's shoulder. If you are **from the Mediterranean region, you will find that you are much closer to your companion**, when your elbow will reach that person's shoulder (Morris 131).

Appropriate Paraphrase

According to Desmond Morris (1977) people from different nations think that "close" means different things. You can easily see what your reaction is to how close to you people stand by reaching out the length of your arm to measure how close someone is as the two of you talk. When people from western Europe stand on the street and talk together, the space between them is the distance it would take one person's fingertips to reach to the other person's shoulder. People from eastern Europe converse at a wrist-to-shoulder distance. People from the Mediterranean, however, prefer an elbow-to-shoulder distance (131).

Ten Tips for Avoiding Misconduct

1. Be transparent about your research process by citing all the sources you have used and only the sources you have used.
2. Use a reliable note-taking system and add citations during the composing process—cite while you write! Leaving your documentation to the end of your writing process is a recipe for disaster.

3. Engage critically with your sources by synthesizing, summarizing, assessing, and responding.
4. Use voice markers to distinguish between your opinion and the opinions expressed in your sources.
5. Learn the three ways of using sources: summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting.
6. Follow the citation guidelines for whichever documentation style is required in the course.
7. Clarify the assignment requirements.
8. Read your source material carefully and represent it accurately in your paper.
9. Adhere to restrictions on the quality and/or type of sources required.
10. Start your projects early. Leave time for the possibility that you'll need to do more research, and leave time to make sure that all your citations are clearly demarcated.

Works Cited

Morris, Desmond. *Manwatching*. New York: Abrams, 1977. Print.

Troyka, Lynn Q., Joanne Buckley, and David Gates. *Simon and Schuster Handbook for Writers*. 1st Canadian ed. Scarborough: Prentice Hall Canada, 1996. Print.

Walker, Janice R., and Todd Taylor. *The Columbia Guide to Online Style*. New York: Columbia UP, 1998. Print.

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