

Words and Ideas of Your Own:

How to avoid Plagiarism and its Consequences

It's 1:00 a.m. You have eight hours to write a 600-word essay on the politics of marriage in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*. A classmate calls. "Great news," she says. "My cousin at State gave me some lecture notes." Together you sift through the notes for inspiration. Marriage, the notes say, is "not simply a conventional happy ending, but also the ideal tactic of narrative closure." This comment reminds you that the neat pairing off of characters at the end of the novel seems a bit unrealistic. So you sit down at your computer and begin your essay with these words: *Marriage in Jane Austen is not simply a conventional happy ending, but also the ideal tactic of narrative closure*. You smile, believing you are off to a solid start. Why, then, does Dr. Ethos hold your essay until class is over? And why is she talking about acknowledging sources and the possibility of plagiarism?

What is plagiarism, and why is it wrong? Plagiarism is using words or ideas that did not originate in your own mind **without acknowledging their source**. Plagiarism is dishonest; it is a form of theft. It violates the principle of trust upon which a liberal arts education is based.

What are the consequences of plagiarizing at Meredith? Plagiarism, intentional or unintentional, is an honor code violation. A plagiarized essay will earn a zero in a course, and your instructor may fail you for plagiarizing. Honor Council penalties for plagiarism range from suspension to supervised study in using sources correctly.

How can a professor detect plagiarism? Because Meredith faculty generally read several hundred student essays each year, we can often discern shifts in voice and style within a piece of writing. Although essays written out of class are usually more polished than those written in class and on exams, extreme contrasts in different assignments by a single student can also set off alarms.

Professors read widely and often recognize the ideas and style of critics in our disciplines. Your English professor, for instance, might recognize the ideas of Tony Tanner in the comments on Jane Austen offered above. Although you might think you are quoting from a professor's lecture (an offense in itself if you don't acknowledge the source), you would, in fact, be plagiarizing the work of an established Austen critic in the situation described above.

Are Internet sources any different? No. Submitting an essay purchased from an online writing service is an act of plagiarism. If you use any material from the Internet or electronic sources, you must cite those sources properly. You may find it easy to locate an essay on the Internet. Keep in mind that your professor can find it, too. Also, remember that Internet materials vary widely in their quality and reliability. Before using Internet sources, see the English Department's handouts entitled "Citations in the Digital Age" and "Using the World Wide Web for Research in English."

What has to be acknowledged? Any facts or ideas that are not generally known must be acknowledged. You need not cite a source when you write that setting is an important element of fiction, but if you mention a point from a critical essay on setting in a specific story, you must cite your source.

How can sources be used? A large part of college writing involves reporting and responding to the words and ideas of others. You can accomplish these aims by using sources in one of three ways: direct quotation, summary, and paraphrase. These methods can also be combined, as in the final example below.

Direct quotation:

A direct quotation offers the exact words of a source. It is used when those words illustrate your point precisely and completely, lending strength to the essay. Use direct quotations sparingly. Place direct quotes in quotation marks, and place a parenthetical citation after the quotation marks. If the quotation is longer than three lines, use the block format designated by MLA. Do not alter the quotation in any way.

Example:

In contrasting the novels of Mark Twain, Lionel Trilling writes, "The truth of *Huckleberry Finn* is of a different kind from that of *Tom Sawyer*. It is a more intense truth, fiercer and more complex. *Tom Sawyer* has the truth of honesty—what it says about things and feelings is never false and always both adequate and beautiful. *Huckleberry Finn* has this kind of truth, too, but it has also the truth of moral passion; it deals directly with the virtue and depravity of man's heart" (106).

Summary:

A summary presents the main idea or ideas of a source, usually in a condensed form. The source is acknowledged in a parenthetical citation and a listing in the Works Cited.

Example:

Trilling contrasts the simple honesty of *Tom Sawyer* with the deeper and broader moral truths of *Huckleberry Finn* (106).

Paraphrase:

Occupying the middle ground between direct quotation and summary, the paraphrase restates another writer's ideas in your own words. Paraphrasing is a good way to test your understanding of an idea. When you paraphrase in an essay, make sure not to echo the wording and sentence structure of the source. Offer a parenthetical citation at the end of the paraphrase and bibliographic information in the Works Cited.

Example:

Lionel Trilling observes that Mark Twain's novel *Huckleberry Finn* probes deeper than his earlier *Tom Sawyer* in examining the truths of the human heart. Like *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn* represents actions and emotions with forthright and moving accuracy; but it goes farther, exploring the more complex and deeper issues of moral good and evil (106).

Combined method--Paraphrase with direct quotations:

According to Trilling, Mark Twain's novels *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* express two different kinds of truth. *Tom Sawyer* "has the truth of honesty—what it says about things and feelings is never false and always both adequate and beautiful" (Trilling 106). Building upon this simple honesty, *Huckleberry Finn* explores the more complex "truth of moral passion; it deals directly with the virtue and depravity of man's heart" (Trilling 106).

Works Cited

Tanner, Tony. *Jane Austen*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986.

Trilling, Lionel. *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society*. New York: Viking, 1950.