AVOIDING PLAGIARISM AND LAZY WRITING

Students are often confused about how to use materials from sources (e.g., journals and books) that they read. Too often material is used inappropriately, in most cases because a student may not know how to properly use such material. The information on this page will help you to avoid two serious flaws in writing plagiarism and lazy writing.

What is Plagiarism?

Plagiarism occurs when you use someone else's words or ideas from a copyrighted source. Whenever something is fixed in some medium (for example, a book, journal, electronic storage medium, or even a term paper written by a fellow student) the work is automatically copyrighted. Using copyrighted material as your own is at best unethical, and at worst illegal. You can expect to receive a very low grade, perhaps even a zero, on an assignment with plagiarized material. You should consult your instructor for her or his policies on plagiarized work.

When most students think of plagiarism they think of using someone else's words or ideas without properly citing the source. Although this is one form of plagiarism, others exist. For example if you use someone else's words or ideas, but change only a couple of words you have also plagiarized. Let's take a look at a couple of examples of outright plagiarism. We'll use a sample paragraph from Horowitz, Willging, and Bordens (1998, p. 175) for illustration purposes.

Horowitz, et al. write the following about the "misinformation effect" in eyewitness memory:

The dynamic nature of human memory suggests that information in memory can be influenced by a variety of factors. For example, what we decide to put or encode into memory is affected by information already in memory.

If you were to reproduce this passage without placing the material in quotation marks and citing the source, you would be guilty of plagiarism. But, plagiarism also occurs if you simply change a couple of words and use the rest:

The dynamic character of human memory suggests that information stored in memory can be acted upon by many factors. For example, what we decide to place or encode into memory is affected by information already in memory.

Notice that we have merely changed a couple of words (shown in italics). However, the basic structure, tone and organization of the original source remains the same.

How can I avoid plagiarism?

The best way to avoid outright plagiarism is to paraphrase information from sources you read and properly cite the source. Here is an example of how to paraphrase our sample passage:

According to Horowitz, Willging and Bordens (1998), human memory is a dynamic, active process and not a static one. Consequently, memories can be affected by many things. As
an example, consider the fact that what we decide to store in memory may be influenced by information already there (Horowitz, Willging & Bordens, 1998).

Notice what we have done here. No longer have we used the words of Horowitz, et al.. We have taken what they wrote and translated it into our own words. The essence of what Horowitz, et al. wrote is still there, but it is now expressed in our own terminology. Notice also that we cited the source in the opening sentence of the paragraph. Proper citation is essential to avoiding plagiarism. We could have cited the source differently, as the following example shows:

Human memory is a dynamic, active process and not a static one. Consequently, memories can be affected by many things. As an example, consider the fact that what we decide to store in memory may be influenced by information already there (Horowitz, Willging & Bordens, 1998).

But what if you think the original wording is necessary to convey precise meaning. It is perfectly acceptable to use a direct quote from a source. The catch is you have to surround it in quotation marks, or if the quotation is long set it off in a block paragraph style, and correctly cite the source. So you could have done the following:

"The dynamic nature of human memory suggests that information in memory can be influenced by a variety of factors. For example, what we decide to put or encode into memory is affected by information already in memory" (Horowitz, Willging, & Bordens, 1998, p. 175).

Notice we have enclosed the passage in quotation marks and provided the appropriate reference citation which includes the page number on which the quoted material may be found.

What is Lazy Writing?

Rosnow and Rosnow (1997) define lazy writing as a writing flaw closely related to plagiarism. In the case of lazy writing, however, material that is copied from a source word for word, or nearly so, is cited. When a student uses too much directly quoted material (even if it is correctly cited) in his or her writing the result is a paper that is largely the work of someone else. Let's take a look at an example of lazy writing by continuing the passage on the misinformation effect.

The dynamic nature of human memory suggests that information in memory can be influenced by a variety of factors. For example, what we decide to put or encode into memory is affected by information already in memory (Horowitz, Willging, & Bordens, 1998). Information encountered after encoding something into memory can influence the stored information. This effect of biasing the memory of postevent information is known as the misinformation effect (Loftus, Schooler, & Wagenaar, 1985). It is interesting that misleading information need not be encountered after one has witnessed an event for the misinformation effect to occur (Horowitz, Willging, & Bordens, 1998).

In the passage above there is only one sentence that is original to the author (the one shown in blue). The rest of the paragraph is taken word for word from Horowitz, Willging and Bordens (1998). A paper comprising paragraph after paragraph of another person's work, with very little of your own work is lazy writing and is inappropriate. At best you can expect a low grade on
Remember, even if you change a couple of words here and there you are still engaging in lazy writing. It doesn't make things any better if you simply change a few words, but retain most of what the original authors wrote, as is the case in the following example:

The *active* nature of human memory suggests that information in memory can be modified by *many* factors. For example, what we decide to put or encode into memory is affected by *information already in memory* (Horowitz, Willging, & Bordens, 1998). Information encountered after encoding something into memory can influence the stored information. *This effect of changing the memory of postevent information is known as the misinformation effect* (Loftus, Schooler, & Wagenaar, 1985). It is interesting that *biasing* information need not be *experienced* after one has witnessed an event for the misinformation effect to occur (Horowitz, Willging, & Bordens, 1998).

In this example we have changed a few words (shown in *italics*). Simply changing a few words does not constitute an appropriate paraphrase of what the original authors wrote, even though you provided a proper citation. You must take steps to properly paraphrase and cite sources, as we showed previously.

Next, we give some tips on how to avoid the traps of plagiarism and lazy writing.

**Tips for Avoiding Plagiarism and Lazy Writing?**

We have already told you that the best way to avoid plagiarism is to correctly paraphrase and cite sources. This goes for lazy writing as well. Keep the following rules of thumb in mind when writing a paper:

1. Always properly cite the source of words and ideas that are not your own.
2. Always paraphrase information from another source and provide a proper citation.
3. Enclose directly quoted material in quotation marks or set longer passages off in a block paragraph style and provide the proper citation, which includes the page number(s) where the material can be found in the original source.
4. Use quoted material sparingly and *only* to support something you have written *in your own words*.
5. Make sure that any written assignment you turn in is written in your own words. *Never* turn in a paper that consists of large amounts of material taken from other sources with little of your own writing. This true even if you made some minor, cosmetic changes to the original material and properly cited the original source.
Web Sites to Help You Avoid Plagiarism and Lazy Writing

To get some more information on plagiarism and how to avoid it try visiting the following sites:

http://www.writing.nwu.edu/tips/plag.html#what

http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/QuotingSources.html

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r_quotprsum.html

http://www.asu.edu/duas/wcenter/paraphrasing.html

http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/wts/plagiarism.html

http://www.hamilton.edu/~wts/wts/plagiarism.html

http://www.hiu.edu/users/mfbhl/wiu/plagiarism.htm

http://sja.ucdavis.edu/avoid.htm

A site that is specific to plagiarism and the Internet is

http://www.wiu.edu/users/mfbhl/wiu/plagiarism.htm

A site with links to several other sites is

http://plagiarism.phys.virginia.edu/links.html