

## USING AND CITING SOURCES<sup>1</sup>

Whenever you use another author's information or his or her wording, you must give credit to that source. If you do not do so, you may be engaged in intellectual theft or plagiarism. This is a serious offense.

*There are two basic and universal rules regarding sources:*

**1. If you use the language of your source, you must quote it exactly and enclose it in quotation marks.** There are two ways of using source material: direct quotation and paraphrase. A direct quotation is either enclosed in quotation marks or indented in the page, and the exact wording of the source is used. If part of the wording is omitted, an ellipsis (three periods, four if necessary for punctuation) is used. **In any case, several words in succession taken from another source constitute direct quotation and must be acknowledged as such.**

A paraphrase employs source material by restating an idea in an entirely new form that is original in both sentence structure and word choice. Taking the basic structure from a source and substituting a few words is an unacceptable paraphrase and may be construed as plagiarism. Similarly, creating a new sentence by merging the wording of two or more sources is also unacceptable.

The following examples illustrate the differences between acceptable and unacceptable paraphrase:

**Source:** "A grand unified theory has long been the holy grail of physicists. Since ancient times, physicists have sought minimalist explanations of nature. Theories with four basic particles are considered better than theories of ten." - Lightman, Alan. *Ancient Light: Our Changing View of the Universe*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991. p. 106

### Unacceptable paraphrase

A grand unified theory has long been the central goal of scientists. Since the dawn of time, men of science have looked for minimalist explanations of natural phenomena. A theory with four elementary particles is considered better than a theory of ten.

[This writer has merely substituted a few words of his or her own for words in the source. The structure and overall wording of the sentences, however, are Lightman's. The result is plagiarism.]

### Unacceptable paraphrase

Physicists have long had the grand unified theory as their holy grail. Science always tries to give a minimalist explanations for natural phenomena. The best theory is the one with the fewest elements.

[The structure of the individual sentences in this passage is somewhat original, but the order of sentences is clearly taken from Lightman. In addition the writer has used several phrases taken directly from the source, such as "minimalist explanations of nature." Borrowing such phrases without enclosing them in quotation marks makes the writer guilty of plagiarism.]

### Acceptable Paraphrase

Physicists have long sought a grand unified theory, since scientists have always preferred theories with the fewest number of elements

[This writer has reproduced much of the meaning of Lightman's passage, but in a sentence that is original in structure and word choice. The only major words and phrases taken from Lightman are *grand unified theory*, *theories*, and *physicists*. Such duplication is acceptable, since it would be cumbersome to find synonyms for these basic terms.]

But even a quotation converted into an acceptable paraphrase, such as the one above, will need to have its source cited in your paper if it falls under the second rule for acknowledging sources, which deals not with the *language* of the original source, but with its ideas.

**2. Even if they are acceptably paraphrased, all ideas and information taken from a source must be acknowledged unless they are considered common knowledge.** The crucial term in this rule is, of course, "common knowledge." There is, however, a simple test to determine whether or not something should be considered common knowledge and need not be documented:

Would this idea or piece of information be familiar to someone like you (a classmate, for example) who has not researched the subject? If the answer is "yes," then you do not have to cite the source. Otherwise, you must indicate the source of the material, even if it appears in several texts. Contrary to some commonly held opinions, appearing in several sources does not make an item of information common knowledge. Some of the most obscure facts in physics or biochemistry, for example, will appear in numerous articles or texts over the years. Still, they are hardly common knowledge.

<sup>1</sup> From the Writing Program at MIT