

Referencing and plagiarism

The following transcript is based on material in *How to Write Better Essays*, by Bryan Greetham.

Plagiarism is, quite simply, the attempt to present someone else's ideas or arguments as your own, or taking credit for someone else's work. It's regarded as a serious form of academic dishonesty. It's all too possible to plagiarise without realizing it: you may not be aware of the conventions of citing references, or you might find when you come to write up your notes that you didn't make a note of where you found a key idea. Unfortunately it's also possible to go too far in the opposite direction, to the point where the point of the essay is lost in a sea of referencing and you are afraid to put forward any original idea of your own if it can't be backed up with a reference!

There's a simple 'six-point code' that will help you decide when and how to cite to avoid both these extremes, and you might find it useful to write out the points and stick them on your computer as a quick reference. Basically, you need to provide a reference for:

1. Distinctive ideas
2. Distinctive structure or organizing strategy
3. Information or data from a particular source
4. Verbatim phrase or passage
5. Anything that's not common knowledge
6. Finally, if in doubt, cite!

Let's go through each of those in a bit more detail.

1. Distinctive ideas.

If an idea can be found in any number of reference resources without being associated with an individual thinker, chances are it's not a distinctive idea. So for example you don't need to provide a citation if you say in your essay that the French Revolution began in July 1789, but if you are discussing one specific historian's view of the causes of it, that would require citation. This gets a bit more complicated for distinctive ideas that have become well-known

within the discipline: Karl Marx coined the term 'alienation', but it's now so well established that it wouldn't require a citation: if however you were to discuss a particular thinker's interpretation of alienation, that would need a reference.

2. Distinctive structure or organization.

A bit more difficult this one: the rule of thumb is that if the author has contributed something distinctive in his or her organisation of the material, even if that material itself is familiar, it requires a citation. This list itself is a good example: each point is not especially distinctive in itself, but the organisation of them into an easy-to-use 6-point code is. So if any individual point were to be mentioned in isolation you would not need to cite the source, but if you referred to the 6-point code as a model or listed the points in this form, then you would need to supply a citation.

3. Information or data from a particular source.

This is usually pretty straightforward: if you've collected a set of data such as statistics from a specific source you need to cite the source so that your readers know who was responsible for compiling the information and where they can find the original material.

4. Verbatim phrase or passage.

This can apply even to a single word if that word is distinctive in the author's argument. It can be much more efficient to use a perfectly chosen word that captures a concept concisely, putting quotation marks around it and citing the reference, than to slavishly try to put it into your own words: remember that you will still have to cite a distinctive idea whether it's put into your own words or uses the author's verbatim!

5. Anything that's not common knowledge.

Sometimes it's obvious what is common knowledge – a widely used term such as 'paradigm' within the disciplines of social sciences and philosophy, for example, or the common opinion that many people in the UK are delighted that the 2012 Olympic Games are to be held in London. But in less clear-cut cases, remember rule 6:

6. If in doubt, cite!

Better to be safe than sorry, although don't fall into the trap of assuming that the more references in an essay, the higher the mark – good citation is not a substitute for clear thinking!

As well as this code, remember that the single best way to avoid plagiarism and also to get higher marks for your essay is to go beyond simply reporting what other people have said and instead to make the ideas your own, graft them onto your own thinking, put the essence of the idea into your own words and draw out new implications.