Understanding Citations, Plagiarism, and Paraphrasing:  
A University of Virginia Honor Committee Supplement

When writing research or academic papers, it is common to use outside sources to inform your own ideas. However, it is critical that the necessary citations are provided to these outside references. Citation is important because it shows that you obtained information or ideas from another source, such as a textbook, website, or research article. By failing to cite, you are falsely portraying someone else’s ideas as your own; this is considered plagiarism, which is a form of cheating.

At the University of Virginia, cheating is an Honor offense. The Bylaws of the Honor Committee define an Honor offense as “a Significant Act of Lying, Cheating or Stealing, which Act is committed with Knowledge” (capitalized terms are defined in the Honor Committee Bylaws, which can be found at http://www.virginia.edu/honor/governing-documents/).

“Cheating” is defined in the Bylaws as “a violation of any standards, conditions, or rules for which a student may receive benefit, credit, or acknowledgment, academic or otherwise. Cheating includes, but is not limited to, performance of any of the following acts, or abetting a fellow student in the performance of any of the following acts: using unauthorized materials in the completion of work, copying from a fellow student, plagiarism, multiple submission, false citation, false data submission, and/or unauthorized acquisition of advance knowledge of the contents of an exam or assignment.”

The definition of cheating and the consequences of plagiarism/academic fraud used at the University of Virginia may differ from those of your high school or prior academic environment. All UVa students are held accountable to the expectations set forth by the Honor System; therefore, as a student at UVa, it is extremely important that you understand these expectations of academic integrity.

This Supplement is designed to elaborate on one element of cheating—plagiarism—with a particular emphasis on one kind of potential plagiarism—paraphrasing the ideas or work of another. In general, you will avoid plagiarism if you cite the sources you paraphrase and, if you use words or phrases that are distinctive to your original source. Alternatively, you can use quotation marks and provide a citation to indicate text that is identical to the original source. You should err on the side of attribution and quotation marks if you want to avoid plagiarism.

This Supplement describes plagiarism and paraphrasing in a general way. Every case of alleged plagiarism will necessarily entail unique facts and circumstances. In other words, whether or not a particular Act actually constitutes plagiarism, and thus “Cheating,” for purposes of the Honor Code, will be determined based on the unique facts and circumstances of each case (including, for example, such things as the nature of the assignment in question; the instructor’s instructions on source material, if any; the extent and manner of reliance on the ideas and work of another author; and the policies established and expectations held by the relevant school, department or instructor). Because

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1 Note: This supplement was originally created in consultation with Gregory C. Colomb, Professor of English at the University of Virginia, and revised in 2015 in consultation with Catherine Bradshaw, Professor of Education and Associate Dean for Research and Faculty Development at the University of Virginia. This supplement draws from A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations by Kate L. Turabian, revised by W. C. Booth, G. C. Colomb, J. M. Williams, and the University of Chicago Press Editorial Staff.
no one can anticipate and describe every Act that may constitute plagiarism, this Supplement is not exhaustive. If you are at all uncertain, you should speak to your instructor or consult a standards manual, such as *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, by Kate Turabian, *in advance*, about whether your actions may put you at risk of committing an Honor violation.

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PLAGIARISM: Plagiarism “occurs when a writer deliberately uses someone else’s language, ideas, or other original (not common-knowledge) material without acknowledging its source” (Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2003, p. 1). In other words, plagiarism is representing someone else’s ideas or work as your own original ideas or work. Plagiarism encompasses many things and is by far the most common manifestation of academic fraud. For example, copying a passage directly from a book, website, journal article, or any other source into a paper without using quotation marks and explicitly citing the source is considered plagiarism. Additionally, paraphrasing without citing the original source is considered plagiarism. It is very important that students properly acknowledge all ideas, work, and even distinctive words or phrases that are not their own.

Any time you describe information gleaned from an outside source, you must complete two steps of proper attribution:

1. Accompany the quotation, paraphrase, or summarized text with a parenthetical or “in-text” citation/reference to the original source
2. Include the source in the bibliography (also known as a “Works Cited” or “References” list) at the end of your paper

The exact method and formatting used to complete these two steps of citation will vary depending on which citation style you use; examples of citation styles include the American Psychological Association (APA), Modern Language Association (MLA), and the Chicago Manual of Style. Different academic disciplines use different citation styles; if you are unsure which style to use, ask your instructor. The information in this Supplement provides an overview of the concepts of plagiarism, paraphrasing, and quotations as they relate to the Honor Code at the University of Virginia. Students should consult relevant style manuals for specific and comprehensive citation guidelines relevant to their field.

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Incorporating Outside Sources Into Your Academic Writing

QUOTATIONS: If you want to include an author’s exact words, phrases, or sentences, you must use quotation marks around the verbatim material or block indent longer quotes. In addition, make sure to cite the source appropriately in-text and in the bibliography. Plagiarism occurs if you do not use quotation marks around the copied words, or if you use quotation marks but fail to cite the specific author. Of course, you should not put quotation marks around words or phrases that are not exactly those of the author – this would constitute false citation (another form of Cheating, defined in the Bylaws of the Honor Committee).
The traditional rule of thumb is to use quotation marks anytime you use three or more words in a row from another source. If you quote a longer passage (typically, a passage that is four or more lines long), you should block indent the quote; see the PARAPHRASING section below for an example of a block quote. Using only one or two words from another source usually does not require quotation marks, except in certain situations, such as when the word(s) reflect a unique term or concept. Consider, for example, the following quotation and explanation discussed in Turabian (2013):

Technology’s history exemplifies what is termed as autocatalytic process: that is, one that speeds up at a rate that increases with time, because the process catalyzes itself (Diamond, 1998, p. 301).

The phrase “autocatalytic process” is distinctive and would require quotation marks and a citation. While determining whether certain words warrant quotation marks might seem dependent on the reader, you should always use quotation marks when in doubt.

PARAPHRASING: Paraphrasing is a common method of incorporating ideas from another source into your own writing. Paraphrasing occurs when you take content or ideas from an outside source and concisely rephrase or summarize the source information in your own words. Paraphrasing does not mean merely changing a word or two or reordering the concepts in a passage; you must use your own words and your own phrasing to replace the words and phrasing of the source. Even though you use your own words, you must still cite the original source from which you obtained the content or idea (both in-text and in your references list). If you paraphrase a source but fail to cite the original source, you are committing plagiarism.

In order to avoid plagiarism when you are paraphrasing, Turabian (2013) suggests, “[D]on’t read your source as you paraphrase it. Read the passage, look away, think about it for a moment; then, still looking away, paraphrase it in your own words. Then check whether you can run your finger along your sentence and find the same ideas in the same order in your source. If you can, so can your readers. Try again” (p. 80-81).

It is important to be diligent and double-check your work, especially when you are incorporating multiple outside sources. Otherwise, you may inadvertently commit a type of plagiarism called mosaic plagiarism. According to the Harvard Guide to Using Sources (2015):

If you copy bits and pieces from a source (or several sources), changing a few words here and there without either adequately paraphrasing or quoting directly, the result is mosaic plagiarism. Even if you don’t intend to copy the source, you may end up committing this type of plagiarism as a result of careless note-taking and confusion over where your source's ideas end and your own ideas begin. You may think that you've paraphrased sufficiently, or quoted relevant passages, but if you haven't taken careful notes along the way, or if you've cut and pasted from your sources, you can lose track of the boundaries between your own ideas and those of your sources. It's not enough to have good intentions and to cite some of the material you use. You are responsible for making clear distinctions between your ideas and the ideas of the scholars who have informed your work. If you keep track of the ideas that come from your sources and have a clear understanding of how your own ideas differ from those ideas, and you follow the correct citation style, you will avoid mosaic plagiarism. (“What Constitutes Plagiarism” section, para. 6).
This example illustrates the possibility that, even where you have cited the original author, you may, in the manner and extent to which you go on to convey the author’s ideas, be found to have represented that author’s ideas or work as your own. This might be the case, for example, where you cite the original author one time at the beginning of a 10-page paper, then, after leaving the topic, return to the author’s ideas later in the paper without indicating to the reader that you have done so; that is, the reader would reasonably infer that your reference to the original author had ended and that later paraphrases of the author’s ideas or work were in fact your own original ideas or work. At UVa, an I-Panel, and, if applicable, a jury, would be asked to review the case and decide whether, in the totality of the circumstances, you have misrepresented the author’s original ideas as your own and therefore committed an Honor offense.

Possible exceptions to traditional citation rules. There is some information that is considered “common knowledge” within specific academic disciplines that may be exempt from traditional citation rules. Common knowledge is information that an educated reader is expected to know (for example, that water boils at 32 degrees Fahrenheit) and therefore does not need to be cited. What is considered to be common knowledge varies among fields; when in doubt, consult a professor or Teaching Assistant (“TA”). If you are still unsure, always err on the side of attribution. Additionally, in certain specialized fields, such as law or business, close paraphrasing may be considered acceptable; in such cases, the relevant facts and circumstances will, as in all cases, inform the question whether a particular Act constitutes plagiarism.

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Examples of How to Paraphrase

It is important to learn to appropriately paraphrase an idea. Toward that end, below are two examples designed to help you better understand what plagiarism by paraphrasing would look like. Each example also provides an appropriate paraphrase. Both examples come from the “What Constitutes Plagiarism” section of the Harvard Guide to Using Sources (2015).

Example #1:


Original Source Material: So in Romeo and Juliet, understandably in view of its early date, we cannot find that tragedy has fully emerged from the moral drama and the romantic comedy that dominated in the public theaters of Shakespeare's earliest time. Here he attempted an amalgam of romantic comedy and the tragic idea, along with the assertion of a moral lesson which is given the final emphasis—although the force of that lesson is switched from the lovers to their parents. But tragedy is necessarily at odds with the moral: it is concerned with a permanent anguishing situation, not with one that can either be put right or be instrumental in teaching the survivors to do better.

Plagiarized Version: In his essay, "The Moral Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet," Clifford Leech suggests that rather than being a straight tragedy, Romeo and Juliet is a mixture of romantic comedy and the tragic idea, and that it asserts a moral lesson which is given the final emphasis. The impact of the moral lesson is switched from the lovers to the parents (20).
**Explanation:** This is an inadequate paraphrase because the student has only replaced a few words ("mixture" for "amalgam"; "asserts a moral lesson" for "assertion of a moral lesson"; "impact" for "force") while leaving the rest of Leech’s words intact.

**Acceptable Version:** In his essay, "The Moral Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet," Clifford Leech suggests that there is more to Romeo and Juliet than simply a gloom-and-doom tragedy of two people destined to die for their illicit love. According to Leech, Romeo and Juliet is part romantic comedy, part tragedy, part morality tale in which the moral lesson is learned at the end. But this moral lesson comes with a twist: Since the lovers are dead, their parents experience the consequences of their actions (20).

**Explanation:** In this version, the student communicates Leech’s ideas (and cites Leech with an MLA in-text citation), but does not borrow language from Leech.

**Example #2:**


**Original Source Material:** Indeed, of the more than 3500 hours of instruction during medical school, an average of less than 60 hours are devoted to all of bioethics, health law and health economics combined. Most of the instruction is during the preclinical courses, leaving very little instructional time when students are experiencing bioethical or legal challenges during their hands-on, clinical training. More than 60 percent of the instructors in bioethics, health law, and health economics have not published since 1990 on the topic they are teaching.

**Plagiarized Version:** In order to advocate the use of the sitcom *Scrubs* as part of the medical education system, it is also important to look at the current bioethical curriculum. Medical school curriculum does not focus adequately on the moral issues that doctors face in the clinic. In fact, in more than 3500 hours of training that students undergo in medical school, only about 60 hours are focused on bioethics, health law, and health economics. It is also problematic that students receive this training before they actually go on to their hands-on, clinical training (Persad et al., 2008). Most of these hours are taught by instructors without current publications in the field.

**Explanation:** The information in [the last sentence of the paragraph] is drawn directly from Persad, but because the student ends the citation of Persad above, this sentence appears to be the student’s own idea.

**Acceptable Version:** In order to advocate the use of the sitcom *Scrubs* as part of the medical education system, it is also important to look at the current bioethical curriculum. Medical school curriculum does not focus adequately on the moral issues that doctors face in the clinic. In fact, according to Persad et al. (2008), only about one percent of teaching time throughout the four years of medical school is spent on ethics. As the researchers argue, this presents a problem because the students are being taught about ethical issues before they have a chance to experience those issues themselves. They also note that more than sixty percent of instructors teaching bioethics to medical students have no recent publications in the subject.
**Explanation:** The student mentions the researchers in each sentence, which makes it clear that all the information in this paragraph has been drawn from Persad et al. The student also uses a clear APA in-text citation to point the reader to the original article.

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In conclusion, paraphrasing is distilling or summarizing another author’s ideas into your own words, while providing appropriate citation to the original source. It is important to evaluate source information critically in order to determine if you are able to paraphrase or summarize the information responsibly. In some instances, it may be more appropriate to provide a direct quotation along with the citation. When in doubt about paraphrasing, use quotation marks. If your words are too similar with those of the original source, a reader may “think that you cross[ed] the line from fair paraphrase to plagiarism” (Turabian, 2013, p. 80). Whether or not the line has been crossed will be decided on a case-by-case basis; since the facts and circumstances of each Honor case are unique, it is impossible to anticipate and describe every example of paraphrasing that may constitute plagiarism. **The important question is whether you have represented someone else’s ideas or work as your own original ideas or work.**

Finally, remember, even if you have correctly paraphrased your source—that is, even if quotation marks are not necessary—you must also cite the original source from which you got the ideas or information.

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References


