

Research-based Writing in College: Doing Honest Work & Avoiding Plagiarism

In college, professors will often assign papers or reports requiring you to read traditional print or electronic sources—textbooks, journal articles, websites. Using the Internet puts a world of information at your fingertips. Yet at the same time, the Internet can tempt some students to copy text and paste it into their assignments without properly quoting, citing, and evaluating the Web sources.

Over the past few years, colleges have become increasingly vigilant about addressing the issue of academic dishonesty or carelessness, in some cases imposing stringent penalties on students who do not cite sources.

To be sure you use traditional print and Internet sources properly,

- Buy and use a style handbook. Often your freshman writing instructor will assign one of these handy references. If not, visit your college bookstore or writing center and familiarize yourself with one of many available handbooks.
- Learn and master at least one major citation style. Modern Language Association (MLA) style is most often used in English and other humanities courses. Social science instructors often prefer Chicago Style or American Psychological Association (APA) style. Rules for these various citation and bibliography styles appear on many college and publishers' websites, and in the best style handbooks. You'll find that some professors are more relaxed about which citation style you use, so long as you do provide adequate page and bibliographical references.
- Learn good note-taking skills. If you need more practice, seek help from your academic support or peer tutoring center on campus, or your writing center. Set up a meeting with a tutor or writing lab staffer, or take a workshop on notetaking, whether from class lectures, discussions, or your reading.
- Summarize and quote directly; don't paraphrase. All too often, when a student paraphrases something she has read, she may unintentionally plagiarize, using words that are too close to the original author's. It's better to summarize or quote directly, noting the pages or website url where you found that good quotation, than to paraphrase.
- Get trained in a reference software program, such as Endnotes, RefWorks or Procite. Check with your college library or academic support services to see if workshops are offered during the term on these helpful programs, which assist you in notetaking, keeping accurate records of page references for material you want to quote in your paper, and recording essential bibliographical information. These programs automatically organize your footnotes and bibliography, into whatever citation style—MLA, Chicago, APA or another specialized academic style—your professor is requiring for your paper.
- Plan ahead and practice good time management. Don't leave your research and writing until the night before your paper is due. Start early, within a few days after you get the assignment, and seek the guidance of your instructor or your college writing center or library staff.
- Above all, don't be afraid to ask for help on when and how to cite sources you use in your essay and report writing. Your freshman composition instructor, tutors at your college writing center, and professors in other courses who assign writing based on outside sources will welcome your questions and show you how to acknowledge sources correctly in their specific disciplines.