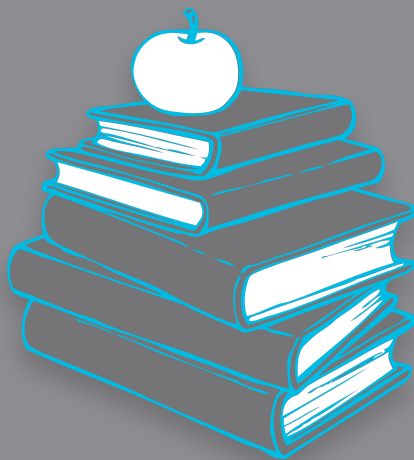


A short guide to good academic practice



What is good academic practice?

The term 'good academic practice' encompasses all of the things that academics do in order to ensure their work is scholarly, ethical and trustworthy. As a student you will be expected to follow the same principles and to ensure that you do not commit plagiarism. This guide looks at four areas of good academic practice: referencing, using high quality sources, engaging with sources effectively, and paraphrasing.

1

Referencing

Good referencing is an essential part of academic scholarship. You should reference anything that has come from an outside source, and you should back up your own viewpoints by citing reliable evidence. Referencing has three functions:

1. To acknowledge an intellectual debt to another author where you have drawn on ideas, words, facts or claims. **This applies even if you have put their ideas into your own words:** you must still reference, making it clear it has been summarised from somebody else's work.
2. To support specific facts or claims which you make in your text, so that your argument is convincing and the marker can clearly see where your supporting evidence has come from.
3. To enable the reader to find sources to which you have referred easily and quickly. This is why your bibliography should be laid out in a uniform way.

It is important to check which referencing system your academic school requires you to use (for example Harvard, Chicago, Vancouver, MHRA), and to research the conventions of that style. Your school may also have produced some guidelines about referencing: if so, follow these carefully.

2

Finding good quality sources

It is important that you use good quality academic sources in your essays. If your arguments are only supported by Wikipedia and the BBC's website, your reader will not be convinced. Far better is to use up-to-date research studies, journal articles, and writing by scholars in your field. This will add credibility to the ideas you put forward.

When sourcing materials, consider:

- Relevance
- How current/ up to date the books or articles are
- Whether the sources are academic/ reliable/good quality
- Who the writer is and whether there may be bias
- Whether journal articles have been peer-reviewed



IMPORTANT LINKS

University of Birmingham's referencing guide: www.intranet_birmingham.ac.uk/icite

Library subject support: libguides.bham.ac.uk/subjectsupport/index



3

Using sources effectively

It is important that you read widely and reference accurately, but, more than that, it is also essential that you use your reading in a purposeful and critical way. Rather than just sticking in a reference because you know you

have to, engage with other scholars' ideas. Challenge them, interpret them, evaluate them, or explain to the reader how they help to further your own arguments. Below is an example:

Although Archer (1995) explains that actors do have the capability to transform their structures, this essay questions her concept. Archer places a disproportionate emphasis on structural factors, rendering agents as mere reactionaries. She stresses the separation of structure and agency, to the extent to which she claims there is a 'temporal distinction' (Archer, 1995: 71). This essay argues, however, that they have an interwoven relationship. As Colin Hay affirms: 'The relationship between actors and their environment is an organic one' (Hay, 2002: 125). Thus, structures and agents do not, as Archer claims, exist in a distinct temporal domain.

Here the essay writer has questioned another scholar's position, giving reasons for the challenge and referring to other writers who support his or her position. Rather than simply reporting the different views on the subject, the

essay writer has engaged with the debate and offered a perspective. This is difficult to do at such a high level, but the more you can practise critical analysis, the higher your marks will climb.

4

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is often defined as putting a passage from another author into your own words. You may want to do this when referring to the viewpoints of other scholars. But how different must your paraphrase be from the original?

The answer is considerably different. The point of paraphrasing is to show you have understood another person's ideas, and can summarise them in your own writing style rather than borrowing their phrases. If you just change a few words, or add some of your own to an otherwise reproduced passage, you will probably be penalised for plagiarism.

You should aim to summarise the key ideas using different sentence structures and expressions. It is also important to credit the original writer, not just through a reference stuck at the end of the passage, but by introducing your summary with a phrase such as 'According to Smith (2000)...'



Tips for Paraphrasing

In order to paraphrase well, you must understand the essence of a writer's argument. Here are some reading strategies that may help you to do that:

- Gain an overview of the article or chapter by reading the introduction and conclusion.
- Then read the document through quickly, to get a 'feel' for the structure of it.
- When you read through again, focus on things that are relevant to your essay. As you read, consider the writer's argument. What are they saying? Do you agree or disagree?
- Then put the article out of sight, and try to sum up the writer's argument in one sentence or short paragraph. This will force you to use your own words and will test your understanding of what you have read. You can then check the original text to ensure that you have produced a fair summary.

Examples of legitimate and non-legitimate paraphrases:

An original piece of text, from the University of Birmingham (2014):

The University's 250 acre campus was recently listed in the top ten most beautiful universities in Britain by The Telegraph. It is a campus that is expanding and improving all the time with our most recent investments being in the planned building of a brand new multi-million pound sports centre, a redeveloped library with a cultural hub and a brand new student hub housed in the iconic Aston Webb building (University of Birmingham, 2014).

Paraphrase 1: only a few words changed. This would be considered plagiarism.

The University's large campus was recently listed by The Telegraph in the top ten most beautiful universities in Britain. It is a campus that is growing and developing all the time with its most recent investments being in the planned building of a new multi-million pound sports centre, an improved library with a cultural hub and a brand new student hub housed in the famous Aston Webb building.



Paraphrase 2: uses totally different expressions but gets to the heart of what the original passage wanted to convey. This paraphrase also credits the original author at the start.

The University of Birmingham website (2014) reports that its campus was recently listed in the Telegraph's 'top ten most beautiful universities in Britain.' It goes on to highlight that the campus is being continually developed. Future plans include a new sports centre, a state-of-the-art library and a student hub.

Conclusion

All scholars engage with and build on the work of other scholars. This is part of the process of academia. However, if you attempt to pass off other writers' arguments or modes of expression as your own, or if you reference inaccurately, this is considered poor academic practice. Take steps to avoid this.

References and further reading

Reference for the piece of text used in the paraphrasing example

About Birmingham [online].

Available from: www.birmingham.ac.uk/undergraduate/birmingham/About-Birmingham.aspx [Accessed 6 May 2014]

Further resources and information

Paraphrase: write it in your own words [online].

Available from: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/619/1/> [Accessed 29 April 2014]

Icite: referencing at the university of Birmingham [online].

Available from: <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/libraryservices/icite/index.aspx> [Accessed 28 May 2014]

Successful vs. Unsuccessful Paraphrases [online].

Available at: http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/QPA_paraphrase.html [Accessed 29 April 2014]

Examples of Paraphrasing [online].

Available at: <http://examples.yourdictionary.com/examples/examples-of-paraphrasing.html> [Accessed 3 May 2014]

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