Managing information: avoiding plagiarism

An effective researcher is a good record keeper. Whether you decide to keep records on paper or on your computer—or both—your challenge as a researcher will be to find systematic ways of managing information. More specifically, you will need methods for maintaining a working bibliography (see 50a), keeping track of source materials (see 50b), and taking notes without plagiarizing (stealing from) your sources (see 50c).

50a Maintain a working bibliography.

Keep a record of any sources you decide to consult. You will need this record, called a working bibliography, when you compile the list of works cited (or, for APA, your reference list) that will appear at the end of your paper. (The format of this list depends on the documentation style you are using. For MLA style, see 54; for APA style, see 59.) Your working bibliography will probably contain more sources than you will actually use and put in your list of works cited.

Researchers once recorded bibliographic information on 3" × 5" note cards. Today, however, most researchers print out this information from the library's computer catalog, periodical databases, and the Web. The printouts usually contain all the information you need to create the list of works cited. That information is given in the chart on page 396.
Information for a working bibliography

For books
- All authors; any editors or translators
- Title and subtitle
- Edition (if not the first)
- Publication information: city, publisher, and date

For periodical articles
- All authors of the article
- Title and subtitle of the article
- Title of the magazine, journal, or newspaper
- Date and volume, issue, and page numbers, if relevant

For articles from electronic databases
- Publication information for the source
- Name of the database (and item number, if relevant)
- Name of the subscription service and its URL, if available
- Library where you retrieved the source
- Date you retrieved the source

For Web sources
- All authors, editors, or translators of the work
- Editor or compiler of the Web site, if relevant
- Title and subtitle of the source and title of the longer work (if applicable)
- Publication information for a print version of the source, if available
- Title of the site, if available
- Date of publication (or latest update), if available
- Any page or paragraph numbers
- Name of the site’s sponsoring organization
- Date you visited the site and the site’s URL

NOTE: For the exact bibliographic format to be used in the final paper, see 54b (MLA) or 59b (APA).

CAUTION: For Web sources, some bibliographic information may not be available, but spend time looking for it before assuming that it doesn’t exist. Look especially for the author’s name, the date of publication (or latest update), and the name of any sponsoring organization. Such information should not be omitted unless it is genuinely unavailable.

50b Keep track of source materials.

The best way to keep track of source materials is to photocopy them or print them out (except, of course, for books). Working with photocopies and printouts—as opposed to relying on memory or hastily written notes—has several benefits. It saves you time spent in the library. It allows you to highlight key passages, perhaps even color-coding passages to reflect topic in your outline. And you can annotate the text in the margins and get a head start on the process of taking notes. Finally, working with hard copy reduces the chances of unintentional plagiarism, since you will be able to compare your use of a source in your paper with the actual source, not just with your notes (see 50c).

NOTE: It’s especially important to keep hard copies of Web sources, which may change or even become inaccessible. Make sure that your copy includes the site’s URL and the date of access, information needed for your list of works cited.

When much of their material comes from the Web, some researchers prefer to organize their source material online—by downloading relevant material into files. This can be an efficient method of working, but it carries dangers. Although it is easy to patch information from downloaded files into your own paper, do so with caution. Some researchers have unwittingly plagiarized their sources because they lost track of which words came from sources and which were their own. To prevent unintentional plagiarism, put quotation marks around any text that you have patched into your own work. In addition, you might use a different color for text from your source so it stands out unmistakably as someone else’s (not your own) writing.
50C As you take notes, avoid unintentional plagiarism.

You will discover that it is amazingly easy to borrow too much language from a source as you take notes. Do not allow this to happen. You are guilty of the academic offense known as plagiarism if you half-copy the author's sentences—either by mixing the author's phrases with your own without using quotation marks or by plugging your synonyms into the author's sentence structure. (For examples of this kind of plagiarism, see 52 and 57.)

To prevent unintentional borrowing, resist the temptation to look at the source as you take notes—except when you are quoting. Keep the source close by so you can check for accuracy, but don't try to put ideas in your own words with the source's sentences in front of you.

There are three kinds of note taking: summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting. As you take notes, be sure to include exact page references, since you will need the page numbers later if you use the information in your paper.

If you come from a culture that stresses memorization and recitation of classic texts, you may not see the need to document such sources—or even to use quotation marks to indicate that you are using the exact words of your source. In the United States, however, written texts and any original ideas they contain are viewed as the author's property. When using an author's property, writers must follow certain conventions or risk being charged with the ethical and legal offense known as plagiarism.

Summarizing without plagiarizing

A summary condenses information, perhaps reducing a chapter to a short paragraph or a paragraph to a single sentence. A summary should be written in your own words, if you use phrases from the source, put them in quotation marks.

Here is a passage from an original source that John Garcia read when researching a paper on mountain lions. Following the passage is Garcia's summary of the source.

**ORIGINAL SOURCE**

In some respects, the increasing frequency of mountain lion encounters in California has as much to do with a growing human population as it does with rising mountain lion numbers.

The scenic solitude of the western ranges is prime cougar habitat, and it is falling swiftly to the developer's spade. Meanwhile, with their ideal habitat already at its carrying capacity, mountain lions are forcing younger cats into less suitable terrain, including residential areas. Add that cougars have generally grown bolder under a lengthy ban on their being hunted, and an unsettling scenario begins to emerge.

— Rychnovsky, "Clawing into Controversy," p. 40

**SUMMARY**

Source: Rychnovsky, "Clawing into Controversy" (40)

Encounters between mountain lions and humans are on the rise in California because increasing numbers of lions are competing for a shrinking habitat.

As the lions' wild habitat shrinks, older lions force younger lions into residential areas. These lions have lost some of their fear of humans because of a ban on hunting.

**Paraphrasing without plagiarizing**

Like a summary, a paraphrase is written in your own words; but whereas a summary reports significant information in fewer words than the source, a paraphrase retells the information in roughly the same number of words. If you retain occasional choice phrases from the source, use quotation marks so you will know later which phrases are not your own.

As you read the following paraphrase of the original source on pages 398-99, notice that the language is significantly different from that in the original.

**PARAPHRASE**

Source: Rychnovsky, "Clawing into Controversy" (40)

Californians are encountering mountain lions more frequently because increasing numbers of humans and a rising population of lions are competing for the same territory. Humans have moved into mountainous regions once dominated by the lions, and the wild habitat that is left cannot sustain the current lion population. Therefore, the older lions are forcing younger lions out of the wilderness and into residential areas. And because of a ban on hunting, these younger lions have become bolder—less fearful of encounters with humans.
Using quotation marks to avoid plagiarizing

A quotation consists of the exact words from a source. In your notes, put all quoted material in quotation marks; do not trust yourself to remember later which words, phrases, and passages you have quoted and which are your own. When you quote, be sure to copy the words of your source exactly, including punctuation and capitalization. In the following example, John Garcia quotes from the original source on pages 398–99.

**QUOTATION**

Source: Rychnovský, “Clawing into Controversy” (40)

Rychnovský explains that because the mountain lions’ natural habitat can no longer sustain the population, older lions “are forcing younger cats into less suitable terrain, including residential areas.”

**WRITING MLA PAPERS**

Most English instructors and some humanities instructors will ask you to document sources with the Modern Language Association (MLA) system of citations described in section 54. When writing an MLA paper that is based on sources, you face three main challenges in addition to documenting your sources: (1) supporting a thesis, (2) avoiding plagiarism, and (3) integrating quotations and other source material.

Examples in this section are drawn from research two students conducted on the use of cell phones while driving. Angela Daly’s research paper on this topic appears on pages 448–55. Daly calls for legislation restricting use of cell phones while driving. Paul Levi’s paper opposing such legislation appears on the companion Web site for Rules for Writers (see p. 447 for the URL).

**NOTE:** For cross-disciplinary advice on finding and evaluating sources and on managing information, see sections 48–50.

**Supporting a thesis**

Most research assignments ask you to form a thesis, or main idea, and to support that thesis with well-organized evidence.

51a Form a tentative thesis.

Once you have read a variety of sources and considered all sides of your issue, you are ready to form a tentative thesis: a one-sentence (or occasionally a two-sentence) statement of your central idea. In a research paper, your thesis will answer the central research question you posed earlier (see 48a). Here, for example, is Angela Daly’s research question and her tentative thesis statement.

**Daly’s Research Question**

Should states regulate use of cell phones in moving vehicles?

**Daly’s Tentative Thesis**

States should regulate use of cell phones on the road because many drivers are using the phones irresponsibly and causing accidents.

Once you have written a rough draft and perhaps done more reading, you may decide to revise your tentative thesis, as Daly did.

**Daly’s Revised Thesis**

States must regulate use of cell phones on the road because drivers using phones are seriously impaired and because laws on negligent and reckless driving are not sufficient to punish offenders.

The thesis usually appears at the end of the introductory paragraph. To read Angela Daly’s thesis in the context of her introduction, see page 448.