Guidelines for Better Writing

Avoiding Plagiarism in Psychological Writing

Monmouth University Department of Psychology

This handout is about communication. Good communication skills will be important to your professional success, not just in psychology, but in any professional field. As a college-educated individual, you will be expected to communicate in written form, which is why Monmouth University and the Psychology Department emphasize writing so much in their curricula (from English Composition I, to the Writing Proficiency Exam, to Experimental Methods, and beyond). Good writing comes with practice. So get to it! This handout is meant to help you develop your writing skills along the way...

THE BASICS

Avoiding plagiarism in your professional writing is an important component of good communication. Chances are, you have not dreamed up everything you want to write about. Other individuals have contributed greatly to your thinking, and it is important to give them credit for their contributions. You must document your sources carefully and accurately to avoid plagiarism.

Let's begin with a definition of the issue that we're making such a fuss about. Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (2003, 11th edition) defines plagiarize as "to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own : use (another’s production) without crediting the source : to commit literary theft : present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source" (p. 946). Sounds pretty terrible, doesn't it? You certainly wouldn't do such a thing--at least, not intentionally. Unfortunately, many people plagiarize without knowing they are doing it. The following pages include some common plagiarism problems, and suggestions for overcoming them.
One of the most common forms of plagiarism is quoting without acknowledgment. Beginning with the original source (these are the exact words as they appear in Reeder, McCormick, and Esselman, 1987, page 243):

An important goal of self-reference research is to determine if the self is unique in its effect on memory.

Severely Plagiarized Version (exact words of original source are used without any acknowledgment):

An important goal of self-reference research is to determine if the self is unique in its effect on memory.

Often, an inexperienced or hurried writer will borrow entire passages from the original source, forgetting to cite a reference.

Better, But Still Plagiarized Version (original source is acknowledged with a reference, but no indication is given that these are the exact words of the original source):

According to Reeder, McCormick, and Esselman (1987), an important goal of self-reference research is to determine if the self is unique in its effect on memory.

- or -

An important goal of self-reference research is to determine if the self is unique in its effect on memory (Reeder, McCormick & Esselman, 1987).

Appropriately Quoted and Referenced Version (original source is acknowledged with a reference, and quotation marks clearly indicate that these are the exact words of the original source. In addition, a page number where the original quote appeared is provided):

According to Reeder, McCormick, and Esselman (1987), "an important goal of self-reference research is to determine if the self is unique in its effect on memory" (p. 243).

If you have obtained an electronic source off of the Internet, you may not have a page number. In this case, cite the paragraph number (para. 5) or the heading and paragraph (Introduction section, para. 5) where the quotation can be found.

Note that the exact words of the original source are used. If you quote, you cannot change the words in any way--then it wouldn't be a quote. If you want to quote, but the passage you are quoting gets long-winded, try using three ellipsis points (...). See page 119 of the APA Publication Manual for more details.

If you are going to quote from the original source, be sure to be accurate. Misquoting a source is just as severe a form of plagiarism as the rest of the problems illustrated in this handout. See pages 117 - 122 in your APA Publication Manual for more information on quoting.

By the way, the previous example would be considered acceptable acknowledgment in your paper. However, your professor always prefers to see paraphrasing rather than direct quotes. If you look over most journal articles, you will see very few quotations. That is because custom dictates
that writers express their points in their own words. At most, you will see one or two quotes in an entire article. You should try to follow this custom yourself.

**PARAPHRASING ALTERNATIVE**

What is paraphrasing, anyway? Turning once again to Merriam Webster (2003), they define paraphrase as "a restatement of a text, passage, or work giving the meaning in another form" (p. 899). Essentially, paraphrasing is explaining, in your own words, what the original source wrote. Doing so takes considerably more time and brainpower than simply quoting passages—but your professor will appreciate your efforts. The following are some important things to consider when you choose to paraphrase rather than quote from the original source.

**Original Source** (once again, these are the exact words as they appear in the original source, Reeder, McCormick, and Esselman, 1987, page 243):

> An important goal of self-reference research is to determine if the self is unique in its effect on memory.

**Plagiarized Version** (original source is acknowledged with a reference, but paraphrasing is incomplete, and no indication is given that some of these words are directly from the original source):

> The goal of research on self-referencing is to determine if using the self will have a unique effect on memory (Reeder, McCormick & Esselman, 1987).

As you can see, the italicized words above are suspect. They are the exact words used by the original authors.

** Appropriately Quoted and Referenced Version.** These words should either be enclosed in quotations (note the use of elipsis points in the following example):

> According to Reeder, McCormick, and Esselman (1987), the "goal" of research on self-referencing is "to determine if" using the self will have a "unique...effect on memory" (p. 243).

Or more fully paraphrased:

> Research focuses on whether self-referencing can be used as a memory tool to facilitate recall (Reeder, McCormick & Esselman, 1987).

Technically, the first example is acceptable—but it is rather awkward. The second example (with the complete paraphrasing) is much clearer and easier to read. Note that this version makes more sense to the reader. For example, "A unique...effect" is too vague to have any real meaning to the reader without additional information. Simply explaining that memory is improved with self-referencing makes the meaning of the passage clearer for your reader.

This is an important point, by the way. You should always try to make your writing understandable to your reader. Clear writing demonstrates that you understand the concepts that you are trying to explain.

When paraphrasing, you don't have to rely on your own creative genius alone to dream up new words. Liberal use of a
the thesaurus can save you quite a bit of time and brain power. Most word processors provide a thesaurus right on your computer screen. Just be sure to use a good dictionary, if necessary, to avoid selecting inappropriate words.

KNOWING HOW FAR TO GO WITH PARAPHRASING

Finally, some writers become terrified that they may plagiarize, simply because they are not sure which words are appropriate to change when they are paraphrasing. This knowledge comes with experience, however, the following guidelines may help you feel more at ease:

While it is important to be thorough when you paraphrase, sometimes it is inappropriate or unnecessary to change every word used by your source. Single word nouns and key words that are used repeatedly throughout the paper (e.g., "self," "self-monitoring," "memory," "research") don't have to be changed. In fact, changing these words would only serve to confuse your reader and obscure the issues you are trying to address.

If there is an "accepted terminology" for a concept use the term freely, but let your reader know that this is the term commonly used:

This personal appraisal of self as an individual of worth is generally referred to as "self-esteem" in the literature (cite a reference or two to support this point).

However, terms that are not generally known (e.g., self-monitoring) should be fully explained and referenced early in the body of the paper. For example, the following passage is a good start at explaining the concept of self-referencing:

Self-referencing, or "judging interpersonal information with respect to oneself," (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, p. 336) is apparently one strategy that individuals use to make sense of their social world.

YOUR AVAILABLE RESOURCES

If at this point you still have questions about avoiding plagiarism, you have a number of resources available to you:

- The APA Publication Manual provides some guidance, but is not meant to be a comprehensive handbook
- The Psychology Department has several excellent handbooks that you can look through for specific details and guidelines on writing
- Your psychology professor can provide general guidelines and assistance, and is willing to look over your writing for potential problems
- The University's Writing Center is an excellent and accessible resource, where you can drop by for quick help, or work one-on-one with a tutor over several weeks. You can reach them at 732-571-7542

By all means, if you are confused or unsure of your writing, ask for help. You'll be glad you did.