

plagiarism

Plagiarism

It is accepted practice in scholarly writing to identify quoted passages from an original text with the use of quotation marks or indentation with full footnote citations. This not only applies for quoted material of a sentence or more, but also for key phrases taken directly from the text.

For example, In *The Principles of Human Knowledge*, Berkeley calls the perceiver of ideas the "mind, spirit, soul or myself," and argues that this perceiver cannot be identified with the collection of ideas perceived.

Using a passage from any source without indicating in these ways that it is taken from an original source is called "plagiarism" and is not condoned in scholarly writing. Plagiarism is considered an act of intellectual dishonesty since it is representing someone else's writing as one's own.

Often inexperienced writers do not plagiarize with the intent to deceive, but simply because they become so engrossed in the wording of the original text on which they are writing that they incorporate phrases from the original into their discussion without full cognizance of what they are doing. To avoid this it is helpful to distance oneself somewhat from the text one is attempting to explain in a paper. Close the book while you write and try to explain in your own words the meaning of the text. Later you can return to the text to find citations and quotations that help to support your interpretation of it.

Paraphrasing

Another closely related problem that can arise at times in the work of inexperienced writers is that rather than simply copying the text verbatim, as occurs in cases of plagiarism, they write in close paraphrases of the text, changing some words or punctuation, omitting other words or phrases, but retaining much of the sentence structure and verbal content of the original. Thus, where Berkeley writes, "It is evident to anyone who takes a survey of the objects of human knowledge, that they are either ideas actually imprinted on the senses, or else such as are perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind," a student may write, "Berkeley says that it is clear to everyone who thinks about the objects of human knowledge, that these are either ideas in the sense organs, or those perceived by paying attention to the operations of the mind."

There are a couple of problems with paraphrasing. First, paraphrasing is a mechanical process of exchanging words and phrases for synonyms that discourages careful consideration of the meaning of the text itself. Consequently, the writer may, in making small changes in the written text, actually change the meaning of original passage without realizing it. When in the illustration above, for example, Berkeley's "ideas imprinted on the senses" is rendered in paraphrase "ideas in the sense organs," the writer erroneously suggests that the ideas that Berkeley refers to are states of the body. A second problem with paraphrasing is that since it is a mechanical process it demonstrates little of the writer's understanding of the material on which he or she is writing.

The solution to close paraphrasing is the same as the solution to unintentional plagiarizing: you should attempt to gain some distance from the text. If you close the book while writing you will never run the risk of writing in paraphrases.

Unexplained, Unsubstantiated, and Irrelevant Statements. It is not enough simply to make a statement in a scholarly paper, you must explain the statement and make it clear to the reader how the statement is relevant to the topic of the paper. If you are writing on the ideas of a particular philosopher, you must not only be concerned with what the philosopher says, but why he or she says it, and why you are reporting it in your paper. It would be of little help to a reader of a paper on Descartes' concept of nature, for example, to be told that Descartes believed that God exists if nothing is said about the strategy he uses to prove God's existence and Descartes' theism is never connected to his concept of the natural world.

Likewise, if you offer your own opinion on a particular issue in a paper, it is not sufficient simply to state your opinion; you must also give your reasons for having the opinion you have.

When writing a paper, then, you should adopt the following rules of thumb: (1) never raise a topic unless you are prepared to provide as full an explanation as is necessary to show its relevance to the subject matter of the paper, and (2) only offer your own opinion when you are prepared to provide an argument or give some reasons in support of it.

Raising Unanswered Questions

It is the writer's task in a research paper to offer some conclusions concerning the subject matter of the paper, whether it be a philosophical issue or the views of a particular philosopher. The writer fails in this responsibility when he or she raises questions in a paper while offering no suggestions as to how these questions might be answered. You should not, then, ask a question of your reader unless you are prepared to answer it. You should also avoid asking rhetorical questions, that is, making statements or claims expressed in interrogative form. Often inexperienced writers will ask a rhetorical question when they feel unsure of a claim that they wish to make in a paper. Thus instead of writing, "His theory of forms determined, in significant ways, the solutions Plato offered to the moral issues and dilemmas of his day," a tentative writer might make the same point in interrogative form by writing, "Wasn't it the theory of forms that determined, in significant ways, the solutions that Plato offered to the moral issues and dilemmas of his day?" Attempts to avoid the criticism of readers in this manner usually fail: it is clear in these instances, despite the evasive wording, that a claim is being made, and the interrogative form only serves to give the reader the impression that the writer has not thoroughly researched the paper topic.

Long Quotations. By all means avoid them. It is seldom necessary to quote any more than a few sentences from a primary or secondary source in order to support a view or interpretation in a paper.

Frequent Quotations

Quotations should be used only as a means of supporting views, ideas, interpretations, etc., that you have already explained in your paper in your own words. They should never be used as a substitute for your explanation. Consequently, you should never write your paper by simply compiling a series of quotations. The bulk of the text of your paper should be your own writing, not quotations from primary and secondary sources.

Unfair Criticism

The rule that a writer should follow in criticizing the views of a philosopher is often called the "Principle of Charity." According to this principle, before offering a criticism of a philosopher's views it is considered good practice for the writer to provide a sympathetic account of those views. Without such an account the reader cannot judge whether the criticism of a philosopher offered by a writer is cogent, or whether it is based simply on the writer's misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the philosopher's views. At times writers will deliberately misrepresent the views of a philosopher so as to make those views easier to attack. This is considered a fallacy of reasoning called a "Straw Man Argument," and should always be avoided.