Remember that there is often more than one correct way to document a source.

Different situations call for different solutions. A writer whose primary purpose is to give credit for borrowed material may need to provide less information than a writer who is examining the distinguishing features of particular editions (or even specific copies) of source texts. Similarly, scholars working in specialized fields may need to cite details about their sources that other scholars making more general use of the same resources do not.

Make your documentation useful to readers.

Good writers understand why they create citations. The reasons include demonstrating the thoroughness of the writer's research, giving credit to original sources, and ensuring that readers can find the sources consulted in order to draw their own conclusions about the writer's argument. Writers achieve the goals of documentation by providing sufficient information in a comprehensible, consistent structure.

This edition of the *MLA Handbook* is designed to help writers *think* about the sources they are documenting, *select* the information about the sources that is appropriate to the project they are creating, and *organize* it logically and without complication. Armed with a few rules and an understanding of the basic principles, a writer can generate useful documentation of any work, in any publication format.

> Think
>
> Select
>
> Organize

WHY DOCUMENT SOURCES?

Documenting sources is an aspect of writing common to all academic fields. Across the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities, authors use standard techniques to refer to the works that influenced or otherwise contributed to their research. Why?

Academic writing is at its root a conversation among scholars about a topic or question. Scholars write for their peers, communicating the results of their research through books, journal articles, and other forms of published work. In the course of a project, they seek out relevant publications, to learn from and build on earlier research. Through their own published work, they incorporate, modify, respond to, and refute previous publications.

Given the importance of this conversation to research, authors must have comprehensible, verifiable means of referring to one another's work. Such references enable them to give credit to the precursors whose ideas they borrow, build on, or contradict and allow future researchers interested in the history of the conversation to trace it back to its beginning. The references are formatted in a standard way so that they can be quickly understood and used by all, like a common language.

Students are called on to learn documentation styles in a range of courses throughout their education, but not because it is expected that all students will take up such research practices in their professional lives. Rather, learning the conventions of a form of writing—those of the research essay, for instance—prepares the student to write not just in that form but in other ones as well.

Learning a documentation style, in other words, prepares a writer to be on the lookout for the conventions to which every professional field expects its members to adhere in their writing. Legal documents must refer to prior legal documents in a standard way to be acceptable in the

legal profession. Reports on scientific research must refer to earlier research in the fashion expected in a particular scientific field. Business documents point to published information and use a language and format that are accepted in business. Journalists similarly obey conventions for identifying their sources, structuring their stories, and so on. The conventions differ from one profession to another, but their purpose is the same.

Learning good documentation practices is also a key component of academic integrity. However, avoiding charges of plagiarism is not the only reason that a student should learn to document sources. The proper use of a field's preferred documentation style is a sign of competence in a writer. Among other benefits, it shows that the writer knows the importance of giving credit where credit is due. It therefore helps the writer become part of a community of scholars and assures readers that the writer's work can be trusted.

PLAGIARISM AND ACADEMIC DISHONESTY

You may have heard or read about cases in which a politician, a journalist, or another public figure was accused of plagiarism. No doubt you have also had classroom conversations about plagiarism and academic dishonesty. Your school may have an honor code that addresses academic dishonesty; it almost certainly has disciplinary procedures meant to address cases of plagiarism. But you may nonetheless find yourself with questions: What is plagiarism? What makes it a serious offense? What does it look like? And how can scrupulous research and documentation practices help you avoid it?

What Is Plagiarism?

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines plagiarizing as committing "literary theft." Plagiarism is presenting another person's ideas, information, expressions, or entire

work as one's own. It is thus a kind of fraud: deceiving others to gain something of value. While plagiarism only sometimes has legal repercussions (e.g., when it involves copyright infringement—violating an author's exclusive legal right to publication), it is always a serious moral and ethical offense.

What Makes Plagiarism a Serious Offense?

Plagiarists are seen not only as dishonest but also as incompetent, incapable of doing research and expressing original thoughts. When professional writers are exposed as plagiarists, they are likely to lose their jobs and are certain to suffer public embarrassment, diminished prestige, and loss of future credibility. The same is true of other professionals who write in connection with their jobs, even when they are not writing for publication. The charge of plagiarism is serious because it calls into question everything about the writer's work: if *this* piece of writing is misrepresented as being original, how can a reader trust any work by the writer? One instance of plagiarism can cast a shadow across an entire career.

Schools consider plagiarism a grave matter for the same reason. If a student fails to give credit for the work of others in one project, how can a teacher trust any of the student's work? Plagiarism undermines the relationship between teachers and students, turning teachers into detectives instead of mentors, fostering suspicion instead of trust, and making it difficult for learning to take place. Students who plagiarize deprive themselves of the knowledge they would have gained if they had done their own writing. Plagiarism also can undermine public trust in educational institutions, if students are routinely allowed to pass courses and receive diplomas without doing the required work.

What Does Plagiarism Look Like?

Plagiarism can take a number of forms, including buying papers from a service on the Internet, reusing work done by another student, and copying text from published sources

without giving credit to those who produced the sources. All forms of plagiarism have in common the misrepresentation of work not done by the writer as the writer's own. (And, yes, that includes work you pay for: while celebrities may put their names on work by ghostwriters, students may not.)

Even borrowing just a few words from an author without clearly indicating that you did so constitutes plagiarism. Moreover, you can plagiarize unintentionally; in hastily taken notes, it is easy to mistake a phrase copied from a source as your original thought and then to use it without crediting the source.

Imagine, for example, that you read the following passage in the course of your research (from Michael Agar's book *Language Shock*):

> Everyone uses the word *language* and everybody these days talks about *culture*. . . . "Languaculture" is a reminder, I hope, of the *necessary* connection between its two parts. . . .

If you wrote the following sentence, it would constitute plagiarism:

> At the intersection of language and culture lies a concept that we might call "languaculture."

This sentence borrows a word from Agar's work without giving credit for it. Placing the term in quotation marks is insufficient. If you use the term, you must give credit to its source:

> At the intersection of language and culture lies a concept that Michael Agar has called "languaculture" (60).

In this version, a reference to the original author and a parenthetical citation indicate the source of the term; a corresponding entry in your list of works cited will give your reader full information about the source.

It's important to note that you need not copy an author's words to be guilty of plagiarism; if you paraphrase someone's ideas or arguments without giving credit for their origin, you have committed plagiarism. Imagine that you read the following passage (from Walter A. McDougall's *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World since 1776*):

> American Exceptionalism as our founders conceived it was defined by what America *was*, at home. Foreign policy existed to defend, not define, what America was.

If you write the following sentence, you have plagiarized, even though you changed some of the wording:

> For the founding fathers America's exceptionalism was based on the country's domestic identity, which foreign policy did not shape but merely guarded.

In this sentence, you have borrowed an author's ideas without acknowledgment. You may use the ideas, however, if you properly give credit to your source:

> As Walter A. McDougall argues, for the founding fathers America's exceptionalism was based on the country's domestic identity, which foreign policy did not shape but merely guarded (37).

In this revised sentence, which includes an in-text citation and clearly gives credit to McDougall as the source of the idea, there is no plagiarism.

How Can You Avoid Plagiarism?

Avoiding plagiarism begins with being scrupulous in your research and note-taking. Keep a complete and thorough list of all the sources that you discover during your research

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Is it possible to plagiarize yourself? Yes, it is. If you reuse ideas or phrases that you used in prior work and do not cite the prior work, you have plagiarized. Many academic honesty policies prohibit the reuse of one's prior work, even with a citation. If you want to reuse your work, consult with your instructor.

and wish to use, linking each source to the information you glean from it, so that you can double-check that your work acknowledges it. Take care in your notes to distinguish between what is not yours and what is yours, identifying ideas and phrases copied from sources you consult, summaries of your sources, and your own original ideas. As you write, carefully identify all borrowed material, including quoted words and phrases, paraphrased ideas, summarized arguments, and facts and other information.

Most important is that you check with your instructor if you are unsure about the way that you are using a particular source.

Does Absence of Documentation Indicate Plagiarism?

Documentation is not required for every type of borrowed material. Information and ideas that are common knowledge among your readers need not be documented. Common knowledge includes information widely available in reference works, such as basic biographical facts about prominent persons and the dates and circumstances of major historical events. When the facts are in dispute, however, or when your readers may want more information about your topic, it is good practice to document the material you borrow.

The rest of this section will guide you through the steps involved in giving credit for others' work. Documentation begins well before you put together your list of works cited. Sound academic use of sources starts with evaluating them and selecting the appropriate information from them.

💡 Think **EVALUATING YOUR SOURCES**

In writing a research paper, putting together a presentation, creating an online project, or doing other kinds of academic work, you will gather sources that inform, support, or otherwise help you shape your argument. The gathering of sources used to be more arduous than it is today: researchers had to spend hours in the library, tracking down printed indexes and bibliographies, locating the works uncovered, and then obtaining physical copies of the works. One part of this process used to be easier, however: a researcher could assume that the works found were reliable, since they were discovered through professionally compiled indexes and in professionally curated collections.

Today the Internet, with its many publications, databases, archives, and search engines, has accelerated the process of finding and retrieving sources—but at the same time it has complicated the researcher's assessment of their reliability. The amount and variety of information available have grown exponentially, but the origins of that information are too often unclear.

The first step, therefore, in gathering sources for your academic work is to evaluate them, asking yourself questions such as these:

Who is the author of the source? Is the author qualified to address the subject? Does the author draw on appropriate research and make a logical argument? Do you perceive bias or the possibility of it in the author's relation to the subject matter?

What is the source? Does it have a title, and does that title tell you anything about it? If it lacks a title, how would you describe it? Is it a primary source, such as an original document, creative work, or artifact, or a secondary source, which reports on or analyzes primary sources? If it is an edition, is it authoritative? Does the source document its own sources in a trustworthy manner?

How was the source produced? Does it have a recognized publisher or sponsoring organization? Was it subjected

to a process of vetting, such as peer review, through which authorities in the field assessed its quality?

Where did you find the source? Was it cited in an authoritative work? Was it among the results of a search you conducted through a scholarly database (such as the *MLA International Bibliography*) or a library's resources? Did you discover it through a commercial search engine that may weight results by popularity or even payment?

When was the source published? Could its information have been supplemented or replaced by more recent work?

These are only a few of the questions that you might consider as you evaluate the sources you use in your work. Both your judgment and your awareness of your readers' expectations are crucial at this stage.

It is important to understand that research is a cyclic process. Scholars rarely find all the sources they need in a single search. You should expect to search, evaluate the sources you find, refocus or otherwise revise your searching strategy, and begin again.

As you do your research, keep complete, well-organized records that allow you to retrace your footsteps, since you may need to return to a source for more information. Keeping good notes will also simplify the task of documenting your sources. Digital reference managers can be helpful to this end, but they have limitations. They may overlook key information, capture the wrong information, or generate citations with improper formatting. You should understand how to create your own documentation even if you use a citation generator, so that you can correct the output and can produce it yourself if the citation generator is not available.

After gathering sources, evaluating them, and winnowing out those unsuitable for your research, you will record information about the ones you plan to consult. This information is the basis of your documentation.

Google and *Wikipedia* are reasonable places to begin your research but not good places to end it. Follow up on the sources that *Wikipedia* entries cite. (Be sure to read the pages accompanying a *Wikipedia* entry, which give its history and the editors' discussions about it, since that information shows how the entry evolved and where the controversy in your subject lies.)

⊘ Select   # GATHERING INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR SOURCES

The source documentation in your finished project will be built from information you collect as you discover and read useful works. As you evaluated your sources, you asked yourself the following questions:

Who is the author of the source?
What is the title of the source?
How was the source published?
Where did you find the source?
When was the source published?

Each of these elements—author, title, publisher, location, publication date—has a place in your documentation, so keep track of them carefully. Be sure that you select the correct information about your sources. Examine the work itself for the facts about its publication. Do not rely on a listing found elsewhere, whether on the Web, in a library catalog, or in a reference book, because it may be erroneous or incomplete.

In general, you should look in the places where the source's publisher, editor, or author gives credit for or describes its production. The examples on pages 14–18 show where you can find publication facts about works in various media. We'll go into more detail about what information you need and what you do with it as we discuss organizing your documentation.