7-Ethical Use of Sources
It's helpful to understand why to cite your sources.

You likely know that research projects always need a reference or a works cited page (also called a bibliography). But have you ever wondered why?

There are some big picture reasons that don't often get articulated that might help you get better at meeting the citation needs of research projects. It's helpful to understand both the theory behind citing, as well as the mechanics of it, to really become a pro.

**TIP: How to Cite Sources**

This section introduces the concept of citing source, so you can begin your search for sources with it in mind. See the next section, How to Cite Sources for examples and the steps for citing appropriately.

In everyday life, we often have conversations where we share new insights with each other. Sometimes these are insights we've developed on our own through the course of our own everyday experiences, thinking, and reflection. Sometimes these insights come after talking to other people and learning from
additional perspectives. When we relate the new things we have learned to our family, friends, or co-workers, we may or may not fill them in on how these thoughts came to us.

Academic research leads us to the insight that comes from gaining perspectives and understandings from other people through what we read, watch, and hear. In academic work we must tell our readers who and what led us to our conclusions. Documenting our research is important because people rely on academic research to be authoritative, so it is essential for academic conversation to be as clear as possible. Documentation for clarity is a shared and respected practice, and it represents a core value of the academy called “academic integrity.” It is a way to distinguish academic conversations (or discourse) from everyday conversations (or discourse).

It is hard to talk about citation practices without considering some related concepts. Here are some definitions of those concepts that are often mentioned in assignments when citation is required.

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**What Is Academic Integrity?**

Different universities have different definitions. Ohio State University uses this definition:

> Academic integrity is a commitment, even in the face of adversity, to five fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. From these values flow principles of behavior that enable academic communities to translate ideals into action.

Please take a few moments to read the [Office of Undergraduate Education web page](#) that describes these values in more detail.
In other words, you must take full responsibility for your work, acknowledge your own efforts, and acknowledge the contributions of others’ efforts. Working/Writing with integrity requires accurately representing what you contributed, as well as acknowledging how others have influenced your work. When you are a student, an accurate representation of your knowledge is important because it will allow both you and your professors to know the extent to which you have developed as a scholar. Part of that development is evidenced by how you apply the ruler for acknowledging the work of others.

What Is Academic Misconduct?

As you might imagine, academic misconduct is when you do not use integrity in your academic work. Academic misconduct includes many different unacceptable behaviors, but the one most relevant to what we are discussing here is submitting plagiarized work:

Submitting plagiarized work for an academic requirement. Plagiarism is the representation of another's work or ideas as one's own; it includes the unacknowledged word-for-word use and/or paraphrasing of another person’s work, and/or the inappropriate unacknowledged use of another person’s ideas.

To see the full definition of academic misconduct, refer to the Ohio State University Code of Student Conduct.

NOTE: Check Your Syllabi

You might have noticed a reference to the Code of Student Conduct on several of your syllabi, as faculty are asked to include this statement for your benefit:

It is the responsibility of the Committee on Academic Misconduct to investigate or establish procedures for the investigation of all reported cases of student academic misconduct. The term “academic misconduct” includes all forms of student academic misconduct wherever committed; illustrated by, but not limited to, cases of plagiarism and dishonest practices in connection with examinations. Instructors shall report all instances of alleged academic misconduct to the committee (Faculty Rule 3335-5-487). For additional information, see the Code of Student Conduct.

What Is Plagiarism?

Plagiarism is defined by the OSU First Year Experience Office in this way:

At any stage of the writing process, all academic work submitted to the teacher must be a result of a student’s own thought, research or self-expression. When a student submits work purporting to be his or her own, but which in any way borrows organization, ideas, wording or anything else from a source without appropriate acknowledgment of the fact, he/she is engaging in plagiarism.
Take time to look at the full definition, which also describes another form of academic misconduct called “collusion.”

Plagiarism can be intentional (knowingly using someone else’s work and presenting it as your own) or unintentional (inaccurately or inadequately citing ideas and words from a source). It may be impossible for your professor to determine whether plagiarized work was intentional or unintentional. But in either case, plagiarism puts both you and your professor in a compromising position.

While academic integrity calls for work resulting from your own effort, scholarship requires that you learn from others. So in the world of academic scholarship you are actually expected to learn new things from others AND come to new insights on your own. There is an implicit understanding that as a student you will be both using other’s knowledge as well as your own insights to create new scholarship. To do this in a way that meets academic integrity standards you must acknowledge the part of your work that develops from others’ efforts. You do this by citing the work of others. You plagiarize when you fail to acknowledge the work of others and do not follow appropriate citation guidelines.

For more information on plagiarism, see Handouts – Plagiarism from OSU’s Center for the Study and Teaching of Writing.

What Is Citing?

Citing, or citation, is a practice of documenting specific influences on your academic work. See How to Cite Sources for details.

In other words, you must cite all the sources you quote directly, paraphrase, or summarize as you:

- Answer your research question
- Convince your audience
- Describe the situation around your research question and why the question is important
- Report what others have said about your question
Why Cite Sources?

As a student citing is important because it shows your reader (or professor) that you have invested time in learning what has already been learned and thought about the topic before offering your own perspective. It is the practice of giving credit to the sources that inform your work.

Our definitions of academic integrity, academic misconduct and plagiarism, also give us important reasons for citing the sources we use to accomplish academic research. Here are all the good reasons for citing.

To Avoid Plagiarism & Maintain Academic Integrity

Misrepresenting your academic achievements by not giving credit to others indicates a lack of academic integrity. This is not only looked down upon by the scholarly community, but it is also punished. When you are a student this could mean a failing grade or even expulsion from the university.

To Acknowledge the Work of Others

One major purpose of citations is to simply provide credit where it is due. When you provide accurate citations, you are acknowledging both the hard work that has gone into producing research and the person(s) who performed that research.

Think about the effort you put into your work (whether essays, reports, or even non-academic jobs): if someone else took credit for your ideas or words, would that seem fair, or would you expect to have your efforts recognized?

To Provide Credibility to Your Work & to Place Your Work in Context

Providing accurate citations puts your work and ideas into an academic context. They tell your reader that you’ve done your research and know what others have said about your topic. Not only do citations provide context for your work but they also lend credibility and authority to your claims.

For example, if you’re researching and writing about sustainability and construction, you should cite experts in sustainability, construction, and sustainable construction in order to demonstrate that you are well-versed in the most common ideas in the fields. Although you can make a claim about sustainable construction after doing research only in that particular field, your claim will carry more
weight if you can demonstrate that your claim can be supported by the research of experts in closely related fields as well.

Citing sources about sustainability and construction as well as sustainable construction demonstrates the diversity of views and approaches to the topic. In addition, proper citation also demonstrates the ways in which research is social: no one researches in a vacuum—we all rely on the work of others to help us during the research process.

To Help Your Future Researching Self & Other Researchers Easily Locate Sources

Having accurate citations will help you as a researcher and writer keep track of the sources and information you find so that you can easily find the source again. Accurate citations may take some effort to produce, but they will save you time in the long run. So think of proper citation as a gift to your future researching self!
Challenges in Citing Sources

Here are some challenges that might make knowing when and how to cite difficult for you. Our best advice for how to overcome these challenges is in the first item.

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Running Out of Time

When you are a student taking many classes simultaneously and facing many deadlines, it may be hard to devote the time needed to doing good scholarship and accurately representing the sources you have used. Research takes time. The sooner you can start and the more time you can devote to it, the better your work will be. From the beginning, be sure to include in your notes where you found information you could quote, paraphrase, and summarize in your final product.

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Having to Use Different Styles

Different disciplines require that your citations be in different styles: which publication information is included and in what order. So your citations for different courses could look different, particularly for courses outside your major.

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Not Really Understanding the Material You’re Using

If you are working in a new field or subject area, you might have difficulty understanding the information from other scholars, thus making it difficult to know how to paraphrase or summarize that work properly.

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Shifting Cultural Expectations of Citation

Because of new technologies that make finding, using, and sharing information easier, many of our cultural expectations around how to do that are changing as well. For example, blog posts often “reference” other articles or works by simply linking to them. It makes it easy for the reader to see where the author’s ideas have come from and to view the source very quickly. But in these more informal writings, blog authors do not have a list of citations (bibliographic entries). The links do the work for them. This is a great strategy for online digital mediums, but this method fails over time when links break and there are no hints (like an author, title and date) to know how else to find the reference, which might have moved.

This example of a cultural change of expectations in the non-academic world might make it seem that there has been a change in academic scholarship as well, or might make people new to academic scholarship even less familiar with citation. But in fact, the expectations around citing sources in academic research remain formal.