

Avoiding Plagiarism: Guidelines and Expectations for Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences at Caltech

This policy statement provides shared expectations for written work in humanities and social science courses at Caltech. Students are responsible to submit writing that follows these guidelines. If these guidelines are not clear to you, consult your course instructor for clarification and support.

Caltech's mission is to "expand human knowledge." This assumes the contribution of new ideas and original writing. At the same time, new work necessarily builds on the prior work of others. Responsible academic writing clearly and specifically demonstrates how it makes use of prior work by others. Academic writers attribute sources through citation. Established academic style systems offer specific rules, guidelines, and models for citation of sources.

Plagiarism is the appropriation of another person's ideas, processes, results, or words without giving appropriate credit. Plagiarism is a violation of the Caltech honor code.

Plagiarism occurs when a writer misleads a reader about the source of ideas, processes, results, or words. This may be intentional, but plagiarism can also be unintentional, resulting from a writer's lack of knowledge or effort. It is every academic writer's responsibility to be aware of their readers' expectations for citation, and to do the necessary work to cite sources clearly, accurately, and specifically. If you are confused about when or how to cite sources, ask for guidance from your course instructor. The [Writing Specialists in the Hixon Writing Center](#) are another source of support for avoiding plagiarism and using academic style systems.

The Caltech honor code says, "No member of the Caltech community shall take unfair advantage of any other member of the Caltech community." Plagiarism violates the honor code by taking unfair advantage of other student writers, and by taking unfair advantage of course instructors who reasonably expect to be able to distinguish between original student work and ideas and words drawn from other sources. Students who violate the honor code through plagiarism and the misuse of sources will be referred to the [Board of Control](#).

The following expectations are in place for your writing in humanities and social science courses at Caltech. Note: in what follows, a "source text" includes printed and online texts, as well as any other media that shapes your understanding of matters you discuss in a paper.

- **All paraphrased or summarized ideas, information, interpretation, or language from a source text should be clearly cited using a style system (APA, Chicago, MLA) appropriate to the course discipline, or an alternative system specified by your instructor.** A complete citation includes both a specific in-text citation and a Works Cited/References page at the end of a paper. If you are uncertain about style systems, consult your course instructor. You can find information about academic style systems at the [Hixon Writing Center resources page](#).
- **All words and phrases you borrow from source texts must be put in quotation marks and clearly and specifically cited.**
- **A reader must understand which ideas, information, and language in your work come from source texts on a sentence-by-sentence basis.** Style systems offer guidance for how to achieve this. Citation must occur alongside the borrowed ideas and language, not at the end of the paragraph or later in the text. Ambiguous citation that fails to track specific ideas and language to specific source texts can be a form of plagiarism.

- **Patchwriting is not acceptable.** Patchwriting occurs when a writer too closely paraphrases a source text, particularly by changing or rearranging words. Transcribing a source text so that no words or phrases are identical can itself be a form of plagiarism, even if the source text is cited. When paraphrasing, you should put the source text aside and write an original paraphrase, based on your knowledge of the source text. All paraphrased source texts must be specifically cited.
- **You are responsible for writing habits that yield a final paper in which your own work is clearly distinguished from elements drawn from source texts.** Again, plagiarism may be unintentional. Develop careful habits of taking notes and producing drafts, so that as you work you clearly distinguish your own ideas from ideas, information, and language drawn from source texts. Be particularly careful about cutting and pasting from digital sources. Plagiarism can result from a careless research and writing process that confuses a reader about your use of source texts.
- **Be careful about what you consider “common knowledge.”** While common knowledge does not need to be cited, err on the side of conscientious citation. Material you learn from texts assigned during the course and from texts you read while preparing your course paper should be cited, even if experts in the field may consider such material common knowledge. Your course instructor may provide additional guidance on what to regard as common knowledge. If your written work draws on ideas from lecture or class discussion, consult your instructor about their expectations for citation in such cases.
- **Avoid consulting reference sources that you are not prepared to cite in a paper.** Once you read a reference source that shapes your understanding of a topic, you may be ethically bound to cite it. Some course instructors consider online resources such as SparkNotes or Wikipedia to be unacceptable sources for academic writing. If you are uncertain, consult your instructor about acceptable sources. Keep in mind that you are expected to cite all reference sources from which you draw information, ideas, or language.
- **Reusing writing you produced in other contexts (for example, other courses) is not permitted unless the course instructor specifically approves such reuse.**
- **You must cite ideas or language borrowed from another student’s writing.** In such cases, follow style system rules for citing an unpublished manuscript. If you develop an original idea through class discussion or discussions of your writing with peers, you do not need to cite those discussions unless your course instructor indicates that this is expected.
- **The above standards apply to all working and final drafts that are submitted to the course instructor.** Leaving citation as the final step in the writing process is a risky practice. Instead, cite as you write.
- **An instructor may develop individual assignments for which some of the above guidelines do not apply.** For example, an instructor may ask you to prepare a summary of a publication in the field, or a chapter from a course text. In such cases, the instructor may offer alternative guidelines for paraphrasing and citation, appropriate to the assignment.

Following these guidelines will help ensure your success in your written work for humanities and social science courses at Caltech. If you are uncertain about these guidelines, or about policies in a specific course, consult with your instructor or with Hixon Writing Center staff.