

Academic writing

I. Working with secondary literature – avoiding plagiarism

Definition:

- plagiarism is the theft of other people's words and ideas

Accidental plagiarism:

- be aware of the dangers of accidental plagiarism and have the techniques for ensuring that you avoid it
 - how can accidental plagiarism happen:
 - you take notes from a book but later you cannot remember what is copied word-by-word and what not, and simply take passages from your notes to use them in your term paper
 - you don't quote literally, but simply rephrase individual words or expressions, so that your text stays too close to the original
 - you may use entirely your own words but don't acknowledge the source of your information
- ⇒ plagiarism can easily be detected with the help of electronic searches or dedicated software programs

Strategies for avoiding plagiarism:

1. Referencing:
 - in a term paper you will be presenting three different kinds of material:
 - general knowledge: not open to dispute; there are many places you can get that; does not need to be referenced
 - evidence and ideas from other people: include findings in work they have done and claims about what their findings mean for some wider question; clear referencing necessary to give credit where it is due and to distance yourself from it
 - your own evidence and your own ideas: cannot be referenced

⇒ if you are not sure if something needs referencing or not, it is better to err on the side of over-referencing!
2. Taking notes:
 - do not only summarize your findings, but take notes relevant to the task and identify the major points that relate to your topic
 - take notes under headings so that you can put together findings from different sources which deal with similar ideas
 - when it comes to writing, read through all your notes under that heading and find out how they relate

⇒ so you will never simply copy things from a source

 - never copy anything without putting it in inverted commas and putting a page reference next to it
 - material from the internet must be accompanied by a full web address with a note of the date that you accessed it
3. Skilled writing:
 - use discourse markers for clear referencing of others' ideas, e.g. rather than:

Ji (2004) describes how Mao's Cultural Revolution affected the Chinese language. A number of politically-charged linguistic formulas introduced during that period made it difficult for speakers to think in counter-revolutionary ways. The result was something similar to the linguistic control described in Orwell's novel *1984*. The television-bound culture of modern western life may have a similar effect. Because people are highly vulnerable to cultural influences, governments have a responsibility not to be too directive.

write:

Ji (2004) describes how Mao's Cultural Revolution affected the Chinese language. She proposes that a number of politically-charged linguistic formulas introduced during that period made it difficult for speakers to think in counter-revolutionary ways. She argues that the result was something similar to the linguistic control described in Orwell's novel *1984*. It is interesting to consider whether the television-bound culture of modern western life may have a similar effect. It could be argued that, because people are highly vulnerable to cultural influences, governments have a responsibility not to be too directive.

4. Referring to only one source:
 - what to do if you are referring for some time to just one work? how often to mention the reference?
 - if possible, avoid that situation
 - try to approach the problem from a different angle
 - it is easier to summarize or expand information found in a source
 - if it can't be avoided, say at the beginning of the section or a paragraph: "The following is a summary of information given in [name] ([year: pages])."

II. Writing up

Before you start to write:

1. Model your style on what you read:
 - develop an awareness of what academic writing looks like to adopt that style yourself
 - as models you can use journal articles, subject specialist books or introductory textbooks
 - keep a list of expressions you read in the literature if they appear suitable for your own writing; memorize them
2. Write a plan:
 - divide the work into an introduction, between three to six major sections, and a conclusion
 - then plan what each section should contain
 - to keep to your word limit allot to each section and sub-section an approximate number of words

⇒ using a plan will help you to keep your ideas organized and not to wander off the point or say something twice
3. Know your weaknesses:
 - take a careful look at your previous marked work and write a list of the problems you had

⇒ identify strategies for avoiding these problems in the future

 - keep a list of words that you tend to spell incorrectly (maybe put them on a sheet of paper over your desk so that you can look at it if necessary)

⇒ you will need to develop an eye for spelling mistakes yourself; electronic spellcheckers may seem comfortable but have some major shortcomings

As you are writing:

1. Develop and sustain a sense of audience:
 - be aware of who it is that you are writing for, and why (say why you did what you did!)
 - ⇒ if in doubt it is better to be too explicit rather than too inexplicit
2. Use the technology:
 - By word-processing from the start you can:
 - make alterations and still have a clean copy
 - keep a backup copy of earlier versions
 - keep a copy on a memory stick or CD in addition to the hard drive of your computer in case the computer crashes
 - email yourself the latest version to have access to your work wherever you are
 - run spellcheckers and use thesaurus and dictionary facilities
3. Mark problems for later checking:
 - when writing the first draft just mark any problem by underlining or highlighting it
 - ⇒ later on you can come back to it and find an alternative
 - do it the same way for facts or references you are not sure about
4. Use a dictionary and thesaurus:
 - concerning terminology, use a specialist dictionary
 - use a thesaurus to widen your vocabulary but do not assume that words are entirely interchangeable
 - e.g. a thesaurus may mislead you into believing that *insinuate* means the same as *suggest*; in fact they are not interchangeable because *insinuate* is very loaded with negativity
 - choose words that, once you see them in the thesaurus, are familiar to you
 - use the word only in the way you have seen it being used by other authors
5. Copy correctly:
 - when quoting or citing pay attention to copy the punctuation and spelling correctly
 - take particular care with proper names
6. Write summaries:
 - in longer pieces of writing, it is useful to provide a one- or two-sentence summary at the end of each major section
 - ⇒ helps both reader and writer to retain a focus and a sense of the structure
7. Draft it and craft it:
 - drafting and rewriting is part of the work
 - from time to time, step back from your work and consider it critically
 - when looking at your draft ask yourself whether you could make it flow better, say something more succinctly or draw out the points in a more appropriate way

After you have written:

1. Proofread:
 - allow plenty of time for proofreading: it can take longer than you think because you might want to rewrite or clarify something

Source:

Wray, Alison & Bloomer, Aileen. 2006. *Projects in Linguistics: A Practical Guide to Researching Language*. 2nd edition. London: Hodder Arnold.