Using Research Sources and Avoiding Plagiarism

It is very important when working with sources that you incorporate them effectively into your writing and document them where appropriate. One of the most common reasons for charges of plagiarism in student writing is simply not knowing that something needed to be cited, or not knowing how to cite it properly. But in addition to avoiding plagiarism, using your sources effectively will greatly strengthen your own writing and credibility.

Incorporating Sources

You can use your sources to:
- Set the context for your argument or discussion: frame the discussion that is to come in your paper from the outset for your reader
- Provide background information: give your reader enough information to understand what you're going to talk about and why it matters
- Explain key terms or concepts: remember that your reader will probably not have read all your sources themselves, and may never even have heard of your topic or subject. Give them any information they will need to follow your argument, such as definitions of new words or explanations of concepts
- Illustrate technical or difficult aspects of the subject: often your sources will provide good discussions of things like how a process works or how research was conducted. In these cases, rely on them to explain it to your reader.
- Support your claim or subclaims: of course, use your sources where appropriate to back up your own thesis and topic sentences.
- Outline or describe conflicts or counterarguments: don't forget to find sources that disagree with your claim and give them their due. This does not undermine your credibility, but instead enhances it because it shows that you've examined multiple sides of the issue before coming to your conclusion

When quoting from or paraphrasing sources:
- Be mindful of how much material you're using. A good rule of thumb is to make sure that at least ¾ of the words in your paper are your own, rather than quoted from a source.
- Incorporate quotes into your own language—never let them stand alone as their own sentence without any transitional or attributive language. For instance:
  - The authors suggest that "it is best to introduce quotes with attributive language" (Smith and Bradley, 2016, p. 32).
  - Additionally, transitional language such as "additionally, consequently, or conversely" can greatly aid in readers' understanding of the argument's structure (Smith and Bradley, 2016, p. 37).

- ALWAYS cite material taken from one of your sources, even if you're paraphrasing rather than quoting them directly.

Citing Sources and Avoiding Plagiarism

What you NEED to cite:
- Quotes
- Paraphrases or summaries, even in your own words
- Images or charts taken from others
- Collaboration: this does not mean citing your professor if you go to office hours or your classmate if they peer-review your paper. This means that maybe a different professor with more expertise on your subject worked with you to design a survey, or a friend contributed data from one of their own studies. It means that someone else actively contributed to the paper, not just that they edited it when you were done.
- Facts that are not widely known

What you DON'T NEED to cite:
- Common knowledge: drinking alcohol leads to impaired judgment
- Facts available from a wide variety of sources: Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776
- Your own findings from original research
  - *unless* you quote someone speaking in an interview you conducted, then mention their name/date of interview

When in doubt, always just cite information you use from a source. It's always better to over-cite than to forget to attribute something and get accused of plagiarism.

Still unsure about using and citing sources?

Make an appointment with the Writing Center!
Library, Room 311/312
www.bradley.edu/writeright