

College Research

Highlights from the article *Doing College-level Research, with Advice on Avoiding the Plagiarism Question*, by Margaret Maurer, with Constance Harsh.

Purpose: Understanding the process of college research and avoiding plagiarism. This includes: finding information, assessing the quality of the information, recording and properly citing the source of the information, and making an original contribution on your topic.

Transitions in thinking:

- 1) From secondary/high school to college level expectations
- 2) From doing report style papers to thesis style papers—formulating your own conclusions based on research
- 3) From simply combining paragraphs from sources to recognizing the researcher's obligation to contribute something original to the process

In her book, *The Practical Stylist*, Sheridan Baker articulates this transition in thinking:

“Research searching again. You are looking, usually, where others have looked before; but you hope to see something they have not. Research is not combining a paragraph from the Encyclopedia Britannica and a paragraph from The Book of Knowledge with a slick pinch from Time. That's robbery. Nor is it research even if you carefully change each phrase and acknowledge the source. That's drudgery. Even in some high circles, I am afraid, such scavenging is called research. It is not. It is simply a cloudier condensation of what you have done in school as a "report"—sanctioned plagiarism to teach something about ants or Ankara, a tedious compiling of what is already known. That such material is new to you is not the issue; it is already in the public stock. (Sheridan Baker, *The Practical Stylist*, 7th ed., New York: Harper & Row, 1990, p. 152.)

Original Work entails:

- Your finished product must have an idea, and the idea has to be your own.
- Your thesis (idea) involves your judgment of something that you have learned from examining the work of others.
- Presenting your thesis involves explaining how the ideas and information generated by others led you to your thesis.

Example Thesis:

"The specialists who have written about this problem generally resort to one of three explanations, but no one of these explanations seems wholly satisfactory." Such a thesis reveals that you have made a judgment based on the research you have done.

Mistakes that lead to plagiarism:

- Losing track of where you found the information.
- Inability to judge how good or how reliable sources are.
- Inability to understand what you have collected well enough to see how it relates to other information that you have collected.

College Research Best Practices

Choosing Your Topic

- Focus your research topic— formulate a real question about your topic and formulate your answer based on what you learn through your research
- Discuss your topic with your professor to ensure that your topic is appropriate for the assignment

Researching Your Topic

- Identify the most important and respected authorities on the topic using input from your professor, the bibliography of your textbook, indices and bibliographies related to your topic, or ask a reference librarian.
- Determine what point each of your sources is making about the topic-- Attach names to arguments and data.
- Find published analyses of your references so you can check your evaluations of them against those of experts
- Be sure any sources you print or photocopy has the complete documentation you will need should you decide to cite the material in your paper
- When taking notes, put all directly quoted material, even if only a key word or phrase, in quotation marks and noting the page on which it appears

Writing/Presenting Your Paper

- Organize the presentation of your work to explain your judgment
- Keep track of exact bibliographical details, including page numbers, even of ideas you are summarizing or paraphrasing
- Give credit to an author or source when using a direct quotation, an indirect quotation, a summary, when you use another's data or charts, or refer to the source.
- When using information from class, ask your professor for the source of the ideas and consult those in writing your paper, or cite the conversation or class in your references
- When using internet resources, assess the credibility of every site you visit. Who is the author of the site? Is he or she an expert in the field? Does he or she have any academic credentials? Has the author provided documentation of facts and arguments? (If so, you may wish to pursue those references and use them instead.) Is the site published under the aegis of an academic institution?
- Document an Internet site just as carefully as you would a published source
- Assume that people will check your references

Source:

Maurer, M. and Harsh, C. *Doing College-level Research, with Advice on Avoiding the Plagiarism Question*. http://offices.colgate.edu/academicadvising/honor_code/college_research.asp (last accessed January 23, 2007).

(Note: A full text version of this article can be found on the Colgate University website).