

Plagiarism vs. Documentation

Plagiarism is the act of presenting someone else's work as your own. It is the theft of intellectual property. The following examples should help you distinguish plagiarism from well-documented research.

Original text from:

McCullough, David. John Adams. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001. p. 57

His marriage to Abigail Smith was the most important decision of John Adams's life, as would become apparent with time. She was in all respects his equal and the part she was to play would be greater than he could possibly have imagined, for all his love for her and what appreciation he already had of her beneficial, steadying influence.

Writing sample #1

John Adam's marriage to Abigail was the most important choice in his life. He was to come to understand this better with time. In so many ways, she was his equal, and he could not have imagined the importance of the role she was going to play, despite his love for her and his appreciation of her good, solid influence.

Unacceptable! This paragraph is the work of someone either deliberately plagiarizing or someone who doesn't understand what it means to plagiarize. The writer may have changed a few words and switched the order of words in the sentences, but the writer has not changed McCullough's sequence of

ideas and has not used the information in a meaningful way. He or she failed to cite what are really McCullough's original ideas or words.

Writing sample #2

When John Adams was ready to marry, he sought a woman who was his equal. He found Abigail Smith and loved her for her steady influence.

Unacceptable! Not only did this student neglect to cite, this paraphrase twists McCullough's meaning. Though it changes words significantly, it also does a poor job conveying the original idea accurately.

Writing sample #3

The best decisions of a great leader may extend beyond the political. In fact, the course of American history may have been changed by an entirely personal decision. In his biography of Adams, David McCullough notes that Adams' choice of Abigail Smith as a wife was the most critical decision of his life. "She was in all respects his equal and the part she was to play would be greater than he could possibly have imagined" (McCullough 57).

This is **acceptable** because the author uses the information in a meaningful way, accurately paraphrases the ideas presented in the original source, credits them and weaves in a quote to emphasize the point. The source is properly quoted and cited using quotation marks and in-text documentation. Note that in this example the student created his/her own topic sentence, following an independent plan and not the necessarily following the structure of another author's material.

You can avoid plagiarism.

1. When you are taking notes, make sure that you copy all original passages in quotation marks.
2. Paraphrase by really putting ideas into your own words; go beyond changing a few words.
3. Recognize that paraphrasing of unique ideas and facts also requires citation.
4. As you write, return to the text and check your paraphrase against the original source to make sure you haven't unintentionally copied.
5. Use graphic organizers to restructure your facts and ideas.
6. Use your own voice to put a new twist on old information.
7. **When in doubt, cite!**

Valenza, Joyce K. "Plagiarism vs. Documentation" in *Online Activities Promoting Information Literacy*. <http://mciu.org/~spjvweb/plagdoc.html>. Accessed November 29, 2005.