The Plague of Plagiarism

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The Plague of Plagiarism

In 1976, after 12 years of research and writing, Alex Haley published *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. The book claimed to trace the true story of Haley’s family back to its African origin, sold well over a million copies, and became an extremely popular television mini-series. Unfortunately, another writer claimed that Haley had stolen entire passages and sued him for plagiarism. When confronted with the evidence, Haley recognized his errors and settled out of court for $650,000 (1 p7). The lesson for writers everywhere is that plagiarism should never be taken lightly.

Writers are guilty of plagiarism any time they take another’s words or ideas and present them as their own (2 p858). Many college students plagiarize because they are not aware that they need to give credit to their sources, because they are not as meticulous as they should be in their research, or because they are unwilling to do the necessary work and hope they will not get caught.

In any event, students at Hudson Valley Community College should know that plagiarism is listed as “prohibited conduct” in both the *Hudson Valley Community College Student Handbook* (3 p 64) and the college *Catalog* (4 p 229). They should know, too, that if they are found guilty of plagiarism, they could face certain consequences such as receiving a failing grade in the paper itself, a failing grade for the course, and possibly suspension or dismissal from the college.

To avoid plagiarism, students should use their sources in one of three ways: with quotation marks, with a paraphrase, or with a summary.

**Quotation Marks.** Most students know they can use a quote from a source, but many go too far and quote too much. As a general rule, quotations should be used sparingly. According to
Diana Hacker, author of *The Bedford Handbook*, quotations should be used only for “special purposes: to use a writer’s especially vivid or expressive wording, to allow an expert to explain a complex matter clearly, or to let critics of an opinion object in their own words” (5 p 561).

**Paraphrase.** When writers paraphrase, they take their source’s information and put it in their own words, using approximately the same length. So, if they paraphrase three sentences from a source, the paraphrase should also be three sentences. The mistake many college writers make is they simply change one or two key words. That is not a paraphrase; that is plagiarism. To paraphrase properly, one should try to do so from memory without looking at the original source, and, then, the writer should check that his or her words and phrases do not resemble the source too closely (5 p 550, 573).

**Summary.** A summary highlights the key points or arguments in a much shorter format. A two-hour movie, for example, might be summarized in one paragraph, or a 300-page novel might be summarized in 500 words. Summaries are especially useful when writers have to give the reader some background information before moving on to an in-depth analysis (5 p 561).

Unfortunately, some students feel that if they do not quote directly from a source, they do not have to cite those sources. That is not true. Whenever writers paraphrase or summarize, they need to include the author’s name and the year in the text of the paper, and they need to include complete details about the author, title, and publication information at the end of the paper. (Certain exceptions exist, and the specific guidelines will depend on the instructor’s expectations regarding editorial style.)

Yet, if all sources have to be cited, some students worry that the research paper will become merely a collection of quotes, paraphrases, and summaries? That is not necessarily so. Writers do not have to cite “common knowledge – information that readers could find in any
number of general sources” (5 p 571). In addition, personal ideas and opinions do not have to be cited. Thus, a research paper should be a combination of the writer’s thoughts, common knowledge, and cited information from other sources. If a writer is unsure whether certain information should be considered “common knowledge” or whether it should be cited, the information should be cited.

When Alex Haley, who also wrote *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, died in 1992, he was acknowledged as a great writer who “tapped the hearts of Americans with two monumental books that transcended literature to become cultural icons” (6 p 1). Since Haley’s death, however, numerous authors have studied his notes and concluded that *Roots* is more of a novel than a true story because Haley’s research and documentation were not as thorough as they should have been (7 p A13). To avoid a similar criticism of their work and to avoid the charge of plagiarism, all writers should make sure that their notes are thorough and their sources are cited properly.
References


