Plagiarism FAQ

1. What is plagiarism?

According to the JSCC college catalog, "plagiarism is defined as presenting someone else's work, including the work of other students, as one's own. Students have plagiarized when they have failed to properly document the original ideas of others. Any ideas or wording taken from an original source for written or verbal use must be cited within the assignment."

Notice that plagiarism applies specifically to "someone else's work," so changing words or sentence structures from the original is not enough to avoid plagiarism. It's okay to incorporate others' words or ideas as long as they are properly cited, but the bulk of a paper should be your ideas and analysis – your work.

2. How should I use outside sources (without plagiarizing)?

Use outside sources to support your points or arguments. When you refer to an outside source, make sure to frame it in your own words so that your reader can understand how it relates to your objectives. Depending on the assignment and type of source, you may want to answer questions like: What did you learn from the source? Do you agree or disagree with its claims? Why? What are its strengths and weaknesses? How does it support or relate to your topic?

You can incorporate your research by quoting, paraphrasing, or summarizing. You’ll find guidelines and tips linked from our LibGuides website.

3. What do you mean by "cite your sources"?

To cite, to document, to attribute: all of these mean to give credit to external sources, which is expected in all academic work. Most instructors will require that you format your citations according to a standard style guide, such as MLA, APA, or Chicago. A proper citation includes more than the title, author’s name, or web address (URL), so follow the style guidelines carefully. Most of the time, you will also need to signal your sources in the body of your paper with parenthetical notes or footnotes. If you don’t know which style to use, ask your instructor.

4. I only have to cite direct quotations, right?

Not true! If you claim that someone else's ideas or findings are your own – even if you rephrase them – you are plagiarizing.
5. Can't I just use a thesaurus to change the words?

If you change words from a source but retain the same ideas, you may be paraphrasing (at best) or patchwriting (at worst). If you do paraphrase – putting something you’ve learned into your own words while acknowledging its source – you must provide a citation! Patchwriting, on the other hand – mixing bits of information from multiple sources without indicating authorship – is plagiarism whether or not you’ve cited your source.

6. Is it possible to plagiarize by accident?

It’s important to understand plagiarism because you can be held responsible even if it’s unintentional. Except for your original thoughts and things that are generally considered “common knowledge,” everything in your paper must be cited. A typical mistake students make is to conduct research without keeping track of sources. Clearly identify the sources of any quotations or ideas in your notes so that, when you want to include a fact or idea in your paper, you’ll be able to find its source again easily to document it. If you are not sure whether something requires a citation, err on the side of caution and cite it.

7. What if the source isn't copyrighted?

Most sources you’ll consult for academic research will be copyrighted, even if that is not clearly indicated. However, even if something is not copyrighted (or is “in the public domain”), you must cite it. Avoiding plagiarism is about academic honesty, so you should always clearly distinguish between your ideas and what you have learned or borrowed from external sources.

8. What if I'm doing a research project that isn't a paper?

Unless otherwise instructed, you should cite sources used to prepare speeches, posters, presentations (PowerPoints), videos, or other non-written projects.

9. Can you help me?

The library staff can answer your specific questions about citations – for instance, how to find a book’s publication information or when a certain web document was created. To learn about citing sources or using a particular style, consult a style manual or look under the “Cite Sources” tab on the Research Process LibGuide (http://jamessprunt.libguides.com/research_process).