

## Avoiding Plagiarism When Using Source Materials

Some plagiarism is clearly intentional. Taking an entire paper from the Internet and passing it off as one's own is a case in point. Most people would agree that such an act is unmistakably plagiarism. Not all cases are as clear-cut, though, because not everyone who plagiarizes means to do so.

The most common confusion students have about plagiarism is actually a confusion about paraphrasing. Many students believe (wrongly) that a paraphrase involves taking an original passage and changing some of the words around. This inaccurate understanding of paraphrasing can result in a charge of plagiarism, and many faculty members and university administrations do not make a distinction between intentional and unintentional plagiarism.

So, what is a "real" paraphrase? The purpose of a paraphrase is to use someone else's ideas in order to make a significant point of your own. An acceptable paraphrase takes the original author's main idea and reworks it entirely into another writer's words and sentence structure. Note the double criteria there: both the words and the structure are crucial elements in a paraphrase. It is not enough to change a word here or there or to adjust the structure minimally. Check out the original passage and five sample paraphrases below to see what we mean.

### **Original Passage:**

In 1925 Dreiser produced his masterpiece, the massively impressive, *An American Tragedy*. By this time - thanks largely to the tireless propagandizing on his behalf by the influential maverick critic, H.L. Mencken, and by others concerned with a realistic approach to the problem of American life - Dreiser's fame had become secure. He was seen as the most powerful and effective destroyer of the genteel tradition that had dominated popular American fiction in the post-Civil War period, spreading its soft blanket of provincial, sentimental romance over the often ugly realities of life in modern, industrialized, urban America. Certainly there was nothing genteel about Dreiser, either as man or novelist. He was the supreme poet of the squalid, a man who felt the terror, the pity, and the beauty underlying the American dream. With an eye at once ruthless and compassionate, he saw the tragedy inherent in the American success ethic; the soft underbelly, as it were, of the Horatio Alger rags-to-riches myths so appealing to the optimistic American imagination. [Richard Freedman, *The Novel* (New York: Newsweek Books, 1975), pp.104-105].

**Student Version #1:** There was nothing genteel about Dreiser, either as man or novelist. He was the supreme poet of the squalid, a man who felt the terror, the pity, and the beauty underlying the American Dream.

**Comment on #1:** Obvious plagiarism: word-for-word repetition without acknowledgment.

**Student Version #2:** There was nothing genteel about Dreiser, either as man or novelist. He was the supreme poet of the squalid, a man who felt the terror, the pity, and the beauty underlying the American dream (Freedman, 104).

**Comment on #2:** Still plagiarism. The footnote alone does not help. The language is the original author's and only quotation marks around the whole passage plus a footnote would be correct.

**Student Version #3:** Nothing was genteel about Dreiser, as a novelist. He was the poet of the squalid, and felt that terror, pity, and beauty lurked under the American dream (Freedman, 104).

**Comment on #3:** Still plagiarism. A few words have been changed or omitted, but by no stretch of the imagination is the student writer using his own language.

**Student Version #4:** "Nothing was genteel about Dreiser as a man or as a novelist. He was the poet of the squalid and felt that terror, pity, and beauty lurked under the American dream" (Freedman, 104).

**Comment on #4:** Not quite plagiarism, but incorrect and inaccurate. Quote marks indicate exact repetition of what was originally written. The student writer, however, has changed some of the original and is not entitled to use the quotation marks.

**Student Version #5:** By 1925 Dreiser's reputation was firmly established. The reading public viewed Dreiser as one of the main contributors to the downfall of the "genteel tradition" in American literature. Dreiser, "the supreme poet of the squalid," looked beneath the bright surface of American life and values and described the frightening and tragic elements the "ugly realities," so often overlooked by other writers (Freedman, 104).

**Comment on #5:** Correct. The student writer uses his own words to summarize most of the original passage. The citation shows that the ideas expressed come from the original writer, not from the student. The few phrases kept from the original passage are carefully enclosed in quotation marks.

As you can see, the final "correct" example pulls information from throughout Freedman's paragraph, rather than from a single sentence or two. The paraphrase uses its own sentence structure, except where it draws on brief quotations from the original. If you are concerned about relying too much on the original writer's words and sentence structure, we recommend drafting your paraphrase with your book or text closed or put out of reach. Start by writing down your understanding of what's most important in the passage you are paraphrasing. You are much less likely to borrow too much this way. You can always go back to add a brief phrase or two from the original if you feel it necessary.

Still worried about whether you are paraphrasing appropriately? If you want some additional feedback, try bringing your practice paraphrases to the Writing Center to discuss with a tutor.

*Adapted from <http://www.albany.edu/eas/104/plagiary.htm>*