

Using Academic Sources Effectively (and Avoiding Plagiarism!)

Introduction

When you begin a university degree, you are entering a community in which knowledge and understanding are developed by building on the work of others. This short guide is intended to help you to avoid some common difficulties and to give you ideas about how to learn to use academic sources more effectively. As you move through your studies you will be learning about how this is done and you will become more skilled at developing your own understandings and expressing them in the manner expected in your subject areas. Some students find that the ways in which they are expected to use sources are rather different from what they have done in their prior educational experiences. Try to be patient with yourself as you are adjusting to any new demands.

Common Difficulties with Using Academic Sources

When students begin their university studies they are often surprised by how many different sources of information are suggested in their reading lists or course information. You may find you are referred to a wide range of journal articles, books or web sites and you may be expected to read more widely than the sources on your initial list. As if that wasn't enough, you may find that many of the sources you're asked to use are not directly tailored to your courses. It may be that only part of a textbook is relevant, or that some of what you are asked to read was not written with students in mind. Don't panic if this is the case for you. You're not expected to be expert at coping with this when you start your studies and there are many sources of advice and guidance. What's important is that you learn to make careful decisions about what you select to read, that you are clear about the purpose of your reading and that you take good notes. Each of these topics is discussed below.

Another challenge, when using academic sources, is working out how to build on what's gone before while still writing something which represents your own understanding. In your University assessments you will often be expected to carefully back up the points you make using evidence or theories from the academic literature. Some students say that more is expected of them at university by way of supporting evidence, or links to theory, than was the case in their prior experiences. The kinds of sources that are valued may also differ: some students find that they are pulled up for using sources like newspapers, or general web sites, when they were expected to draw on more in-depth academic sources (although both newspapers and general sites may be used for some purposes on some courses). The key here is to learn about what kinds of sources are valued in your subject areas, why they are valued and how to use them in your work. Some ideas about how to do this are given in the final section of this handout.

You need to take great care, when using academic sources, that you don't inadvertently break the University's rules about plagiarism, this can have serious consequences. The University regulations state that:

'Plagiarism is the act of copying or including in one's own work, without adequate acknowledgement, intentionally or unintentionally, the work of another, for one's own benefit.'

You may well find that what is expected by way of 'adequate acknowledgement' is rather different from what you have done in the past. More about all of this later.

Figuring Out What to Read

The first step in making good use of academic sources is figuring out which ones to read! This is something that many students have not had to think about much before university because they were given detailed guidance about reading in the past. A good place to start, when you are wondering what to read, is to look at your course documentation or course website. Some courses do give quite detailed guidance, especially for first year students, so you should check – even if this wasn't available for one of your other courses. The texts held on reserve for your courses are also a good bet. You can search the course reserve using the University Library Catalogue: <http://www.lib.ed.ac.uk/>.

If you are given a big reading list the first thing to bear in mind is that you may not be expected to read everything that's there. You might have been given a big list to give you the opportunity to learn how to be selective, or to avoid having lots of students fighting over the same book in the library. Where you would start in tackling a big reading list depends on your purposes. You need to think carefully about how what you choose to read will fit in with what you are trying to do and with the time you have available for each task. Here are some possible strategies:

- If you are trying to build on what you learned in your lectures then you might want to start with an introductory textbook, picking out points that seem to link to your lectures or clarifying anything you didn't understand during the lecture. If you do this as you go along during the semester then you will be better placed for your exam revision.
- If you have an assessment to do which relates to lectures which have not yet taken place, try looking at the section of your course book or web pages relating to those lectures. There may well be information there about relevant readings.
- Particularly for less experienced students, preparing for an assessment is often easier if you start with introductory level texts and read the more difficult materials (such as journal articles) as the 'icing on the cake' if you have time left over. Take care to leave enough time to make a good job of writing and revising your assessment. Sometimes two hours spend revising what you've written will help your mark a lot more than doing one more reading.

If you are going to read beyond the sources given in your reading lists, you need to find out what kinds of sources are most useful for your particular subject area(s). To help with this you can:

- Look at the library web site where you will find information for each subject area, including resources pages and contact details for subject liaison librarians (<http://www.lib.ed.ac.uk/> under College Library Information). As a member of the University you will have access to many sources of information not available to the general public so you will need learn how to search through these. Sticking your question into Google won't be enough!
- Ask other students in your year group, they may have found a really helpful source that you've not read.
- Ask students in the years above you, they may know more about how to be selective for your subject area.
- Ask academic staff, or postgraduate students, during tutorials or laboratory classes.

- Speak to your Course Organiser or Programme Director if you are still stuck after trying these other suggestions.

Reading for a Purpose

Once you've chosen some of the sources you want to use, you need to find a way of reading them which serves your purposes. It's much easier to read efficiently if you create some boundaries which will stop you ending up with a huge pile of reading notes, of which only a small proportion are really relevant. Here are some ideas about how you can stop your reading getting out of hand in this way:

- Create a broad time plan for the semester by counting up how many hours you spend in classes per week, subtracting that from the total number of hours per week you plan to spend on your academic work and then sharing out the time left over between the tasks you need to get done. This may be tricky at first but it gets easier with practice. You don't need to follow this plan exactly but it will help you to spot when something is taking far too long and you need to change your strategy.
- If you are reading for an essay or report, start by carefully analysing the title and checking you really know what you are being asked to do. If you're not sure then ask someone about this before you plunge into your reading. Once you understand the title try to keep it in mind all the time when you are reading.
- If you are reading to support your exam revision, find out as much as possible first about the exam. What kinds of exam questions are asked? Do you get a choice of question? Is there a set number of questions asked for each section of the lecture series? Is what you have learned in tutorials or practicals also assessed in the exam? Once you know the answers to these questions it's much easier to plan what to read. For more about this see the exam guides on the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Assessment web pages (www.tla.ed.ac.uk under information for students).

Thinking about the purpose of your reading can help if you are becoming frustrated or bored with a text that you have to read. If you are reading something which seems technical, dry, or complicated you might want to ask yourself why the author used that style. For example, very careful use of specific technical terms can allow difficult ideas to be communicated in a precise manner. While it may be a struggle to work through such material at first, you may be learning communication skills which are essential for your subject area(s).

As well as being selective about *which* sources you choose to read you can also be selective *within* those sources. Here are some strategies you could try:

- You might begin by skimming a chapter to get an idea of what's relevant before taking a limited amount of notes. One way to do this is to read the first sentence of every paragraph.
- You might want to focus on the introductions and summaries of some of your readings.
- If you are reading a text which is not really designed for someone at your stage of an academic career then ask yourself how much it's realistic to understand just now. Some students get upset when they can't understand all of their readings, especially if

they were used to understanding it all at school or college, but it's normal to struggle when reading texts designed for more experienced readers.

Taking Notes Effectively

Once you have worked out the purpose of your reading, the next step is to take notes which serve your purposes. How you take your notes for assessments can make a big difference to the quality of your work and it can also help you to avoid accidental plagiarism. Here are some ideas about how you can make notes effectively:

It's really important to have some way of recording in your notes what is your own ideas, what is someone else's ideas written in your own words, and what you have copied word for word from another source. You might want to have a colour coding system for different kinds of notes, or write different kinds of notes on different pages, or you could draw thought bubbles round your own ideas to separate them out.

- If you are making notes of diagrams, figures or calculations take extra care to be very precise. A mis-labelled axis or a decimal point in the wrong place can completely change the sense of what you are recording.
- If you create your own organisation for your notes - rather than following the one in the textbook or your lecture notes - then this tests your understanding and helps you to develop your own ideas. One way to do this is to organise the notes in relation to the assessment question. So, for a compare and contrast essay, you might want to organise the notes so that the aspects you are comparing are written side by side on the page.
- Making mind maps (also know as spider diagrams or patterned notes) can also help your understanding. In these notes you write your topic in the centre of the page then draw branches and twigs on which you note main themes and sub themes. Notes of this kind help you to think about how ideas are related and you may see links which were not suggested in your readings, in which case you are some way towards developing your own perspective on a topic. For more about mind maps, have a look at one of the books on this topic written by Tony Buzan, which you can find in most book stores.
- If you find you take too many notes, try switching your noting strategy. Some people find that annotating photocopies is quicker, others find mind maps quicker and some students find that writing things out in their own words disciplines them to write less. You might also want to write the title of your essay or report at the top of each page of notes, to help to keep you focused on why you are taking the notes. Another strategy is to start writing your essay or report *before* you've finished reading. You may well find you've already got more than enough material.
- As soon as possible, when you are working on an essay or report, make a rough plan for the piece of work and allocate an approximate number of words for each section. Taking notes generally about Topic X is a lot more difficult than taking notes to write 500 words about a particular aspect of Topic X. Some students have managed to get

Whenever you are noting anything from another source, you should be very careful to record exactly what the source was and what pages your notes came from. There's nothing more annoying than being half way through writing an assessment only to find that you don't have the correct reference for a point that you want to make.

through school or college work without ever making plans for their assessments but this becomes increasingly hard at university as the ideas you are organising become more complex.

Building on Others' Work in Your Assessments

Once you've done your reading and made your notes, you need to build what you've learned into your assessments in such a way that you get full credit for all of your hard work! There are two main aspects to be considered here. Firstly, you need to make sure you follow the appropriate academic conventions and avoid plagiarism. Secondly, there's the more complicated matter of making what you write your own when you are drawing on the work of writers who are often more experienced than you are.

Following the conventions and avoiding plagiarism

- The first step is to check your course information carefully to make sure you know the appropriate referencing style for your subject area(s). What you are required to do to acknowledge sources may differ between your subject areas and may be different from what you have done in the past.
- You should also read the University's student guidance about plagiarism:

<http://www.aaps.ed.ac.uk/regulations/Plagiarism/Intro.htm>

- Students sometimes break the University's rules about plagiarism by mistake because what is expected at University differs from what they were allowed to do in their prior education. Even if you plagiarise by mistake, this can still result in serious consequences.
- One common misconception is that it will be enough to simply include a list at the end of your work of everything you read while preparing it. In your University assessments you will generally be expected to give references within the body of the text which tell the reader the source of each idea, piece of evidence, theory, diagram (and so on) as they are mentioned in your work. Then at the end of each piece of work you will probably be expected to give full details of each of the sources mentioned in your text.
- Students sometimes become confused about the more subtle forms of plagiarism. For example, if you take material from a source, change a few words and give the reference it may still be plagiarism. This is because you've represented as your own words something that is really someone else's work. So it's important to either quote directly and to signal that this is what you have done or else to put the ideas fully into your own words and give the reference.
- This is all a bit complicated, so here are a few examples of what to do and what not to do. You can find many more examples in the web sites mentioned in the University's student guidance about plagiarism. Bear in mind that the referencing system shown here may not be exactly the same as the one used in your subject area(s).

Here is the original text on which the examples will be based:

It is worth re-emphasising that our concern here is with the ways in which students' *perceptions* of assessment, teaching, and courses may influence their attitudes and approaches to studying, and not with apparently objective characteristics of the context such as continuous assessment methods, the use of learning packages and aids, and the division of teaching methods into lectures, tutorials and other techniques.

We can best try to understand the effects of the context of learning by examining the relationship between students' approaches and their perceptions of learning tasks at a number of separate but interconnected levels. Students' approaches depend on their interest in the task and their previous experience of the area to which it relates; these influences are themselves associated with their perceptions of how the work will be assessed and with the degree of choice over content and method of learning available to the student. The perceived demands and support of teachers, and the content of the subject, also influence the students' approaches.

The origin of this text is pages 200-201 of a book chapter by Paul Ramsden. The reference for the text could be written in this format (amongst others):

Ramsden, P. (1997). The context of learning in academic departments. In F. Marton, D. Hounsell & N. Entwistle (Eds.) *The experience of learning* (2nd edn., pp. 200-201). Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press.

You would give this full reference in a references section at the end of your essay or report.

Here are two correct ways of referring to this text within an essay:

A)

Ramsden (1997) points out that it is students' perceptions of their teaching-learning environments which are important in understanding how they learn. Different students may perceive the same teaching-learning environments in different ways.

B)

Ramsden (1997) suggests that: 'We can best try to understand the effects of the context of learning by examining the relationship between students' approaches and their perceptions of learning tasks at a number of separate but interconnected levels.' (p.200.)

Example A) is fine because the text has been put into the student's own words and the source of the ideas has been included. Example B) is also acceptable because the student has signalled, by using quotation marks, that they have used Ramsden's original words and they have given the source and the page number for the quote.

Example C) below would be considered to be plagiarism:

C)

It is worth bearing in mind that our concern here is with the ways in which students' *perceptions* of assessment, teaching, and courses may influence how they study, and not with apparently objective characteristics of the context such as continuous assessment methods or different teaching methods (Ramsden, 1997).

Example C) is plagiarism because it uses a lot of Ramsden's own words and sentence construction without fully acknowledging that this has been done. So it's still wrong, even though the reference has been given.

- Remember that these guidelines about acknowledgement of sources don't usually apply in the same way during examinations. You may, for example, only be expected to mention author's names in an examination, rather than having to give the full reference. You should check what is expected for the exams in your subject areas.
- If you are still uncertain about how to acknowledge sources, after reading the available guidance, then you should ask your Course Organiser or Programme Director.

Making what you write your own

Once you've figured out what plagiarism is and how to avoid it you may be wondering about how to develop and express your own ideas when you are writing within academic conventions. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- One important aspect of academic writing is to offer some critique, or evaluation, of the sources you are reading. You should bear in mind that this does not necessarily mean being negative. You might, for example, want to write about why a study, or theory, is particularly useful.
- You can learn the forms of criticism commonly used in your subject area(s) in a number of ways. Try paying careful attention to how your lecturers evaluate others' work, to how studies are evaluated during tutorial discussion, or to how established authors in your area evaluate other people's research.

There are some useful ideas about evaluating the quality of sources in the 'How to ...' section of the library web site. You might want to start with the tutorial on researching an assignment.

Many students think that textbooks about research methodology or analysis are boring but they can be a good source of ideas about how to evaluate the literature. They also become more interesting when you start to design your own projects!

- In some subject areas you can draw on your own experiences, or your observation of the world around you, to question the academic literature. Perhaps your own experiences tell you that something must be missing from a theory, or that a research study carried out in a different context would not apply well to the settings you know. Be careful to remember, though, that many subject areas do not give as much weight to personal experiences as they would to formal research studies.

- If you are far enough along in your studies to have done your own research projects (or perhaps you will have done research in your prior employment) then you may be able to think about the limitations of those projects and wonder whether some of these would also apply to the studies you are considering in the literature.
- Another way to make a piece of work your own is to develop a new synthesis, or organisation, of ideas from a range of sources. This is where having well structured notes can really help. Mind maps are particularly useful for this kind of work.
- Although quoting in the correct manner means you should not get into trouble for plagiarising you may still get a low mark if you use too many quotes as the marker will not be able to tell whether you have really understood the material for yourself.
- Look carefully at the feedback given on your work. Those cryptic comments like 'what is the evidence for this' or 'avoid sweeping generalisations' can give you clues about how to express your own views in the manner expected within a particular subject area. If you don't understand your feedback then it's important to ask for guidance.

Remember, if you are discussing an assessment (or sharing notes about an assessment) you need to take care that the work you finally submit represents your own efforts. There is more about this issue in the University's student guidance about plagiarism.

Finally, don't forget value of discussing what you are learning with other students, friends and family. Doing this can really help your thinking. Explaining your ideas to someone who has never studied your subject can be very illuminating as they may see things in quite different ways. You have to really understand a topic to explain it well to someone who has never studied it. If you talk to students from your classes about your ideas then you are more likely to be at the same level, which can make discussion easier. Talking with students who are a year or two ahead of you can help you to move your thinking on as they may find it easier to understand what may be confusing you than more experienced academics.

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For information about workshops and further resource materials to help you to learn effectively at University see – www.tla.ed.ac.uk under information for students.

The following sources were used in developing these guidance notes:

Indiana University plagiarism guidelines - <http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml>

Materials on critical reading written by Charles Anderson, Department of Higher and Community Education, University of Edinburgh.

Materials on online learning written by Nora Mogey, Media and Learning Technology Service and Hamish Macleod, Centre for Teaching, Learning and Assessment, University of Edinburgh.

Northedge, A., Thomas, J., Lane, A. and Peasgood, A. (1997). *The sciences good study guide*. Milton Keynes: The Open University.

University of Edinburgh staff and student guidance on the avoidance of plagiarism - <http://www.aaps.ed.ac.uk/regulations/Plagiarism/Intro.htm>

University of Edinburgh Library online tutorial materials on 'researching an assignment' written by Denny Colledge - <http://www.lib.ed.ac.uk/howto/infoskills.shtml>