Frequently Asked Questions About Research Papers

What is the best balance between my ideas and information from outside sources?
Keep in mind that the research paper bears your name as author; therefore, the majority of the ideas, arguments, and style should be your own. A good rule of thumb is no more than one-third of the paper should be attributed to outside sources.

When do I have to cite a source?
Acknowledge your source when you use: a direct quotation, a statistic, someone else’s idea, concrete facts, information from the internet, illustrations, photos or charts (not your own) or information not commonly known.

Note: Common knowledge is regarded as a fact that can be found in any number of general resources, such as the dates of the Civil War, Beethoven’s birth date, or the chemical composition of sodium chloride.

What is plagiarism?
Plagiarism is the intentional use of another’s words or ideas without attribution. If in doubt, cite your source.

To avoid plagiarism:
- Always give credit for facts, quotations, and opinions that are not common knowledge, even when expressed in your own words.
- Always give credit when you use another person’s wording, even a phrase. Use quotation marks.
- Write your first draft with your notes and books closed. Don’t go back and forth between your ideas and sources.

Is it better to directly quote a source or to paraphrase?
Unless the source expresses an idea in particularly memorable or relevant language, it is best to paraphrase the idea and cite the author. Remember, the paper is an example of your writing.

How do I integrate another source into my paper?
A direct quotation should be preceded by a short introduction. Identify the author and the source of information.
Example: Mike Rose’s essay “The Language of Exclusion” notes, “The writing course hold a very strange position in the American curriculum.”

Example: English professor Mike Rose poses this question: “But might not these difficulties with writing suggest the need for possible far-ranging changes within the curriculum as well — changes that are the proper concern of the university?”

Example: Composition researcher Mike Rose does not believe in the “myth of transience.”

**What if I borrow only a few words?**
A rule of thumb is that quotations marks are necessary after you have used three or more significant, consecutive words from your source. (Do not count and, the, or, etc.)

**How often do I give citations?**
If many facts from one source are contained in a paragraph, use one citation for all of them after the last fact or idea. At the outset, use a phrase to signal the reader that you are using a source, such as “according to…” The citation should be in the same paragraph as the source. [See MLA documentation sample for further information.]

**What do I do with titles?**
Underline or italicize titles of books, periodicals (magazines), journals, plays, films, and television programs. Use quotation marks for titles of poems, essays, songs, and one-act plays.

*Note:* The title of your own essay does not go in quotation marks.

**How do I use an author’s name in my work?**
Use the author’s full name the first time you mention it. Thereafter, use the full name or last name only — never just the first name.

**What’s wrong with writing “in this quote, the author…”?**
This phrase suggests that your source is quoting from someone else. The word *quote* is a verb; *quotation* is a noun. When you use quotation marks, you acknowledge that the language is borrowed; using a phrase such as “in this quotation” or “quote” is redundant.