

# How to Cite a Literary Text

by Alfred J. Drake

Be safe and sane in your borrowing of other people's language. Common phrases like "a stitch in time saves nine" need no source. However, the sentence "For Touchstone love is a ubiquitous human need that seeks an object; it is very like a need that in animals is seasonal," unless you yourself originated it, had better be followed by (Gilman 28). Never paraphrase or copy another writer's language -- including the teacher's handouts and the anthology's introductory material -- without making sure the reader knows that's what you're doing. There are procedures for quoting and paraphrasing with propriety and sophistication. See, for example, the gallery's guides on plagiarizing and on analyzing texts, as well as the grammar guide. Plagiarism is the academic equivalent of a felony. Like Caesar's wife, you must learn to avoid even the appearance of impropriety. With that admonishment in mind, I'll close by citing the Modern Language Association's explanation of the problem and by offering a few of my own common-sensical observations.

Editor Joseph Gibaldi's *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 5th. edition (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1999 pp. 30-31), explains plagiarism as follows:

To use another person's ideas or expressions in your writing without acknowledging the source is to plagiarize. Plagiarism, then, constitutes intellectual theft...

At all times during research and writing, guard against the possibility of inadvertent plagiarism by keeping careful notes that distinguish between your own ... thoughts and the material you gather from others. Forms of plagiarism include the failure to give appropriate acknowledgment when repeating another's wording or particularly apt phrase, when paraphrasing another's argument, or when presenting another's line of thinking.

You may certainly use other persons' words and thoughts ... but the borrowed material must not seem your creation. Suppose, for example, that you want to use the material in the following passage, which appears on page 625 of an essay by Wendy Martin in the book *Columbia Literary History of the United States*.

Some of Dickinson's most powerful poems express her firmly held conviction that life cannot be fully comprehended without an understanding of death.

If you write the following sentence without any documentation, you have committed plagiarism:

Emily Dickinson strongly believed that we cannot understand life fully unless we also comprehend death.

But you may present the material if you cite your source.

As Wendy Martin has suggested, Emily Dickinson strongly believed that we cannot understand life fully unless we also comprehend death (625).

Now *that* is a clear explanation! I conclude with a few practical observations. Students sometimes feel confused about what to do with ideas from sources other than books and scholarly articles. The main questions are as follows:

1. "What do I do with an idea my friend or roommate or spouse gave me?"

My response to this question -- and keep in mind that the response may differ for some instructors -- is that such borrowings need not be documented. In my view, ideas of this sort are freely given; the giver does not require credit for ideas good-naturedly and casually thrown your way. The spirit of the situation is, "hey, here's an insight I have about Dante's *Inferno* -- see what more you can make of my observation!" However, it's entirely another and less savory matter to let others do your writing for you or to let them do much of your thinking. Don't let others take over the tasks of writing, editing, structuring, and thinking through. Making suggestions about these matters can be helpful -- but in academic matters, all "takeovers" are *hostile*.

2. "What about the teacher's handouts and lecture material? Should I treat them just like a book or an article?"

My response is that if you are making use of such material, you should indicate as much. Handouts are written material, and although the insights offered in them are freely given, the manner of giving is not casual but formal and academic. If you borrow from them, say so; if you quote them directly, do so in proper MLA form.

Lectures and student observations, while freely given, are offered in an academic setting, so it would be unwise to repeat what I or your fellow students say as if it originated with you. It is surely acceptable to use this kind of material -- in fact, often an exam question or a paper prompt calls for some incorporation of lecture material, though good questions and prompts ask you to do more than simply demonstrate your recall of what was said in class or written in handouts. When you refer to lecture comments, simple, occasional, generic attribution-phrases like "As suggested in class, .." will serve you well, though you should not be fanatical in applying them. A fuller example might be,

It was suggested in class that one of the most important things to understand about Dante is how he dramatizes the distance between human and divine love. That observation seems to me particularly appropriate in reading Canto such and such, [which I now go on to explore in my response].

A passage like the above suggests that you're aware of what the teacher has said, but also that you have managed to incorporate it into your own understanding of the text, using it as a guide for further exploration, a point of departure. Even if you agree with what your instructor says and want to respond in that spirit, use your own examples and offer insights of your own. If your whole response lies between one big implied set of quotation marks, that's bad news -- it means you're just repeating the ideas you hear, either without having reflected on them or without

understanding that the teacher would actually welcome your expressing the results of that reflection. *It is all right to disagree, and it is all right to strike out on different paths.* I would be perfectly happy to see a response like the following:

It was suggested in class that one of the most important things to understand about Dante is how he dramatizes the necessary distance between human and divine love. Still, in Canto such and such [which I now go on to explore in my response] Dante calls attention to the ways in which humans make that distance seem all the greater because of their own misconstruction. [Or, "Canto X emphasizes another, equally important problem.."]

To sum up what I've been saying about borrowing others' ideas, while it may be true that "95% of life is just showing up," it's even more true, as Oscar Wilde says, that "The critic's task is to see the object as in itself it really is not."\* Understand that quip in a truly Wildean sense -- not as a call to willful, lazy misinterpretation of great books but as an invitation to be insightful and creative -- and you will never have to worry about plagiarism and lack of originality. Instead, you will be honoring the authors of said great books and making your instructors' experience a *lot* more worthwhile. Your "other 5% of life" is really the most important part.

3. How do I cite Internet sources? The basic requirements are that you cite the document title, author, relevant publication dates, Uniform Resource Locator (URL), and the date on which you accessed the information. The MLA mentions many different kinds of internet sources, so it is best to consult that handbook. Below is an MLA example in which someone has cited "a document within a scholarly project or information database":

Dove, Rita. "Lady Freedom among Us." The Electronic Text Center. Ed. David Seaman. 1998. Alderman Lib., U of Virginia. 19 June 1998  
<<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/subjects/afam.html>>.

**Notes:**

\*The very earnest Victorian man of letters Matthew Arnold had said, "The critic's task is to see the object as in itself it really is."