

So you don't want to plagiarize... what do you do?

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Writing a paper that does not involve plagiarism is very straightforward. Writing a very good paper is more difficult. You'd like to write a very good paper, but you really want to make sure you don't plagiarize. So what do you have to do?

Only two things. If you do these two things, you will not be plagiarizing. If you don't do these two things, you are plagiarizing, and it is possible that your professor might follow University policy and give you a 0 and send you to the Student Disciplinary Committee.

You should do these two things, and I recommend addressing them in the following order:

1. Cite all your sources. When thinking about this point, it is important to remember: **it is 100% irrelevant whether or not you "put it in your own words"**. Putting it into your own words is nice, but if you fail to cite your source, then even using 100% of your own words won't stop you from committing plagiarism. Make sure you cite your source before you even begin to think about "putting it into your own words".

Example: Your professor gives you a writing assignment. You are required to use two scholarly journal articles that you choose and then are approved. You decide to write about the Chinese Civil War, and you have two nice journal articles. But you feel you need some background information, so you look at Wikipedia. You use some of the "facts" from the Wikipedia article. You put it 100% in your own words, but you don't cite Wikipedia... because you're a little bit embarrassed and don't want your professor to know you used Wikipedia.

This is plagiarism. If your professor chooses to follow the University policy, you will get a 0 and you will be sent to the Student Disciplinary Committee, even though it is 100% in your own words. **If you use information from Wikipedia*, you MUST cite Wikipedia as the source, EVEN IF it is 100% in your own words, even if it is "just facts"**.

(*Obviously, it's not just Wikipedia. The principle holds for textbooks, answers.com, other websites, or any other source. If you "found out stuff" in that source, you MUST cite it).

2. If it is not 100% your own writing, then you must use quotation marks. You can not

avoid this by any so-called “5 consecutive words rule”. If the text says

Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country.

... then you **can not** avoid plagiarism by changing it to

Now is the time that all good men should come to the rescue of their country.

Notice: No more than 4 consecutive words are copied, so you followed the “5 consecutive words rule”, but guess what? **It’s still plagiarism.**

So what should you do?

Choice 1: Keep the phrase or part of it, and **put it in quotation marks**. You should do this if you think the phrase is so unique, so powerful, that you simply need to use it.

Choice 2: Read the text—not just that sentence, but a whole paragraph, or a whole page. Think about it. Understand it. Process it. Internalize it. And then close the text and write the information from scratch out of your own head. **Don’t simply copy the sentence (or paragraph, etc.) and try to “change enough words”**. As you see from the example above, that can lead to plagiarism.

And remember, either way, you have to cite the source.

That really is all there is to it.

1. If you make sure you cite **every** source you actually use—even the ones you only “take some facts from” and “put in your own words”—then you will avoid a very common source of plagiarism.
2. If you make sure you always write your own paragraphs instead of simply “changing enough words” then you will avoid another common source of plagiarism.

If you do **both** of these things, then you are not guilty of plagiarism. If you fail to do even one of them, then you are committing plagiarism, and your professor may decide to follow University policy and give you a 0 and send you to the Student Disciplinary Committee.