

# THE USE OF SOURCES IN WRITTEN WORK AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OVIEDO

## Introduction

The submission of written work is an important part of the learning and assessing processes at the University of Oviedo. Such work is intended to serve several purposes: in addition to helping in the learning and assessment of subject matter, it is also intended to provide training in writing correctly and precisely and in formulating arguments in a clear and convincing manner.

It is a characteristic of many of the written assignments submitted in this context that they are to a great extent based on texts and various forms of presentations which others have authored and thus have copyright to. Such texts and presentations are called sources, and they can vary in character, for example textbooks, articles in journals, magazines and newspapers, monographs, reports in various publications, text on the internet, lectures, talks, debates, images, film, sound recordings or conversations and discussions with lecturers and students.

Regardless of the source, however, the general rule is the same: when you take facts, thinking, ideas, opinions and short or long quotes from one or more sources and use them in your own work, it must be clearly stated which sources you have used. In other words, you must not give the impression that other people's thinking, ideas, opinions and results are your own. You are therefore required to cite, refer to and quote in a clear and honest manner every time you make use of a source.

It is not only permitted to utilize sources, it is often essential. There are two formal sets of rules that protect the person behind a source (the copyright holder). One is the Copyright Act (the "Act relating to copyright in literary, scientific and artistic works etc."), which states among other things that it is permitted to quote from such works provided that this takes place in accordance with proper usage and to the extent necessary to achieve the desired purpose. The other set of rules consists of the established academic norms for the use and citation of sources. The Copyright Act and the academic norms overlap and complement each other, and it is not always easy to say where the line should be drawn between them. Both factors are important, and it is not sufficient to refrain from doing something illegal; you must also comply with "proper usage" in the academic world and in the traditions of your academic discipline.

## Source citations

As mentioned, you are required to cite, refer to and quote in a clear and honest manner every time you make use of a source. How this is done varies from discipline to discipline and according to genre, which is easy to observe by examining the practice of different publications. Two examples will serve to illustrate this.

### *Example 1*

In the text: Whether or not a person carrying a knife in a public place has a worthy purpose can decide whether the act is lawful or unlawful (De Vergottini, 1996, p. 57).

In the list of references:

De Vergottini, Giuseppe, Legal rights the new minorities and Multiculturalism in contemporary Italy, en Dune, Michael (Edit.), Citizenship and Rights in Multicultural Societies, Keele University Press, 1996.

### *Example 2*

In the text: Many natural products have proven to be effective aids in combating various infections [7].

In the list of references:

[7] Bosniak, L..Citizenship denationalized, *Indiana Law Journal*, **1997**, 60, p. 52.

Regardless of which method is chosen, the intention behind references and lists of references is to ensure that the reader is given the information necessary to find the source, partly as a check on the author of the text, but also to satisfy the reader's own academic curiosity.

## **Plagiarism**

If you submit written work in which the necessary references are wholly or partly lacking, this can result in you being guilty of submitting a plagiarized piece of work. Plagiarism can be defined as an act and result of an act whereby other people's results, thinking, ideas or formulations are passed off as one's own. This is a form of intellectual theft, as is made clear in the Copyright Act.

Plagiarism is deemed to be cheating, and it has serious consequences. It is clear that a student who cheats can both have his/her examination results annulled and be expelled for a period. How can you protect yourself against such serious consequences? The answer is simple: by being very conscious about the use of sources, and by referring to all relevant sources in an honest manner using a standard system that is accepted by the academic milieu that is to assess your written work.

As a rule, "to refer to in an honest manner" means two things: firstly, you must be loyal to the author or authors you cite. If you quote an author indirectly in your own text, it may be tempting to choose words that make the author's words fit better as support for what you are writing than if you reproduced the author's own words. There is nothing wrong with indirect quotes, but the loyalty requirement is absolute. Secondly, it must be possible for the reader of the text to find the material to which you refer. If it is a written, published source, it shall be stated in a standardized manner what the source is and where it can be found (whether the reference is from a book, an article in a journal, a newspaper, an internet address, from a note posted on a notice board etc., and in which edition, which volume, which chapter and on which page(s) etc. the text can be found).

Of course, it is not always the case that written sources are involved. The source could be a conversation with a knowledgeable person, an interesting contribution to a discussion or an artistic experience. There are also standardized approaches for referring

to such sources, and if these approaches are not followed, one may present other people's thinking, ideas and formulations as if they were one's own, thus being guilty of a form of plagiarism.

It is not always the case that lacking or incorrect references to sources is deemed to be cheating. However, even though it is not necessarily cheating, you should be aware that if you fail to provide (sufficiently good) references to sources, this may lead to your being awarded a poor grade, even though you have done good work in other respects.

### **Collaboration at work and independent work**

The requirements for the use of source references may have consequences for how written work by two or more authors is assessed. Since the main rule is that students are to be assessed as individuals, it is important that, if two or more students are to write something jointly, this must be agreed and cleared in advance.

There are two main ways of organizing such collaborations. One is to state clearly which parts (chapters and paragraphs with pertaining list of references) each individual author has contributed, so that it is clear who is responsible for which parts of the submitted text. The other method is to agree with the person with academic responsibility that an integrated joint work will be written by named students, so that the participants have joint responsibility for the whole text and pertaining list of references, and accept that they will be awarded the same grade for the work.

What about what takes place in good, active student milieus? A good learning environment at the university is often characterized by discussion and exchanges of opinion, and it is not always easy to know who first came up with a good idea that proved to be valuable in further work. In such cases, it is a good rule to thank those who have contributed to such discussions in an appropriate place in the text, e.g. in a foreword or as part of the conclusion. A sentence such as "I would like to thank my fellow students P., B. and A. , for many rewarding discussions in the spring semester 2004, without this making them in any way responsible for what I have written," will have the same effect as a source reference. Those who are to assess the work and award a grade can then contact students P., B. and A. , and, by discussing with them, find out whether or not the author has been independent.

### **When are references unnecessary?**

On the basis of the above, it might appear to be impossible to write a single sentence without including extensive source references, but that is not the case. It is normal in all subjects to assume a large, shared set of "general knowledge" that the reader can be presumed to know, and which therefore does not require a reference. If you write that Spain is a monarchy, it is unnecessary to refer to the Constitution of 1978 concerning the king's constitutional position.

It is not possible to provide a general definition of what constitutes "general knowledge"; it can only be sensibly delimited within each academic subject. If you are in doubt as to whether something is "general knowledge" and therefore does not require a source reference, you should ask about it. It is better to ask than to be suspected of

plagiarism for writing something that is controversial without a source reference in the belief that it is “general knowledge”.