A Question of Attribution*

The Why? What? and How? of using other authors’ written texts in the construction of our own


Why do we refer to other writers?

- To demonstrate whose theories we have used or are evaluating†
- To demonstrate awareness of different schools of thought about the topic
- To demonstrate our ability to apply theory to practice
- To demonstrate our ability to discuss theories’ strength and weaknesses in application to particular cases
- To support our own views by reference to other writers who agree with them

What must be referenced?

- Any direct quotation from another’s work.
- Other people’s opinions and arguments, even if we have paraphrased or summarised them
- Truth statements, specific facts and generalisations, unless they are considered general knowledge

How should it be done?

- By using paraphrase in different ways
- By using signalling words, combined with in-text citation, to indicate others’ ideas, statements, opinions, even if paraphrased (states, maintains, alleges, etc).
- Remembering that simply changing the words doesn’t make it an adequate paraphrase
- Ensuring that key disciplinary terminology is retained in paraphrases
- When attributing an idea to its original author, it is inadmissible if the paraphrase changes the sense of their argument
- By applying the general to the specific, to demonstrate understanding of the author’s idea by rewording it and applying it to a specific example or instance
- Knowing when it is fitting to use a direct quote (when a key idea is put into especially memorable or appropriate words)
- Knowing how to combine your ideas with another writer’s ideas and give credit appropriately

Magyar’s article can be downloaded from: http://www.aldinhe.ac.uk/ojs/index.php

---

† Borrowed from the title of a 1988 play by Alan Bennett.

† Oxford’s Proctors report that literature reviews are often the source of suspicions of plagiarism. It is a requirement of research degrees that students demonstrate knowledge of the field in which they are working, evaluating others’ contributions, theories, etc. in order to provide the context against which their own potential contribution can be judged. Not clearly and correctly citing and referencing the sources of ideas thus evaluated could easily constitute plagiarism.