

How to Avoid High-Risk Situations

Students who misuse sources usually don't set out to; they usually plan to write a thoughtful paper that displays their own thinking. But they allow themselves to slip into a situation in which they either misuse sources out of negligence or come to believe that they have no choice *but* to misuse sources. Here are some suggestions for avoiding such situations, based on Administrative Board records of students who did just the opposite.

1. ***Don't leave written work until the last minute***, when you may be surprised by how much work the assignment requires. This doesn't mean that you need to draft the paper weeks in advance (you can start working on a paper by simply jotting a few words or thoughts somewhere), but it does mean looking over the instructions for the assignment early on, jotting any first impressions, clearing up any confusions with your instructor, and getting the topic into your subconscious mind, which can help you flag potentially useful material in subsequent reading and lectures. (If you feel you have a special fear or block about writing papers, or procrastinate excessively, or just don't seem to be able to organize and prioritize work, make an appointment at the Bureau of Study Counsel.)

2. ***Don't use secondary sources for a paper unless you are asked or explicitly allowed to***. Especially, if you feel stuck or panicked, don't run to the library and bring back an armload of sources that you hope will jump-start your own thinking. Chances are they will only scatter and paralyze your thinking. Instead, go to your instructor or section leader for advice or try jump-starting your paper in another way (e.g. by free writing or brainstorming, by re-analyzing the assignment itself, by formulating a hard question for yourself to answer, by locating a problem or conflict, by picking a few key passages and annotating them copiously).

3. ***Don't rely exclusively on a single secondary source for information or opinion*** in a research paper. If you do, your paper may be less well informed and balanced than it should be, and moreover you may be lulled into plagiarizing the source. Using several different sources forces you to step back and evaluate or triangulate them.

4. ***When you take notes, take pains to distinguish the words and thoughts of the source from your own***, so you don't mistake them for your own later. Adopt these habits in particular:

* Either summarize radically or quote exactly, always using quotation marks when you quote. Don't take notes by loosely copying out source material and simply changing a few words.

* When you take a note or quote from a source, jot the author's name and page number beside each note you take (don't simply jot down ideas anonymously) and record the source's publication data on that same page in your notes, to save yourself having to dig it up as you are rushing to finish your paper. Save even more time by recording this information in the same order and format you will use for listing references on your final draft.

* Take or transcribe your notes on sources in a separate word-processing file, not in the file in which you are drafting your paper. And keep these files separate throughout the writing of the paper, bringing in source material from your notes only as needed.

5. ***Take notes actively, not passively***. Don't just copy down the source's words or ideas, but record your own reactions and reflections, questions and hunches. Note where you find yourself resisting or doubting or puzzling over what a source says; jot down possible arguments or observations you might want to make. These will provide starting points when you turn to write your paper; and they will help keep you from feeling overwhelmed by your sources or your notes.

6. ***Don't try to sound more sophisticated or learned than you are***. Your papers aren't expected to sound as erudite as the books and articles of your expert sources, and indeed your intelligence will emerge most clearly in a plain, direct style. Moreover, once you begin to appropriate a voice that isn't yours, it becomes easier accidentally to appropriate words and ideas

to plagiarize. Also remember that, when asked to write a research paper using secondary sources, you are expected to learn from those sources but not to have the same level of knowledge and originality, or to resolve issues that experts have been debating for years. Your task is to clarify the issues and bring out their complexity. The way you organize the material to do this, if you take the task seriously, will be original.

7. ***If you feel stuck, confused, or panicked about time, or if you are having problems in your life and can't concentrate, let your instructor or section leader know.*** Make contact by e-mail, if it's easier for you, but do make contact even if you feel embarrassed because you haven't attended lectures or section or think you're the only student in the class who is having trouble (you aren't), or if you will have to lose points for a late paper. Losing points will be a much smaller event, in the story of your life, than being required to withdraw for plagiarism.

8. ***Don't ask to borrow another student's paper*** if you are stuck or running late with an assignment. Reading it will probably discourage or panic rather than inspire you, and it may tempt you to plagiarize. Instead, ask the student to help you brainstorm some of your own ideas.

9. ***Don't write a paper from borrowed notes***, since you have no way of knowing the source or the words and ideas. They may, for example, come directly from a book or lecture, or from a book discussed in lecture.

10. ***Don't do the actual writing of a paper with another student***, or split the writing between you unless you have explicit permission. Even if you collaborate on a project, you're expected to express the results in your own words.

11. ***Don't submit to one class a paper or even sections of a paper that you have submitted or will submit to another class***, without first getting the written permission of both instructors and filing the permission with your Senior Tutor or Assistant Dean.

12 ***Always back up your work on diskette, and make a hard copy each time you end a long working session or finish a paper.*** This will reduce your chances of finding yourself in a desperate situation caused by computer failure.

13. ***Avoid study guides, such as SparkNotes or ClassicNotes***; they only increase your risk of using others' ideas as your own.

<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~expos/sources/chap3.html>