

Accurate and Ethical Use of Sources

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn how to make sure that your use of sources in academic writing is accurate and ethical. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [Using Sources With Accuracy](#)
2. [Ethical vs. Unethical Source Use](#)

1. Using Sources With Accuracy

The accurate use of sources is important. It applies to both the recording of bibliographic data from a source, and the use of a source's ideas, assertions, and content. Most academic essays must include a bibliography so that readers can check the support for the writer's work. The option to do so is available to readers when the writer has accurately recorded the source's author, title, and publication information, including any umbrella source (for print articles), URL (for websites), and page or paragraph numbers (for quoted and summarized material).

When using sources, there are several ways that writers can violate the ethical standards according to which academic writers and researchers must work. It is unethical to do all of the following:

- **Misrepresent the source's bibliographic data.** Doing so violates the reader's trust. Part of the reason that writers include this data is to invite readers into the academic conversation about the topic of the work. To misrepresent that information is to give readers a false invitation.
- **Use a quotation out of context, in a way that misconstrues the source's intention, or in a way that mischaracterizes the source's ideas, research, or points.**
- **Fail to use quotation marks around quoted information, or fail to properly cite the source from which a quotation was taken.** These actions constitute unintentional plagiarism. When using part of a quotation, or removing sections from a quotation, make sure that the resulting quotation is an accurate representation of the writer's words and work.
- **Present another person's ideas or words as if they are your own.** This is intentional plagiarism.

Even when you observe these requirements, it can be difficult to fully and accurately explain academic sources—the ideas, research, and points provided by those sources—while also presenting your own ideas, research, and points.

It can be tempting to alter or oversimplify another person's ideas, research, and points to align them more closely to your own. However, the work of others must be accurately represented in all instances. All writers must ensure that they use sources ethically and accurately.

2. Ethical vs. Unethical Source Use

Suppose you are assigned to write an essay on the effects of social media. Your thesis is that social media sites (e.g., Facebook) are useful not only for long-distance networking, but for helping people (especially young people) to learn how to socialize. You argue against those who say that Facebook and other social media sites are the beginning of the end of “true” friendship.

Suppose that while conducting research, you find an article written by sociologists who studied the effects of Facebook usage on young adults. Here is the introductory description of the article:

Over 500 million people interact daily with Facebook. Yet, whether Facebook use influences subjective well-being over time is unknown. We addressed this issue using experience sampling, the most reliable method for measuring in-vivo behavior and psychological experience. We text-messaged people five times per day for two weeks to examine how Facebook use influences the two components of subjective well-being: how people feel moment to moment and how satisfied they are with their lives. Our results indicate that Facebook use predicts negative shifts on both of these variables over time. The more people used Facebook at one time point, the worse they felt the next time we text-messaged them; the more they used Facebook over two weeks, the more their life satisfaction levels declined over time. Interacting with other people “directly” did not predict these negative outcomes. They were also not moderated by the size of people's Facebook networks, their perceived supportiveness, motivation for using Facebook, gender, loneliness, self-esteem, or depression. On the surface, Facebook provides an invaluable resource for fulfilling the basic human need for social connection. Rather than enhancing well-being, however, these findings suggest that Facebook may undermine it.

Although this article is not in agreement with your thesis, it is closely related to your topic, and it is also the first peer-reviewed source you've located. Because your professor requires you to use at least four academic sources for your essay, you'd like to use it. Perhaps if you reconsidered (and adjusted) your understanding of the article's purpose, you could cite the article and summarize it by writing that no connection between Facebook use and unhappiness was found in the study. But doing so would be inaccurate, unethical, and wrong.

What if, instead, after reading the abstract and the rest of the article, you examined the research and data collected about how Facebook use predicts unhappiness in young adults and extracted this quotation:

Whether Facebook use influences subjective well-being over time is unknown.

Would it be wrong for you to do so? Although the article includes this sentence, it would be inaccurate and unethical for you to quote it out of context (i.e., isolated from the conclusions of the article) and present it as the result of the study. When using a source, ask yourself, “If the writer(s) knew what I was doing, what would they think about my use of their work?”



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that when incorporating research into an essay, it's important to make sure you are **using sources with accuracy**. This involves representing the source material truthfully and giving credit to the original authors. To demonstrate the **difference between ethical and unethical source use**, you examined an example of how a piece of research can be unethically used to support an argument.

Best of luck in your learning!

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