

PLAGIARISM: WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS SENTENCE?

Plagiarism is using the **words**, the **ideas**, or even the **structure** of a source without making it clear that those elements are not your own. That source can be a book, an article, or a website; it can also be a song, an email, a comedy routine, or a conversation with a friend. If any part of your work is taken from somewhere else (unless it's common knowledge), **you need to make clear exactly which part it is and show exactly what that source was**. To avoid unintentional plagiarism, always follow these five rules:

- Put any words from your source, unchanged, inside quotation marks.
- Put any ideas from your source in your own words entirely.
- Avoid presenting your ideas in the same order as your source.
- Never mix your work and your source's work together without showing where one ends and the other begins.
- Always show where each part of your source material comes from.

You show where your source material comes from by **citing**. One way is to identify the source inside a parenthesis after the material you're citing; how you identify it varies with the citation style your teacher wants you to use. Some teachers may allow you to use "informal citation," in which you simply name the source in one of your sentences.

Identifying a source, however, is rarely enough. Consider the following passage from Susan Faludi's essay "Sold Out: From Team Booster to TV Backdrop."

Much has been written about how televised football sliced the game into consumable bits sandwiched between commercials, forced the use of injurious Astro turf because it was prettier to look at, turned the sport into a big-stakes money machine, and so forth. But what did it do to the fans?

Now consider this plagiarized version:

Faludi says that many people have published articles about how television broadcasting has affected football. Because of broadcasting needs, the action of the game has been sliced into little bits sandwiched between commercials. Many teams have been forced to play on Astro turf, which can be more dangerous than grass, just because it's prettier to look at on television. Also, the whole game has turned into a big-stakes money machine. It's even affected the fans, most of whom can no longer afford to buy tickets.

What's the problem? This version says where the ideas originally came from; it changes many of the source's words; it even adds some new ideas of the second writer's own. It's still plagiarism, though, because:

It doesn't put quotation marks around the source's words. Some words from an original source will show up in even the best paraphrase. It's hard to imagine any discussion of Faludi's point which doesn't include common words like "the" and "is," or keywords like "game" and "football." More than 50% of this plagiarized version, however, is taken directly from Faludi: "sandwiched between commercials," for example, and "big-stakes money machine." Those phrases have to be in quotation marks (if they're going to be used at all) and substituting "game" for "sport" doesn't help if the rest of the sentence is unchanged.

It copies the organization of the original argument. Every idea in the plagiarized version shows up in exactly the same order that it does in the original. Yes, “and so forth” is skipped and the cost of tickets is added, but the overall sequence is exactly the same. This is Faludi's structure, not the second writer's.

It doesn't show which ideas are the writer's and which are the source's. It's clear that the first sentence of this plagiarized version comes from Faludi. But what about the second? The third? If we want to give the second writer credit for thinking about ticket prices, how do we know that the claim about fans right before it belongs to Faludi? Moreover, the original suggests that Faludi is paraphrasing other people in her first sentence, but raising a new point of her own in the second. That distinction is lost in this rewording.

Here are two of many acceptable ways of reworking Faludi's passage. Notice how each focuses on a different idea, leading to paraphrases that are as different from one another as they are from their source. Note, too, that each one makes sure that the reader sees exactly which ideas come from Faludi, rather than the paraphraser.

PARAPHRASE I

Broadcasting football games on television has put players at risk. First, as Susan Faludi observes, it has made AstroTurf's looks more important than its slipperiness, so players now have to risk friction burns and sprains by running across it. Second, the game's division into what Faludi describes as “consumable bits sandwiched between commercials” may increase the pressure on athletes to make those “bits” exciting, encouraging ever more aggressive and dangerous plays. And last, since television, as Faludi says, has made football “into a big-stakes money machine,” many players may increasingly be tempted to take dangerous steroids to raise the size of their stakes.

PARAPHRASE II

Broadcasting football games on television has been good for fans. Susan Faludi notes that television has persuaded many teams to move to less muddy AstroTurf; the result is that it's easier to see the player's uniforms against the green background. Faludi notes, too, that the action of the game is now concentrated between commercials. In my experience, that makes it easier to get another snack or make a fast phone call without missing anything.

DISCUSSION

- The first sentences are ideas developed by the paraphrasers, so no citation is needed.
- Paraphrase I changes the organization of the original by starting with the AstroTurf issue.
- The second sentence is Faludi's idea, so the paraphraser says so. The structure of the sentence is basically new, however, and her words “prettier” and “injurious” have been reworked.
- Keywords like “football” and “game,” however, are so essential that you can use them.
- Because Faludi's AstroTurf idea was properly attributed to her, the reader of II should assume that other ideas NOT attributed to Faludi (aggressive plays, steroids) are the paraphraser's. Conditional language (“may”) and/or claims specifically attributed to the writer (“in my experience”) also help separate Faludi's ideas and the paraphraser's.
- Any distinctive word or phrase from the source has to go inside quotation marks.

Last Revised Fall 2009