TIP 2: HOW CAN I AVOID PLAGIARISM IN MY RESEARCH ESSAY?

Take Notes
Accidental plagiarism is a real concern for some students. It can be overwhelming to have so much information from so many different sources when you are writing your research paper. I recommend using note cards, and having on the one side bibliographical information of the source and on the other side the quotations or a paraphrase of the quotations of the information you want to later use in your research essay. This will help you remember when it comes time to write whether you need to change the words in order to make the direct quotation a paraphrase or whether you can just use the wording on the card as is because they are already your words. This will really help you avoid accidental plagiarism.

Put Text away when Writing
It can be really difficult to paraphrase someone’s excellent quotation and put that into your own writing. What I often say to students is, “it’s difficult because they already chose the best words.” So, when it comes time to paraphrase a really great quotation, you might want to try a few tricks, such as saying it in your own words out loud and then using that as the paraphrasing in your own paper. You don’t want to be looking at the direct quotation when you paraphrase because you might be tempted to just simply replace some words and think of that as your own writing. Often that paraphrase you end up with is too similar to the direct quotation, and that can be another example of accidental plagiarism.

Don’t wait until the end of the Paragraph to Cite
One of the key differences between using a quotation in your paper, or a paragraph, is how you cite it. For example, if I were using the APA form of citation, and this were a direct quote, what I would do is add quotation marks and put the author, year, page number at the end:

“Remember to cite your sources early on in the paragraph instead of waiting until the end. That may be too late!” (author, year, page number).

However, if I’ve taken this direct quotation and put it into my own words to make it into a paraphrase, then I don’t use the quotation marks and I need to move the citation earlier in the paragraph to after the first sentence or after the end of the first sentence with the period on the outside:

Remember to cite your sources early on in the paragraph instead of waiting until the end (author, year). That may be too late!

That makes it clear to the reader that this sentence is paraphrased from a source rather than strictly your own ideas and your own words. To not do it this way is to commit accidental plagiarism.
Follow Conventions
When writing a paper that uses quotations or citations from other sources, it’s important to follow the style guide that’s common in your discipline. For example, some disciplines will use the APA format; others will use MLA. There’s also the Chicago Style. So, there are many different ones that disciplines choose from. Be sure to be familiar with which one you are expected to use. If you are not sure, ask your instructor or a reference librarian.

What is Common Knowledge?
One of the questions we often get in The Writing Centre is “how do I know what I need to cite? What’s common knowledge?” It’s true that you don’t have to cite what’s commonly known, but how do you know what is commonly known? We actually found it pretty difficult to find a definition of what common knowledge is. The best that we found comes from the Cal State San Marco’s Library (http://library.csusm.edu/plagiarism/howtoavoid/how_avoid_common.htm), which uses these three criteria:

1. The fact can be found in numerous places;
2. It is likely to be known by a lot of people; and
3. The information can be easily found in a general reference source.

If you are still unsure whether you need to cite it or not, then you can ask your instructor, a librarian, or a writing tutor.