Narrator

Even if you’re the cleverest person in the world, you still need to refer to other people’s work when writing assignments. And you need to acknowledge the source. You can’t let the reader think these words and ideas came from you. That would be plagiarism, which is bad news.

So, let’s imagine you’ve found some really good sources. What next? How do you use these sources in your work?

Most importantly, you always need to reference the source. You do this whether quoting, paraphrasing or summarising. We’ll look at those in a moment.

But first off, how do you reference someone else’s work in your writing? You can give a short reference in the main text, like this, including the author’s name and the year the source was published.

And at the end of the essay you include more information about the source material. For example: author's name, year of publication, title and chapter of the book or journal, publisher, place of publication. What to write varies among different institutions, so check your own requirements.

Now, we’re referencing economist Adam Smith’s book The Wealth of Nations. He originally wrote this:

"The rich consume little more than the poor, and in spite of their natural selfishness and rapacity… they divide with the poor the produce of all their improvements. They are led by an invisible hand…"

Quite long isn’t it? And complicated. So we can summarise it. We take only the main ideas and express them in a shorter form.

"… and thus, without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interests of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species."

A related skill is paraphrasing. Here, you take a short section and rewrite it in your own words. Let’s look at Adam Smith again. Take a good look at this:

"The rich are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life… among all its inhabitants."
We can paraphrase like this:

"Smith (1776) believes an unseen force guides the wealthy, which ensures wealth is shared out almost equally in society."

See how the words changed? And we also changed the grammar. For example, from passive voice to active. Remember, your writing should always be as clear as possible.

What about quoting? Well Adam Smith’s theory is best known as the ‘invisible hand’ theory. It would be strange to paraphrase this to the ‘unseen force’ theory. So when the source material has expressed something in a particularly interesting or convincing way, we often prefer to quote directly. For example:

"Adam Smith’s view is that the wealthy "are led by an invisible hand", which ensures their wealth is shared out through society."

But be careful not to rely on quotes too much. You should use them to back up your point, not to make the argument. Remember to use your own words to make the main point, and then use the quote as evidence.

And, if you’re being asked to discuss, evaluate or compare, remember to include alternative points of view.

There we go. Follow these tips to help you write strong essays and avoid plagiarism. After all, you are the cleverest person in the world.

Vocabulary

plagiarism  
copying some else's work and pretending it is your own

to reference  
to mention something and show the source

to paraphrase  
to repeat something using different words