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Proper Citation of Sources--MLA Format

When writing papers, which use information from researched sources, it is necessary to provide complete and correct documentation to show the source of all words and ideas which are not those of the student. Failure to cite a source implies that the information used is the original work of the paper writer--a form of stealing known as "plagiarism." In college classes and on the WCT, plagiarism is grounds for failure, no matter how well written the rest of the paper may be. In the professional world, it is grounds for lawsuits.

There are two necessary components for proper documentation: in-text citation (within the paragraphs of the paper) and the Works Cited page (at the end of the paper). When quoting the words of another writer in your paper, it is necessary to use quotation marks around a quote, which is shorter than four lines. After the quotation put the author's name(s) followed by page number. For electronic sources, no page number is needed.

Example:

It is common practice today to exclude people from a jury if they have heard or read much about the crime and/or defendant in the media. As some writers have pointed out, this type of exclusion leads to the selection of jurors who don't know and probably don't care what is going on in their community. "This exclusion, intended to prevent prejudice, substitutes a different kind of prejudice" (Minow and Cate 456).

A quotation longer than four lines should be set in from the left margin:

Recent movies like The Juror portray dangerous criminals who threaten jurors who might vote to convict them. Such movies may frighten us into thinking that anonymous juries are needed. William Kunstler, however, suggests that this practice takes away all possibility of a fair trial for a defendant.

Ostensibly intended to protect the safety and privacy of jurors and their families, it is, in reality a prosecutorial device to increase the likelihood of conviction by giving jurors the impression that a defendant is so beyond the pale that their very lives would be in danger if their identities were made public (458).

Sometimes you will want to comment on an idea you have read without the need to actually quote from it. In that case, you may paraphrase the idea, but you still must cite the source. Here is an example:

Today's high-profile cases can sometimes offer rewards for jurors who can later sell their stories to the tabloids, or who may have their own radical political views. This can also prevent a defendant from getting a fair trial. The same people who would otherwise use any tactic they could think of to avoid jury duty, may now become what lawyers call "stealth jurors"--people who will tell the lawyers whatever they think they want to hear in order to be appointed to the jury (Scheck 56).

Note that in all these examples, the source material is used to reinforce the idea of the essay writer. This provides context for the quote or paraphrase. Don't use source material to stand alone--use it to support the point you want to make.

Works Cited

In showing sources on the Works Cited page, you must be careful to give enough information that the reader could take your citation to a library and find the information you used. For a magazine you need to give the author and title of the article, name of the magazine, and exact date of the issue, along with the page number(s) for the article.

Scheck, Barry. "The Death Row Dance." Newsweek. 7 April 1997: 56.

Be especially careful if the source you use is part of a larger work, such as an essay from a book of essays or a short story or poem from an anthology. You must give credit to the writer you are quoting, as well as the source of that piece.

Minow, Newton and Fred Cate. "Impartial--Not Ignorant--Juries Needed." Strategies for Argument. Ed. Sally DeWitt Spurgeon. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1992: 456-457.

(For other examples of citations, see the MLA Handbook, 6th ed.)

(Rev. May 2004)