Developing a Research and Writing Ethos

It’s worth beginning our conversation about ethical research and writing practices with the observation that the concept of “ethical behavior” relates closely to the recognition of different cultural perspectives and practices. The term “ethics” derives from the ancient Greek word *ethos*, which signifies the common, accepted ways of life that characterize a particular cultural group. Accordingly, what it means to “behave ethically” can differ depending upon the cultural context in which one is acting. Different cultures have different rules and conventions governing proper conduct, and this is true not just at the broad, overarching level. It’s not just that Saudi Arabian culture differs, Italian culture, which differs from Korean culture, which differs from American culture, etc. But also, within any particular broad and overarching culture, there are also many smaller, subcultures. The academy is one such subculture. It has its own values and norms, which sometimes differ from those of broader society. And even within the academy, different disciplines differ in various ways regarding how one is expected to conduct research and how one is expected to represent that research in one’s own writing. It is your job, as graduate students in particular disciplines or areas of study to seek to understand the rules and expectations that govern research and writing practices in your disciplines or areas of study.

All of you are entering a new cultural context to some degree, because the ethos of graduate level study in the academy is different from the ethos of undergraduate study. The expectations are higher on almost every score, and the sorts of research and writing tasks you will be asked to undertake are more complex. Some of you are entering multiple new cultural contexts: you are not only moving from the undergraduate to the graduate level (or perhaps from the Masters level to the PhD level), but also you are moving from some other broad and overarching cultural context into the American cultural context. In either case, the key for you is to begin to pay close attention to the ways in which your new culture’s expectations differ from those that have characterized your previous experience. In order to conduct ethical research and to know how to ethically represent that research in your own writing, you must develop a research and writing ethos that matches the ethos of your new academic culture, both broadly and narrowly construed.

Basic Differences between Undergraduate- and Graduate-level Research and Writing

Some of the basic, underlying differences between undergraduate- and graduate-level research that you will encounter across all of the disciplines in the academy include that:

- Whereas, undergraduate research is often largely passive (a professor effectively gives you the body of texts or objects of study that form the content of your research or points you in a very precise direction, leading you by the hand to find the material or data that you need), graduate-level research is much more active and self-directed. You will be taught discipline-appropriate methods for locating the material or data you need, but you will be expected to apply those methods on your own.

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Whereas undergraduate research and writing often ask little more of you than that you demonstrate and ability to accurately report on the findings or ideas of others, in graduate school you will be expected to demonstrate an ability to locate information and/or extrapolate data that is not readily available and that does not merely representative of the prior work of others, and you will be expected to develop ideas that are truly your own, displaying an ability to think in original ways that move a discussion or debate in your discipline forward in some substantive manner.

It is important to recognize that these two fundamental differences between undergraduate- and graduate-level research are inextricably connected to one another. If you cannot conduct research that either reveals new information or ideas or re-analyses existing information and ideas in a new way, then you cannot produce writing that goes beyond reporting what others have already said, in order to say something new yourself.

**Plagiarism**

It is also important to recognize that, as part of an ethos of academic work, these expectations that you will now face throughout your time in graduate school here at GW are not just expectations regarding performance, they are expectations of ethical behavior, and, as such, they carry with them potentially severe consequences. For example, while in some cultures it is considered perfectly appropriate, even in graduate level academic writing, to use the data, ideas, or words of others without attribution—that is, to present others’ data, ideas, or words without clearly signaling to the reader that they are, in fact, someone else’s, in American academic culture such unattributed borrowing of others’ data, ideas, or words is called plagiarism, and it is considered to be a profound violation of the ethos of academic work, and, accordingly, it is treated with great seriousness and subject to harsh penalties, sometimes including failure of a course or, in the most egregious cases, even expulsion from a degree program.

In short, in American academic culture, you must explicitly acknowledge the sources of any data, ideas, or words that you have found in the work of others. Unless a fact, idea, or conclusion is “common knowledge” within your discipline, you must report to your reader where you found it. And under no circumstances may you either quote directly from or even paraphrase the words of other writers without drawing your reader’s attention to their work with a full bibliographic citation.

And to those of you who have grown up in or have previous experience with American academic culture, I would say, be sure not to assume that this necessarily means that you know everything that you need to know about plagiarism and how to avoid it. For example, I find that many American students who understand perfectly well that you may not borrow the words or thoughts of other writers without citing them do not understand that you also may not borrow your own words from previous writing that you have done, say in another class, without citing that previous work.

**Citations**

Let’s be clear about what citations are: Citations are formal acknowledgements of sources. There function is two-fold. First, signal to your readers when and where within your writing you are drawing upon the work of others. Second, they tell your readers where to locate those other sources, so that they can retrace your research process and confirm that you have represented your sources accurately and fairly. Therefore, a citation must include sufficient information about the source to which it refers to allow the reader to locate it herself. Different kinds of sources will be identified in different ways. You will give different information to a reader in order to help her locate a book or article than you would to help her locate a website, or a person, of a geographical object. But in any one of these cases, the rule of thumb is the same, provide any and all information required so that the reader can find what you found.
Beyond that, you should follow the specific rules for presenting and formatting citations that are common to your discipline or field of study. At the very beginning of your graduate career, you should determine what “style” or “styles” of citation is or are common in your discipline or field and begin to practice employing it or them regularly and rigorously in your writing. Many humanities-based disciplines and fields make use mainly of the MLA style of citation, which comes from the Modern Languages Association. Others use the “Chicago” style, based upon the style manual published by the University of Chicago. Most of the social sciences use the APA style, which was developed by the American Psychological Association. In the natural sciences, there are many very specific styles of citation that correspond to very specific genres of writing, such as lab reports. The sooner you master the citational forms that are common in your discipline or field, the sooner you will be able to focus your attention of the more substantive aspects of the research and writing process, without being distracted by having to keep going back-and-forth between your citations and the rulebook to make sure you are doing it correctly.

Determining What is “Common Knowledge”

One thing that I said a moment ago may need some clarification. I indicated that you do not need to cite a source when you are referring to something that is “common knowledge”. But how does one know when something is common knowledge, as opposed to original information that must be cited? There is no absolute, black-and-white answer to this question. However, there are a couple of rules of thumb you can employ.

- First of all, if a piece of information or a definition of a concept or general idea is available in sources such a dictionaries or encyclopedias, it can be treated as common knowledge within whatever discipline or field of study it is relevant.

- Second, if the information is available in numerous locations that are reputable sources within the relevant discipline or field of study, and these sources do not bother to cite some original source of the information themselves, then you may treat it as common knowledge in that discipline or field of study.

Of course, when in doubt, cite.

The following information on “Best Practices” for students comes from a statement on plagiarism by the Council of Writing Program Administrators.

The full statement can be found at:  http://www.wpacouncil.org/node/9

Safe Practices

Most students, of course, don't intend to plagiarize. In fact, most realize that citing sources actually builds their credibility for an audience and even helps writers to better grasp information relevant to a topic or course of study. Mistakes in citation and crediting can still happen, so here are certain practices that can help you not only avoid plagiarism, but even improve the efficiency and organization of your research and writing.

Best Practices for Research and Drafting

Reading and Note-Taking

- In your notes, always mark someone else's words with a big Q, for quote, or use big quotation marks
• Indicate in your notes which ideas are taken from sources with a big S, and which are your own insights (ME)
• When information comes from sources, record relevant documentation in your notes (book and article titles; URLs on the Web)

**Interviewing and Conversing**

• Take lots of thorough notes; if you have any of your own thoughts as you're interviewing, mark them clearly
• If your subject will allow you to record the conversation or interview (and you have proper clearance to do so through an Institutional Review Board, or IRB), place your recording device in an optimal location between you and the speaker so you can hear clearly when you review the recordings. Test your equipment, and bring plenty of backup batteries and media.
• If you're interviewing via email, retain copies of the interview subject's emails as well as the ones you send in reply
• Make any additional, clarifying notes immediately after the interview has concluded

**Writing Paraphrases or Summaries**

• Use a statement that credits the source somewhere in the paraphrase or summary, e.g., According to Jonathan Kozol, ....
• If you're having trouble summarizing, try writing your paraphrase or summary of a text without looking at the original, relying only on your memory and notes
• Check your paraphrase or summary against the original text; correct any errors in content accuracy, and be sure to use quotation marks to set off any exact phrases from the original text
• Check your paraphrase or summary against sentence and paragraph structure, as copying those is also considered plagiarism.
• Put quotation marks around any unique words or phrases that you cannot or do not want to change, e.g., "savage inequalities" exist throughout our educational system (Kozol).

**Writing Direct Quotations**

• Keep the source author's name in the same sentence as the quote
• Mark the quote with quotation marks, or set it off from your text in its own block, per the style guide your paper follows
• Quote no more material than is necessary; if a short phrase from a source will suffice, don't quote an entire paragraph
• To shorten quotes by removing extra information, use ellipsis points (...) to indicate omitted text, keeping in mind that:
  o Three ellipsis points indicates an in-sentence ellipsis, and four points for an ellipsis between two sentences
• To give context to a quote or otherwise add wording to it, place added words in brackets, []: be careful not to editorialize or make any additions that skew the original meaning of the quote—do that in your main text, e.g.,
  o **OK**: Kozol claims there are "savage inequalities" in our educational system, which is obvious.
  o **WRONG**: Kozol claims there are "[obvious] savage inequalities" in our educational system.
• Use quotes that will have the most rhetorical, argumentative impact in your paper; too many direct quotes from sources may weaken your credibility, as though you have nothing to say yourself, and will certainly interfere with your style.
Writing About Another's Ideas

- Note the name of the idea's originator in the sentence or throughout a paragraph about the idea.
- Use parenthetical citations, footnotes, or endnotes to refer readers to additional sources about the idea, as necessary.
- Be sure to use quotation marks around key phrases or words that the idea's originator used to describe the idea.

Maintaining Drafts of Your Paper

Sometimes innocent, hard-working students are accused of plagiarism because a dishonest student steals their work. This can happen in all kinds of ways, from a roommate copying files off of your computer, to someone finding files on a disk or pen drive left in a computer lab. Here are some practices to keep your own intellectual property safe:

- Do not save your paper in the same file over and over again; use a numbering system and the Save As... function. E.g., you might have research_paper001.doc, research_paper002.doc, research_paper003.doc as you progress. Do the same thing for any HTML files you're writing for the Web. Having multiple draft versions may help prove that the work is yours (assuming you are being ethical in how you cite ideas in your work!).
- Maintain copies of your drafts in numerous media, and different secure locations when possible; don't just rely on your hard drive or pen drive.
- Password-protect your computer; if you have to leave a computer lab for a quick bathroom break, hold down the Windows key and L to lock your computer without logging out.
- Password-protect your files; this is possible in all sorts of programs, from Adobe Acrobat to Microsoft word (just be sure not to forget the password!)

Revising, Proofreading, and Finalizing Your Paper

- Proofread and cross-check with your notes and sources to make sure that anything coming from an outside source is acknowledged in some combination of the following ways:
  - In-text citation, otherwise known as parenthetical citation
  - Footnotes or endnotes
  - Bibliography, References, or Works Cited pages
  - Quotation marks around short quotes; longer quotes set off by themselves, as prescribed by a research and citation style guide
  - Indirect quotations: citing a source that cites another source
- If you have any questions about citation, ask your instructor well in advance of your paper's due date, so if you have to make any adjustments to your citations, you have the time to do them well.