Avoiding Inadvertent Plagiarism

Plagiarism, which is the presentation of another person’s words as your own, is a serious academic offense. Unfortunately, many students who are not experienced in historical writing inadvertently plagiarize textbooks or primary source documents in their papers. Avoid this type of plagiarism by including all direct quotations in quotation marks and attaching footnotes to indicate the source of your material. If you reword a phrase from another source, be sure to change the wording to such an extent that it no longer parallels the author’s original wording or sentence structure.

Consider this quotation from Mary Beth Norton’s *A People and a Nation*, p. 696: “From the first days of his presidency, Roosevelt displayed a buoyancy and willingness to experiment that helped to restore public confidence in the government and the economy. He acted not only to reform the banks and stock markets but also to provide central planning for industry and agriculture and direct government relief for the jobless. This sweeping emergency legislation was based on the concept of ‘pump priming,’ or pouring billions of federal dollars into the economy to generate business and industrial activity, thereby stimulating employment and consumer spending.”

There are a number of ways in which a student could plagiarize this paragraph.

First Example of Plagiarism:

Including a direct quotation without using quotation marks constitutes plagiarism. Even if this quotation is footnoted, it is still considered plagiarism if the quotation is not enclosed in quotation marks. A footnote indicates that the ideas came from another source; it does not indicate that the words did so, unless quotation marks are used.

Example of plagiarism:

Roosevelt came to the White House with a determination to solve the problems of the depression. From the first days of his presidency, Roosevelt displayed a buoyancy and willingness to experiment that helped to restore public confidence in the government and the economy. He established several major programs, ranging from the National Recovery Administration to the Tennessee Valley Authority, during his first hundred days in office.

Second Example of Plagiarism:

You can also inadvertently plagiarize by using wording that too closely parallels the author’s original words.

Examples of this:

1. From his first days in office, President Roosevelt showed a willingness to experiment that helped to restore public confidence in the country.
2. Roosevelt displayed a buoyancy and willingness to experiment once he became president.
3. Roosevelt was willing to experiment to restore public confidence in the government and the economy.

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4. Roosevelt reformed the banks and stock markets and provided central planning for industry and agriculture.

5. Roosevelt’s sweeping emergency legislation poured billions of federal dollars into the economy to generate business and industrial activity, thereby stimulating employment and consumer spending.

To avoid this type of plagiarism, don’t use any words that are clearly taken directly from the source that you are citing. For example, in this case, a student should avoid using phrases such as “sweeping emergency legislation,” “poured billions of dollars into the economy,” “buoyancy,” “willingness to experiment,” and other phrases that are clearly unique to Norton.

Writing Without Plagiarizing:

You can present an author’s ideas without plagiarizing. This paragraph presents the main concepts from the Norton excerpt, yet it does not plagiarize Norton:

As soon as he became president, Roosevelt introduced legislation that addressed the problems of the depression and restored people’s faith in their country. Roosevelt’s programs provided billions of dollars for job creation, welfare, and industrial relief. He reformed the banking and financial system, and instituted a greater degree of governmental control over private industry. As a result, the unemployment rate fell, and consumer spending increased.\(^2\)

The information for this paragraph came from the Norton textbook, so the paragraph should contain a footnote that indicates this. But the words did not come from Norton, so no quotation marks are used.