

How To Write Background Text

Elizabeth Purdom

Here is general advice for how to incorporate information you have learned elsewhere so that it is truly in your own words. First of all at the beginning of your description, indicate the sources for your information and make clear all of the sources you are drawing from. If you directly copy text, you must quote it. Anything that is not quoted needs to be in your own *independent* words. The following is a strategy for making sure you are writing independently of the phrases and wording of the original source.

After spending time understanding all of the details, try to sit and write it without looking at the original source. Then you can go back and check and make sure your details are correct, but only after you've written the main idea yourself. In doing so, if you realize you don't understand a part, stop writing, go and try to understand it, and then come back and again try to write it without looking. Moreover, as you do this it will be much easier for you to realize that additional expansions would make much more sense for your reader (what is a 'post code'? what does it mean to 'balance to the totals'? to 'balance for seasonal features'?). You may not know the answer, and then you can go back to the source and figure it out. That is the sign that you really understood it yourself. If you can't figure it out, you may need to ask for help, or it may just not be clearly enough explained for you to be precise, in which case you give your best interpretation. Please remember you can go beyond the specific accompanying information you have to clarify questions. If something is just not explained fully, it is permissible to say something like

"the weights were then further adjusted by 'correcting for inter-operational correlation' (Practical Exemplars and Survey Analysis, 2009, p.14). This adjustment procedure were not explained in detail, but was used in order to ..."

and then give your best understanding of what was happening. Note the quotation around the specific phrase taken directly from the source as well as an explicit reference to its precise location.

What NEVER to do: Never take the sentences from a source and try to shuffle the words around so its technically 'different'. To begin with, that is still considered plagiarizing. Also it usually results in really bad and choppy writing. And its usually obvious that you've done so. Moreover, doing this is generally highly correlated with not actually understanding the information you are writing. Often when students do that the result is sentences that actually make no sense (a good sign you didn't understand to begin with). For example, the most telling sign is you try to use 'catch phrases' that you read in the source, but you don't understand what they really mean; so when you use them they no longer make sense because you use them incorrectly.

Citations As a final note, when you cite another source (whether a specific quotation or a general citation as to where the material came from), you must use standard bibliographic strategies. In particular, the full citation should be in a list of references, and the text should refer to the full citation in some reasonably standard way. For example, the text could say something like “The details about the survey and the method for calculating the weights come from Lundely (2006)” or “the weights were then further adjusted by ‘correcting for inter-operational correlation’ (Practical Exemplars and Survey Analysis, 2009). This adjustment procedure were not explained in detail, but was used in order to ...” and then the references at the end would have the full bibliographic information. Do NOT dump all the information in the text. If you are not sure how to cite something, refer to standard books on style such as Strunk & White or the Chicago Manual of Style.