Incorrect citation easily leads to accidental plagiarism. But did you also know that, depending on the severity, incorrect citation can be considered a form of plagiarism in its own right? To avoid this common mistake, follow these tips.

CAUTION BEFORE READING: The following principles of when to cite apply to all citation styles. However, the principles of how to cite vary by discipline. See style manuals for more information on how to cite using MLA style, APA style, Chicago style, and so on. All examples in this handout use MLA style.

If a fact is common knowledge, you do not need to cite it. However, deciding what is and isn’t common knowledge can be tricky.

- Just because you already knew the fact does not automatically make it common knowledge. For example, this won’t work: “I already knew about Smith’s work on the French Revolution, so I didn’t have to look it up!” You’ll need to find a reliable source that discusses this information and cite it.
- Likewise, not knowing the fact yourself does not mean it isn’t common knowledge. For example, many people might not know that modernist poetry is characterized by fragmentation of form, or that Schindler’s List came out in 1993. However, these facts are considered common knowledge.
- If you find the same information in multiple reputable sources and these sources are not citing it, you have a good clue that the information is common knowledge.
- Controversial information must be cited, even if you find the information in multiple sources. For example, “Abraham Lincoln was gay,” or “Abraham Lincoln was born in 1808, not 1809.”
- If you are unsure, ask your instructor.
- If you are still unsure, play it safe and cite!

If something is your own original idea, obviously, you do not need to cite it. However, if you read your “original” idea somewhere else after you have come up with it on your own, you still need to cite it.

- This may seem unfair, but if someone else invents the wheel and you discover it a century later on another continent, the other person still goes down in history as the inventor of the wheel.
- With some crafty phrasing, you can find a way to give yourself credit for the idea as well. For example: As Kathryn Temple has also noted, the final stanza of “Dover Beach” is a failed sonnet, with the missing line suggesting that the poem ends in ebb and misery rather than hope (257).

(continued on reverse)
If you use a direct quote, use a parenthetical reference or a footnote (depending on the citation style you are using).

- For example, "Rebel [Without a Cause] really belongs entirely to Dean and his iconic red windbreaker. Everyone else revolves around him and fades in the bright light of his on-screen charisma" (Willmott 24).

If you paraphrase/restate a fact from a book without using a direct quotation, you still MUST cite it using a reference as demonstrated above.

- For example, using the above quotation you could say the following: Willmott argues that Dean's character is the center of the movie, and that the other performances pale in comparison to his (24).

If you have several sentences in a row that all come from the same source, you may use one citation, provided that it is clear from your writing that all the sentences are related.

- For example: Frankl divides the mental reaction of a prisoner to his incarceration into three distinct stages. The stages are immediately following imprisonment, after the initial adjustment to camp life has been made, and after release from the camp. Frankl believes “the symptom that characterizes the first phase is shock” (6).

If you want to use an idea from class discussion or from a conference with an instructor, you must cite the idea. Different citation styles (i.e. MLA, APA, Chicago) call for you to cite this information in different ways; check with a style guide such as The St. Martin’s Handbook.

**When in doubt, cite!**

- While over-citing is messy, if you feel uncertain, it is better to cite. Your instructor will prefer flaws in citation style to accidental plagiarism.