Plagiarism
Plagiarism is using someone else’s words or ideas without giving proper credit. It can take many forms, including the following:

- Omitting documentation of a source
- Inadequately documenting the words or ideas you are using
- Closely paraphrasing the writing of another person without documentation

Remember, an author deserves credit for his ideas as well as his sentence structure, word choice, and sequence of thoughts. Changing several words in someone else’s sentence does not make that sentence or idea your own.

If you are unsure if something you’ve written constitutes plagiarism or you would like more tips on how to avoid plagiarism, feel free to visit us in the Writing Center. You can also check your department’s website for guidance. For Swarthmore’s official policy on academic honesty, see the Academic Freedom, Honesty, and Responsibility section of the Swarthmore College Guide to Student Life (http://www.swarthmore.edu/cc_collegelife.xml).

Paraphrasing
Paraphrasing is putting another person’s ideas in your own words. It is useful to paraphrase when your reader needs to understand or be exposed to the argument of another author in order to understand your argument. Paraphrasing ALWAYS requires a citation. Even if you are using your own words, the idea still belongs to someone else.

Sometimes there is a fine line between paraphrasing and plagiarizing someone’s writing. Here’s one strategy for paraphrasing effectively: read over the paragraph of interest. Then close the book or turn the page of the article and write a short summary. If you’re still stuck with the author’s language and sequence of thoughts, wait a few hours and try again. Once you have internalized the author’s ideas, you will be able to express them in your own words. One of the keys to paraphrasing effectively is applying what you have learned instead of simply duplicating another author’s writing or ideas in your paper.
If you’re having trouble getting away from an author’s exact words, you might want to simply include her exact words as a quotation with proper citations. Sometimes you can’t express the same thought any other way because the precise meaning is lost when the phrasing is changed. There is nothing wrong with directly citing a source when you need to.

**Common Knowledge**

There are a few situations in which source material does not need an accompanying citation. It’s very important to know when omitting a citation is acceptable. If you’re not sure, consult your professor or the Writing Center.

Two common situations when you shouldn’t cite a source are:

- When the information you are providing is “common knowledge,” which means that someone could easily find the information in multiple reference texts. For example, stating that George Washington was president from 1789-1797 does not require a citation because the reader could easily find this information in any encyclopedia or American history book. The particular book you used is not significant.
- When the information you are providing is considered common knowledge in your field. When you write for colleagues in a field, you shouldn’t burden them with citations for commonly known theories and ideas. In *Rules for Writers*, Diana Hacker gives two examples: the current population of the United States could be common knowledge in the fields of sociology and economics, and Freud’s theory of the unconscious could be common knowledge in psychology.

**Citations**

Citations allow you to give credit where credit is due. They also help your readers to track down your sources easily. For citations to serve their purpose (and for you to avoid plagiarism), it is imperative that you cite correctly and completely. Your choice of citation format may depend on specifications from your instructor, conventions for your discipline, or your personal preference.

The Writing Center library (Trotter 120) contains books that provide citation instructions, including the MLA Handbook, ACS Style Guide, APA guidelines, and multiple books from the *Short Guide to Writing About*... series. The reference librarians in McCabe and Cornell can help
you format citations correctly. Also, many departments offer guidelines for citation. Check department websites or ask your professor.