The **Dos** *and* **Don'ts** *of* **Paraphrasing**

When do you need to cite sources?

- Quote a source
- **Paraphrase** information that's not common knowledge from a source.

With paraphrasing, how do you decide what needs documentation and what doesn't? If the information you're presenting is common knowledge, then no citation is needed. If the information isn't common knowledge, however, then you do need to add a citation. *For an explanation of "common knowledge," see the handout, "How & When to Cite."*

What is paraphrase?

Paraphrase is the rewording of information or concepts from a source into your own language: it presents the information or concepts in your own vocabulary and your own syntax (sentence structure).

Any text that you present *without quotation marks* is text that you are claiming as your own. When you paraphrase, you are saying that you wrote those words and sentences by drawing upon your own vocabulary and your own grammar choices.

What is patchwriting," and why is patchwriting a problem?

"**Patchwriting**" *refers to copying phrases, clauses, or sentences from a source while only changing or deleting a few words*. The resulting text heavily echoes the vocabulary and sentence structure of the original source.

Why is patchwriting a problem? If the vocabulary and sentence structure aren't yours (i.e., if you've echoed them from the original source), and you don't have quotation marks around the borrowed words, then you're misrepresenting those words as your own.

> Patchwriting is plagiarism, *even if you include a citation.*

How can patchwriting be plagiarism, if I include a citation?

A citation only identifies the source from which information comes. Quotation marks are necessary if the language itself—not just the information—comes from the source. If the quotation marks are missing **and the language is not your own,** then you've engaged in patchwriting/plagiarism.

The exercise below shows the distinction between patchwriting and genuine paraphrase. A quotation is presented, followed by two attempts at paraphrase. One attempt is patchwriting (it borrows too much of the quotation's original language) and therefore would be seen as plagiarism even with the parenthetical citation. The other attempt is an accurate, responsible paraphrase.

ORIGINAL

Excerpted from The New Jim Crow, by Michelle Alexander, The New Press, 2012, page 1:

Jarvious Cotton cannot vote. Like his father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and great-great grandfather, he has been denied the right to participate in our electoral democracy .... Today, Jarvious Cotton cannot vote because he, like many black men in the United States, has been labeled a felon and is currently on parole.

Cotton's story illustrates, in many respects, the old adage "The more things change, the more they remain the same." In each generation, new tactics have been used for achieving the same goals—goals shared by our Founding Fathers. Denying African Americans citizenship was deemed essential to the formation of the original union. Hundreds of years later, America is still not an egalitarian democracy.

PLAGIARISM

Jarvious Cotton has been wrongly denied the right to participate in America's electoral democracy, just like his father, grandfather, great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather were (Alexander, 2011, p. 1). For each generation, new tactics have been used to reach the same goals—goals shared by the Founding Fathers, who deemed it essential to deny citizenship to African Americans (Alexander, 2011, p. 1).

CORRECT

As Alexander (2011) noted, the barriers to racial equity have changed for each generation (p. 1). For example, the law prohibiting convicted felons from voting is only the latest of many historic methods that have kept African Americans from participating equally in America's democracy (Alexander, 2011, p. 1). The criminal justice system is the current mechanism for maintaining unequal racial castes (Alexander, 2011, p. 1).

How can I avoid patchwriting?

The challenge to moving beyond patchwriting is that the original text—its words, its phrases—may echo in your mind as you write. Here are two strategies to help:

1) Read the information you want to paraphrase *and then set that source aside for a few minutes.* Let the echoes of the original source's language fade. Then sit down and—without looking at the original source—restate the information in your own words.

2) Better still: If you can ask a friend to help, *summarize and explain* the information you want to paraphrase to the other person while they ask clarifying questions. Once your partner understands what you're saying, sit down and—without looking at the original source—restate the information in your own words.

3) *Going beyond paraphrase*: Instead of asking, "how can I paraphrase this line?" ask, "how do I want to *apply* this information to develop or support my analysis/argument?

> Ask yourself, "How do I want to *apply* this information?"

*Here's an example of **going beyond paraphrase** by <u>using</u> Alexander's work to serve a new purpose: to connect Alexander's discussion of mass incarceration with other forms of institutionalized racism:*

I have worked with D.C. community organizations in largely black neighborhoods that address homelessness, food insecurity and education gaps. While I understood these social issues were the result of institutional racism, Alexander (2011) taught me that mass incarceration undergirds all of America's social issues. Indeed, she argues that today's criminal justice system is the current mechanism for maintaining racial castes (Alexander, 2011, p. 1).