

# IMPROVE YOUR WRITING

## Using Sources

Computer technology and the Internet have given us quick and easy access to more and more information on every subject under the sun. This presents us with enormous opportunities that would have been unthinkable only a few years ago. For students it means that there is hardly a subject in the world that is so specialized that you cannot find information about it. The breeding habits of the emperor penguin, climate change in Fiji, the latest Nepalese football results – with search engines like Google and Yahoo, it is all just a couple of mouse clicks away.

But this also presents us with new challenges. Finding information is no longer a great achievement; any fool can google! What any fool cannot do, however, is to deal with the information he finds: understand it, evaluate it and use it for his own purposes. You will have great benefit from the Internet and other information sources (not least, your school library) in many of your written assignments, both in English and other subjects. But it is how you *use* what you find there that will decide how your assignment is evaluated.

Let us imagine that you are writing an essay on ... well, alright then, the breeding habits of the emperor penguin! You have been on the Net and found that there is lots of information out there. There is Wikipedia, there is Penguinworld.com, there is a BBC Nature page about the emperor penguin and even a whole website devoted entirely to this fascinating bird! On the Wikipedia page you find the following description:

*The penguins start courtship in March or April, when the temperature can be as low as  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$ . A lone male gives an ecstatic display, where it stands still*

*and places its head on its chest before inhaling and giving a courtship call for 1–2 seconds; it then moves around the colony and repeats the call. A male and female then stand face to face, with one extending its head and neck up and the other mirroring it; they both hold this posture for several minutes.*

How are you going to use this? Obviously, the easy thing to do is to “cut and paste” – that is, simply include the whole passage in your text and say no more about it. This is called “plagiarism” – or cheating – and should be avoided at all costs. Not just because it is dishonest (which it is), but because it actually *weakens* your text. Unless your written English is as good as an adult native speaker, your reader (i.e. your teacher) is going to notice immediately that something is wrong. The language will be so different from what you usually write that it will seem out of place. Essays that include “stolen goods” make very irritating reading – rather like trying to have a conversation with somebody who is pretending to be somebody they are not. Teachers – understandably – are particularly allergic to such texts.

However, the extract from Wikipedia contains too much good information to be ignored. Your best bet is to *paraphrase* it. That means putting it into your own words. Like this, for example:

*According to Wikipedia, emperor penguins begin courtship in March or April when it is still very cold (down to -40°C). The male penguin gives “an ecstatic display”. First he stands motionless with his head on his chest. Then he breathes in and gives out a call to attract a mate. This call, which lasts a second or two, is repeated as he moves around the penguin colony. A female signals that she is interested by standing face to face with him and standing in the same position as him, with head and neck raised, for several minutes.*

Notice that the paraphrase acknowledges where the information is taken from, even though it no longer uses the exact wording. This is important; it shows you are reliable and increases your credibility. Notice too that the paraphrase includes a direct quotation from the original text. There is nothing wrong with this; sometimes a particular phrase is difficult to avoid, or perhaps so well expressed that you feel it is a pity to paraphrase it. The only condition is that you make clear in the text where you are quoting from and where the quotation starts and finishes. We do this by using “inverted commas” (also called quotation marks). If the quotation is a whole sentence rather than just a phrase, you should use a colon before the quotation:

*According to Wikipedia's description, the male emperor penguin has to give a virtuoso performance to win his mate: "A lone male gives an ecstatic display, where it stands still and places its head on its chest before inhaling and giving a courtship call for 1–2 seconds."*

As a general rule, the shorter a quotation, the more effective it is. Essays consisting of large chunks of original text should certainly be avoided, even if the quotations are acknowledged in the proper way. After all, the point of a writing task is that *you* should be doing the writing.

In an essay it is usually enough to acknowledge sources in the text itself, as in the example above. If you are writing a longer piece, for example for project work, you will need to include a list of sources at the end. (But you still have to mention which source you are quoting or paraphrasing in the text itself.) Here you must be precise – it is not enough to list “The Internet” or “The Library” as a source. For websites you must give the title of the site (e.g. Wikipedia) and its “url” (e.g. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emperor\\_Penguin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emperor_Penguin)). For books or a magazines, you should give the title, the author, the publisher and the date of publication (e.g. *Penguins of the World* by Wayne Lynch, Firefly Books, 2007).

Finally, a word about using websites as sources. Remember that anybody can publish on the Net. No qualifications are required! Sometimes the letters at the end of an “url” can give you some idea of what sort of site you are dealing with; **.org**, **.edu**, **.ac** and **.gov** generally mean that it is run by a public or educational institution. **.com** means that the you are dealing with a commercial business or a private individual. That does not of course mean that it must be unreliable, but it means that it might be. You should look carefully at who is behind a website before trusting its content. (If there is no such information, this is all the more reason to be suspicious!)

Wikipedia is a popular source of information, particularly for young people, not least because it is quick and free of charge. However, there is some disagreement about how reliable it is. The word “wiki” means that it is written and edited by its users rather than by paid experts. So it may well contain errors or have a focus that is quite different from more “learned” encyclopedias. On the other hand, there are many topics on which it is an excellent site to find information. The best idea is to cross-check with other sources.

### 1 REWRITE THE TEXT

The following pairs of examples show a) an original source text and b) an essay text that plagiarizes the original by stealing from it. Rewrite text b) so that it quotes properly.

#### Example 1

a I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. (*Martin Luther King jr, in a speech delivered 28 August 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington DC*)

b In his speech Martin Luther King jr expressed the hope that blacks and whites would one day overcome their differences and take their places at the table of brotherhood. He said he believed even a state like Mississippi, with all its racial tensions, could one day become an oasis of freedom and justice.

#### Example 2

a And it was so peaceful. No droning engines. In fact no machinery of any kind. A simplicity. A perfection. But for how long? Neville thought gloomily of the villages that had been opened up to tourism for some years, where children shrieked and threatened for sweets, and hardened house owners had learned the art of cheating foreigners. (From "Paradise": see p. 302)

b In Matthew Kneale's short story "Paradise", Neville is awestruck by how peaceful the village is. But he is afraid that once it is opened to tourism it will become like the other villages where children shrieked and threatened for sweets, and hardened house owners had learned the art of cheating foreigners.

### 2 PARAPHRASE THE FOLLOWING TEXTS

- a In 1979 a West Country sub-aqua club gained permission to dive in Britian's most inaccessible loch. Happy in the knowledge that they were the first-ever people to explore the underwater world of remotest Scotland, they drove 740 miles, climbed 3,000 feet, put on their gear and plunged in to find that it was only four feet deep. (*The Return of Heroic Failures* by Stephen Pile, Penguin, 1988)
- b The emperor penguin is the only penguin species to reproduce in winter. The male comes south to breed with a large fat store mainly around the stomach. This is important as the male fasts through the winter whilst incubating the egg. Reproduction occurs in the middle of the polar night generally with the same partner as previous years.