Plagiarism and Term-Papers or Take-Home Exams

In a take-home exam or term paper your answers or text must be original (written by you), and not copied or paraphrased without attribution. Here is a direct quotation of a definition of plagiarism from the UO Conduct Program’s web page, that also shows the proper way of indicating that the material has been copied (quotation marks), and acknowledging its source (citation):

“Plagiarism is the inclusion of someone else's product, words, ideas, or data as one's own work. When a student submits work for credit that includes the product, words, ideas, or data of others, the source must be acknowledged by the use of complete, accurate, and specific references, such as footnotes…. On written assignments, if verbatim statements are included, the statements must be enclosed by quotation marks or set off from regular text as indented extracts.”


The big problem that arises in a take-home examinations is the opportunity that exists to search the web for relevant material, and copy it into a word processor. Although it is quite appropriate (and even desirable in some circumstances) to use the web to research an answer, it is never appropriate to directly copy a passage without attribution.

Here are four ways in which the question “How much has the average global surface temperature changed over the past century?” might be answered. (A general source for this answer is the “Executive Summary” of Chapter 2 of the IPCC Third Assessment.)

1) Inappropriate (no quotations, no attribution):

1. Average global surface temperature has increased by approximately 0.6°C since the late 19th century, with 95% confidence limits of close to 0.4 and 0.8°C. Most of this increase has occurred in two periods, from about 1910 to 1945 and since 1976, and the largest recent warming is in the winter extra-tropical Northern Hemisphere.

This is a direct copy of material from p. 101 of the IPCC Third Assessment, which also appears at the URL http://www.grida.no/climate/ipcc_tar/wg1/049.htm The problem is that no source is given, and no quotation marks appear to indicate that this passage is a verbatim copy. Without that information a reader would wrongly conclude that this sentence was written by the author of the answer. (Note that some style guides (e.g. The Chicago Manual of Style) allow long quotations to be presented as “block quotations,” usually single-spaced and indented, without explicit quotation marks. The example above is not a valid example of a block quotation, because it makes up the entire answer, and there is no documentation of its source.)

2) Inappropriate (paraphrase, no attribution):

1. The average surface temperature of the globe has increased around 0.6°C since the late 1880, with 95% confidence limits ranging from 0.4 to 0.8°C. Most of this increase has occurred in two steps, from about 1910 to 1945 and since 1976, with the largest recent warming occurring in winter in the extra-tropical Northern Hemisphere.
The passage here is just a slightly reworded version of the original, again given without attribution. Simply reformatting or slightly rewording a passage does not transfer ownership from the original author, and it’s easy to wreck the meaning.

3) Not technically inappropriate but not likely to impress the examiner either (extensive verbatim quotation with a proper attribution, but not really in the author-of-the-answer’s own words):

1. Chapter 2 of the IPCC states that “Average global surface temperature has increased by approximately 0.6°C since the late 19th century, with 95% confidence limits of close to 0.4 and 0.8°C. Most of this increase has occurred in two periods, from about 1910 to 1945 and since 1976, and the largest recent warming is in the winter extra-tropical Northern Hemisphere.” (Folland et al. 2001; p. 101)


This is technically correct—it is marked as being a direct quote, and the source is given, but if this form of answer was used a lot it might give the reader the impression that the author of the answer knew where to find relevant material, but didn’t necessarily understand it. (It also violates one of the fundamental rules of exam or term-paper writing: Don’t annoy the reader!)

4) Best practice (in the author-of-the-answer’s own words, properly cited):

1. The average surface temperature of the globe has increased about a half-degree (Celsius) over the past century, with the greatest warming occurring at high latitudes and in winter in the Northern Hemisphere. Most of the warming occurred over two intervals, from 1910 to 1945 and from 1976 to present (Folland et al., 2001)

(with the Folland et al. citation given in example 2 again appearing in the bibliography.)

This would be the preferred form of the answer—it’s in the author’s own words, and properly documents the source of the information.

Special case of the IPCC Reports

The IPCC reports contain many chapters with multiple authors, and the full bibliographic citations may be quite lengthy. In a case like this, in which no ambiguity may arise between authors and readers, it is permissible to use an abbreviated form of citation, like “Ch. 2, IPCC Third Assessment, WG1” or “IPCC (2001)” (The latter is pretty cryptic, however, and doesn’t indicate which 2001 IPCC Report). One good way to tell if a citation is sufficient or not is to imagine whether another person, perhaps someone not in this class, would be able to locate that reference in the library or on the web. The best practice is to use a full citation-and-bibliography style, like the “author-date” system used in example 4.