



How is good scientific writing¹ like good cooking?

Let's imagine that I would like to invite a group of friends to dinner and I would like to impress them with my good cooking. What is the first thing I need to do? I have to decide what it is that I would like to make and for this I need to know what kind of food my friends like. Let's say I decide I'm going to make a chicken stew, I could of course, go to an upmarket supermarket and buy a chicken stew put it in my own casserole dish and pretend that I made it myself. There's nothing wrong with buying a ready meal but I'm not so sure that it is right to be dishonest about it. But since I actually want to make the food myself, what do I need to do? I need to buy the ingredients and so I go to the shops and I see all of these ingredients. Because I am making a chicken stew, I'm going to be buying chicken and all the other ingredients I think will go nicely with chicken. I'm also going to make sure that I select fresh good quality ingredients. Don't underestimate what I am doing here. I am not growing my own vegetables or keeping my own chicken, and I might even be using a recipe as a guideline but I am working quite hard when deciding what to buy and selecting the best ingredients to fit my chosen dish. Next I take all of these raw ingredients home and when my friends arrive, I put them all out on the table and we can eat. Yes? Of course not! I'm going to prepare the food, chopping, mixing and of course, cooking. I am taking the lead role in deciding what I want to serve; what key ingredients are going to make up my dish and finally, I am going to put it all together. When I finish my dish and I serve it to my friends, I'm not ashamed that I used ingredients bought at the market, in fact I might even proudly mention to my friends that my dish contains some kind of rare ingredient I got at a well-known delicatessen. Also I might proudly mention that my dish is based on a famous recipe but that I added one or two things of my own. By highlighting these things, I am not doing my dish any disservice in fact I might even be enhancing the experience of my friends.

What does all of this have to do with academic writing? I'm sure you've guessed where I'm heading with this. When you want to do research, you need to identify the research question – one that has value to the society in the community of academics you live and work in. That is like deciding what to cook based on your friends' preferences. And then you have to choose the ingredients in the case of research, these are: what others have said about your research question and what you have

¹ Scientific writing = academic or scholarly writing (it includes all academic fields and disciplines)

observed. There is nothing wrong with using other's ideas in fact without it you wouldn't have any raw ingredients, but just as you wouldn't serve up a table of raw ingredients, you would not expect your readers to read a patchwork of other people's ideas. You should be like the chef – you carefully choose which authors are relevant to your research question and which are not and then you use your logic and argumentation which is like the fire to put these ideas together in a way that says something about your research question and helps you understand your own observations. Your dish represents your conclusions and answers to your research questions. When you offer this dish to your community of scholars they should be quite pleased and will be doubly impressed if you highlight the choice ingredients you made this dish from. That is if you can show that you consulted the experts in the field.

So, to sum up, **scientific writing involves using the best sources and showing off your sources**. Because we are asked to make an original contribution to the body of knowledge, we sometimes think that we must approach the research question completely with our own thoughts and ideas therefore we hide the fact that we are actually relying quite heavily on other people's work. The first step in avoiding plagiarism is to understand the value of using other people's ideas in your dissertation. Unfortunately until you are a respected scholar yourself, your ideas will simply not carry enough value as those of established scholars in your field. Using other people's ideas and showing them off will actually add value to your writing, but this does not mean that you can get away with doing nothing. You have to come up with a research question and you have to choose ideas that are relevant to *that* research question. Then you must say something about these ideas – compare them to each other and to your own observations so that you can draw conclusions about your own research question. Your original contribution is when you make some conclusion about your research question based on all of these ingredients mixed in with your own observations and primary data. At a doctoral level, of course you will take this a step further and make conclusions even about the way in which we should be thinking about the research question.