How to cite and quote correctly in theses

When preparing a paper (seminar thesis, bachelor thesis, master thesis etc.) it happens time and again that references are cited and quoted incorrectly. Some of these mistakes are so serious that it leads to a suspected case of plagiarism and actions are initiated due to these suspicions.

In the General Examination Regulations the following is stated: ‘Where a candidate attempts to alter the result of his or her coursework or examination through deception […], the coursework or examination work concerned shall be assessed as “failed” or “insufficient”. In especially severe cases – particularly concerning plagiarism or repeated deception – the board of examiners may also decide that the candidate […] failed the entire degree program’ (Quote [TUB13, p. 9]). Plagiarisms, i.e. parts of theses which do not have any or have an insufficient number of citations or quotations thus lead to a failed mark. The examination board can also exclude the possibility of a repeat thesis. The degree course is from then on treated as failed.

This guideline is to explain to you how to deal with citations and quotations in order for you not to be unintentionally accused of plagiarism. If further questions may arise, your supervisor will gladly be of assistance.
1. How to deal with academic sources
In theory every public announcement can be used as a source. However, in practice the quality of sources can differ considerably. When in doubt, it is better to indicate too many sources rather than too few. In order to induce high academic substance into your thesis, here are a few hints how to deal with sources.

a) It is best to use only publicly available sources for your thesis which were published in a written form. These include (prioritization in that order) books, journal articles, academic conference papers, dissertations. Standards are also widely available. Deliverables and conference proceedings are possible, but not always publicly available. It can be assumed with all of these sources that they were quality-tested prior to publication.

b) Theses such as student research projects, diploma, bachelor or master theses should only be used as a source when necessary. These are test achievements which in contrast to written or published dissertations have not necessarily undergone a quality control.

c) Online sources without any quality control such as Wikipedia should not be used as a source. It is better to find literature that has passed some quality control which comprises the online source. However, if you would like to refer to an online source nonetheless, you need to indicate the exact date and time of access in your bibliography. Furthermore, it is necessary to store the record of a copy of the website on a CD which you should include in your thesis. When in doubt, please contact your supervisor.

d) What are skillfully chosen sources? Given, for example, you would like to cite the Viterbi Algorithm, it is not advisable to cite the lecture notes where you first encountered the Viterbi Algorithm. This is a clear indication to the reader that you don’t think outside the box! Preferably you should quote from or cite a relevant textbook and have a look at Google Scholar to find out where the aforementioned technique has been cited the most (in this case in a paper by Forney called ‘The Viterbi Algorithm’).

2. Sources must be disclosed
It is quite usual to refer to external knowledge in the theoretical part of your thesis. In this case you must disclose the source for every explanation, description, or specification which does not originate with you. The same goes for copied figures, or your own figures which are based on external samples. It is completely unimportant where exactly you use a citation or a quotation: the same rules of citation or quotation apply to footnotes or image captions as well as to the text.

3. Referring to the content of the text
If you would like to use the content of a source without copying the exact words, a reference is sufficient. However, there is a difference in the in the indication depending on whether in your text a single sentence or a whole paragraph, i.e. more than one sentence, refer to that source: with a single sentence the source is part of the sentence which means it’s before the full stop at the end of this sentence. With a paragraph the source is part of the paragraph and is thus placed after the full stop at the end of the paragraph.

If the source consists of many pages (e.g. a book) you should indicate the number of the page. However, if the source consists of only a few pages (e.g. a paper) you can leave it out.

The place of merging data determines the achievable gain [Rec14].

In this example the source refers to a single sentence only (and is thus placed before the full stop at the end of the sentence). As the source consists of a paper, the number of the page was left out.
Another example:

[...] The Viterbi algorithm shows best performance for decoding paths. With Soft Inputs it possible to further increase the gain. [Lin83, p.212]

The source in this case is a book with more than 300 pages. That’s why it’s worthwhile to state the number of the page concerned. As both sentences, i.e. the paragraph, refer to the source, the reference is put after the full stop of the sentence.

If you produce your own figure on the basis of a different figure in your source you should indicate it with the word ‘according to’ (acc. to). The following example shows how an external figure can be used as a copy (version 1) or how it is used as a template (version 2):

Version 1: Direct copy of a figure

Version 2: Using a figure as a template

4. Direct Quotations

In engineering sciences direct quotations are highly unusual and are seldom applied. Quoting directly is only appropriate if the exact wording is decisive.

A direct quotation occurs when you copy whole sentences or parts of sentences exactly as in the source. The beginning and the end of the direct quotation are indicated by quotation marks. At the end of the quote the source must be referred to with the keyword ‘Quote’. An example:

In the General Examination Regulations it is written that ‘students may withdraw their registration for examination without giving reasons up to one week before a topic or task is set, or, in the case of written examinations, up to the last working day before a topic or assignment is set, by 12 o’clock midday’ (Quote [TUB13, p. 10]). This regulation ensures that a student has the option to deregister from any exam after registration.

5. The Bibliography

A bibliography is necessary in the annex of your thesis. Please follow the guidelines provided by the Institute for Telecommunications Technology. The listings in the bibliography include at least the author’s name, the title, and the year of publication. The exact number of the page is usually not stated.

1 Available from the IfN network at https://ifn21.ifn.ing.tu-bs.de/studiportal/. Please contact your supervisor if you have any problems with the templates offered here!
in the bibliography but rather in the reference to the source itself. The table of contents has to have a numbering (numerical or by acronyms, cf. the guidelines). While with (shorter) conference papers and journal articles the numerical version is preferred (or even mandatory), it is recommendable to make use of acronyms with longer bachelor or master theses.

Unless you have detailed specifications for the outlines for bibliographies at hand, below you can find a sample bibliography of sources as stated in the guidelines. Acronyms are used for distinction of sources.

Bibliography

Books <Author>, <Title>, <Publisher>, <Year>:


Journal Article <Author>, 'Title", <Journal>, <Volume>, <Number>, <Page>, <Month Year>:


Paper <Author>, 'Title", in Proc. of <Event>, <City>, [State], <Month Year>:


Other:

[TUB13] TU Braunschweig, 'General Examination Regulations (APO) for Bachelor's, Master's, Diplom and Magister degree programmes at TU Braunschweig,' Braunschweig, 2013.

Please note: it's important to have consistency in your bibliography! All of the listed references must have the same style of consistency which goes for books, journals, conference papers including all other types of sources. Consistency rules over questions of taste in the format.