It should go without saying that you always need to cite someone else’s words, even when those words seem like straightforward facts. For example:

**You write:**

************************************************************************

The health care crisis is growing in the United States; many people do not have health insurance coverage. In fact, 15.7% of Americans were uninsured in 2004.

************************************************************************

As a general rule of thumb, you need to cite anything that is not common knowledge among your readers. So, while in the above paragraph I might not need to cite my claim that “many people do not have health insurance coverage” (Devine Eller), I do need to cite my claim of the specific percentage. Note how I just cited myself: I put the repeated words in quotes, with my last name in parentheses. You should also include a year and page number when you’re citing from articles or books. This is what my statement should look like:

************************************************************************

The health care crisis is growing in the United States; many people do not have health insurance coverage. In fact, 15.7% of Americans were uninsured in 2004 (U.S. Census, 2005).

************************************************************************

Notice how I’m including a citation even though I did not include any direct quotes. **HOWEVER!** This is not quite enough. The basic premise underlying citation is that any reader could go look up and confirm your quotes. So while I’ve told the reader where the data comes from, I haven’t told them how to find it themselves. Therefore, at the end of my essay, I also need a bibliographic entry (also called a *citation*). There are lots of different bibliographic formats; you might have used MLA or Chicago or ALA. Sociologists tend to use Chicago style, so this is what I would write:


The basic format is below; you can find much more detailed examples online or in the ASA Style guide (posted to sakai).

**Books:** Last, First. Year. *Title*. City, State: Publisher.
Now, while some things about citation are hard and fast (you always have to cite other peoples’ exact words), some things are judgment calls. Some examples, and questions to guide your answers:

1. Do I have to cite my teacher or my class notes when I’m writing an essay for a class?
   a. Is your teacher introducing new knowledge or a different interpretation, or on the contrary, just helping to summarize the text?
   b. Has the way the teacher explained something changed how you thought about it?
   c. Are you writing for this teacher’s class or for another class on down the line?

2. This seems so obvious; everyone knows it!
   a. Why are you writing something that’s so obvious that everyone knows it, anyway?
   b. Who is ‘everyone’? Would your teachers generally know this? Your friends? Your grandparents?
   c. Assume that college writing is always for an intelligent but naïve audience. Your audience might change depending on what you’re writing. In a class about Marx, you might not need to cite the general idea that he wrote about capitalism. But if you’re talking about Marx in an essay for a literature course, you might.

3. This comes from a text my teacher assigned; everyone in the class already read it.
   a. Is this a general concept or theme that runs throughout the whole class (e.g., ‘postcolonialism’ in a class about postcolonialism), or a concept specifically mentioned by one author in one text?

4. I can’t remember where I read this idea, so can’t I just summarize it in my own words?
   a. Well, no. But here are some ideas to help you keep track of what you’ve read, or find it later on:
   b. Take notes while you read! I take notes in a word file, and include a full citation of the reading right there – then it’s done, and I can copy, paste, quote, and search for what I’m looking for.
   c. Ask! There are no dumb questions, including not remembering where you read something. Ask your classmates, ask me.
   d. Google it. Use key words, terms, or ideas, and maybe you’ll get lucky.

It’s always better to cite more rather than less; citations can always be taken out, and the worst that happens is that you look meticulous or fussy. If you fail to cite where you should, however, you look careless or dishonest. Finally, a word to the wise: these are examples of judgment calls; different teachers will have different standards!
Your source says:

Straight Edge (also known as sXe, sexy xXx, or “Edge”) refers to a lifestyle, a personal commitment, a philosophy, and a subculture that is closely associated with hardcore punk music. Straight edgers abstain from recreational drugs, including tobacco and alcohol. Some followers of the straight-edge philosophy also abstain from promiscuous sex, the regular use of painkillers, and the intake of caffeine. Some also practice vegetarianism or veganism.

Originally inspired by the hardcore punk community that came together at punk rock performances (especially the Teen Idles and Minor Threat) straight edge has spread around the world, but is most popular in more economically developed nations. Although straight edgers do not necessarily identify with a particular world view on social or political issues, straight edge is sometimes associated with the precepts of anarchism, socialism, and atheism.


You write:

People who are involved in Straight Edge (sXe) have a lifestyle, values, beliefs, and a subculture that revolves around punk music, especially hardcore. Most sXers refuse to use drugs, including tobacco, alcohol, and sometimes even painkillers and caffeine. Some sXers also do not have promiscuous sex, and many are vegan or vegetarian.

People who consider themselves sXe first became a community when they met in the punk rock music scene; they especially follow the bands Teen Idles and Minor Threat. There is a bigger sXe scene in richer countries, and people who follow sXe values tend to be anarchists, socialists, and atheists (Wikipedia entry for “Straight edge”, accessed 1/29/07).

This is plagiarism, people! Don’t do it. You need to cite other peoples’ ideas as well as their words; changing the words but maintaining the same ideas, ordering, structure, etc. is not enough. In this example, the summary is still inappropriate even though it has a citation because it does not show any original or interpretive thought on the part of the author. It’s not even a summary – it’s just a regurgitation.

**RULE OF THUMB:** Read your source, then put it away for three days. Then write about it without opening up the original source. This helps ensure that you’ve processed the ideas through your own brain and are not just regurgitating the source. You will still need to include a citation.