IV SOME ACTIVITIES

Understanding plagiarism is not, basically, a matter of acquiring a particular set of facts or rules. It involves, first and foremost, an understanding of the ethical and intellectual issues behind taking someone else's work and calling it your own. But it also involves learning how to make proper use of other people's ideas and assimilate them into your own writing, giving credit where it is due. Now that you have seen an illustration of how to do it and how not to do it, here are a couple of activities for you, to make sure that you have fully understood this.

Activity I

Read the following extract from *The Language Instinct*, by the American psycholinguist Steven Pinker:

1.   Linguists repeatedly run up against the myth that working-class people and the less educated members of the middle class speak a simpler or coarser language. This is a pernicious illusion arising from the effortlessness of conversation. Ordinary speech, like colour vision or walking, is a paradigm of engineering excellence – a technology that works so well that the user takes its outcome for granted, unaware of the complicated machinery hidden behind the panels. Behind such 'simple' sentences as *Where did he go?* and *The guy I met killed himself*, used automatically by any English speaker, are dozens of subroutines that arrange the words to express the meaning. Despite decades of effort, no artificially engineered language system comes close to duplicating the person in the street.

[Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 28.]

Given below are four examples of how students might make use of the above passage in their writing. In groups, discuss the merits or demerits of each example.

2.   It is a myth to say that working-class people speak a simpler or coarser language than the rest of society. This impression is due to the effortless nature of conversation. Ordinary speech works so well that the user takes its product for granted, not noticing the complicated 'machinery' behind it. Any ordinary speaker of English can make 'simple' sentences like *Where did he go?* and *The guy I met killed himself*, but many subroutines are needed to arrange these words to express the meaning. Even after many years of effort, no artificially engineered language system comes close to duplicating the average speaker of a language.

3. In his book *The Language Instinct*, Steven Pinker points out that working-class people and the less educated members of the middle class are wrongly regarded as speaking a simpler or coarser language. 'Ordinary speech', he says, 'like colour vision or walking, is a paradigm of engineering excellence – a technology that works so well that the user takes its outcome for granted, unaware of the complicated machinery hidden behind the panels.' He points out that, behind such 'simple' sentences as *Where did he go?* and *The guy I met killed himself*, are dozens of subroutines that arrange the words to express the meaning. 'Despite decades of effort, no artificially engineered language system comes close to duplicating the person in the street.' (Pinker, 28)

4. However familiar language may be in our everyday lives, and however easily we all seem to be able to produce it, language is anything but simple. Even the sentences produced by the less educated members of our society are far more intricate than we think, and involve a complicated 'machinery' which far exceeds our expectations. For example, sentences such as *Where did she go?* and *The girl I met killed herself* may look simple, but actually require dozens of 'steps' to generate. The kind of linguistic system that the average speaker of a language possesses is far more complicated than any artificially engineered language system that has yet been devised.

5. All of us have grown up speaking one or more languages. Language has become such a familiar part of our everyday lives, and most of us seem to be able to produce it so effortlessly, that we tend to forget that language is actually a very complicated phenomenon. As the famous psycholinguist, Steven Pinker, rightly points out (Pinker, 28), even the supposedly 'simple' language spoken by the less educated is highly complex. He gives, as an illustration, 'simple' sentences like *Where did he go?* and *The guy I met killed himself*, which any ordinary speaker of English can produce automatically, but which require dozens of linguistic 'subroutines' to generate. Pinker observes that the linguistic system – the 'machinery' so to speak – behind the production of even such apparently simple sentences far surpasses any artificially engineered language system in complexity and intricacy.

Activity II

Read the following extract from *The Price of a Dream*, about the original idea that motivated Dr Muhammad Yunus to found the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, the first 'poor people's bank' in the world. After that, write a paragraph making use of whatever ideas you find useful in it, as part of an essay about efforts to combat poverty in the world. Remember to make proper acknowledgements, and to integrate the borrowed ideas organically into your own writing.

6.   'The myth that credit is the privilege of a few fortunate people needs to be exploded,' explains Muhammad Yunus, the founder of the Grameen Bank. 'You look at the tiniest village and the tiniest person in that village: a very capable person, a very intelligent person. You have only to create the proper environment to support these people so that they can change their own lives.'

…. Here was a twentieth-century economist, one of the most highly respected voices in world development, arguing that the best (in fact, the only) way to combat the world's most entrenched poverty was to create the conditions whereby millions of tiny entrepreneurs scattered in hundreds of thousands of villages and small towns could support themselves through self-chosen pursuits.

[David Bornstein, *The Price of a Dream* (Dhaka: University Press, 1996), 20-23.]