

PLAGIARISM

What It Is And How To Avoid It

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INTRODUCTION

Plagiarism has become epidemic. But just because it seems nearly everybody is doing it, does not make it right.

What is plagiarism? Students caught plagiarizing at the graduate level are sometimes expelled from a university, and undergraduates might be given a second chance, although failed in a particular course. Thus plagiarism is a very serious matter.

This concise document describes and defines plagiarism, along with an explanation of why it is such a serious violation of academic integrity. This document is intended as a guide for students – with some thoughts at the end for instructors and faculty members.

PLAGIARISM IS DECEPTION

The Internet makes it very easy and tempting to copy and paste material without appropriate indication and citation. It is also tempting to follow the crowd in the sense that other students are doing it that way – and seeming to get away with it.

When grading your work, the instructor assumes all the words, ideas, drawings, overall structure, and other aspects of your paper, or work, are yours, unless told otherwise. The way you tell your instructor that words, ideas, and other aspects of your work are **not** yours is through full disclosure of what specific portions are not yours, along with their sources. If you fail to do this properly and adequately, then the instructor will have assumed that all the words and other aspects of the work are yours although they are not. Failure to inform the reader which words and other aspects of your work are not yours is plagiarism.

Plagiarism is deception. Plagiarism is the theft of the words (and even ideas) of

others. If the material being copied is copyrighted, then the plagiarism is a violation of that copyright and possibly even a civil violation of the law.

Plagiarism is very disturbing to most faculty members and instructors, particularly when it is done deliberately. The fact that you claim that you did not intend to plagiarize and deceive your instructor is impossible to prove, and hence most universities take the position that intent does not matter in cases of plagiarism.

Committing plagiarism exposes you to a host of academic sanctions, from reduction of a grade in a course to outright expulsion from the institution.

FULL DISCLOSURE — IT'S ALL ABOUT QUOTATION MARKS!

Full disclosure of words, sentences, and paragraphs is accomplished through the use of quotation marks to show what words and phrases are not yours and have been copied from sources. Any clauses, sentences, and paragraphs copied directly and verbatim from sources must be enclosed in quotation marks.

If the copied material runs over a number of lines, the copied material is frequently indented and single spaced to inform the reader that the material comes from a source. Some writers place quotation marks around even the indented material to be extra safe and not accidentally confuse the reader.

CITATION

Citation is the process of disclosing the source of the copied or referenced material, be it words, sentences, paragraphs, or even ideas. There are a number of ways of doing this. One way is the use of footnotes placed at the bottom of the page. Another way is a short reference at the end of the material and with more details about the source placed at the end of the paper in a bibliography or list of references.

Citation methods can vary according to whether your work is an academic research paper or a more practical professional piece,

and different disciplines vary in the specifics. Style manuals describe and explain specific methods. When in doubt, you should ask your instructor what specific style is desired. But the use of quotation marks and other indications of what words are not yours are **always** required.

PARAPHRASING

When you paraphrase material you restate it entirely in your own words. Only the overall idea of the source is used. A citation is usually required to give credit to the source of the idea.

Paraphrasing is **not** simply rearranging the words of the source, perhaps adding and dropping a few words along the way. If you wish to rearrange the words of the source, then you should place all the copied words within quotation marks and use square brackets [] to indicate the words you have added and ellipses ... to indicate where you have omitted words.

The best advice is that if you are going to copy the words of a source, you should copy them exactly. Adding and dropping words is a tricky matter and invites problems. The copied words should be placed within quotation marks and the source suitably cited.

FACTS

Usually there are limited ways in which facts can be stated in a paper. Usually, you would reword the fact using your own words as much as possible, with an appropriate citation to indicate the source of the fact. However, if you are unable to reword the fact and you copy the fact exactly from a source, enclosing it in quotation marks is the best way to avoid problems.

EXCESSIVE QUOTATION

Imagine that a paper is entirely quoted from various sources. Sentence after sentence in the paper would then be a lengthy string of quotations. Although all the quotations were enclosed in quotation marks and the sources properly cited, the student would most likely receive a low or

failing academic grade for the reason that no analysis or thought was performed. This, however, is no justification for a student to omit quote marks to avoid submitting a paper that would otherwise have too much quotation.

DON'T BE PARANOID

A fear of accidental plagiarism should not grip you. In researching a topic, you could remember a phrase and accidentally use it in your paper without quotation marks or even a citation. Some clauses and phrases are so common in writing that anyone could use them. A few words and phrases here and there in a long paper might be identical to a source, but this would not be plagiarism. Plagiarism usually is quite extensive and consists of many sentences, paragraphs, and instances of copied material – all without quotation marks.

The plagiarist writes a paper by copying directly and extensively from sources. Sometimes a few words are added and dropped here and there to make the copied material a little different from the original. Other times the material is copied verbatim with no changes. Usually citations are present so that the reader believes the paper has been carefully researched. But since quotation marks are absent, the reader does not know that the words are not those of the student.

The shrewd plagiarist not only copies without using quote marks, but citations are absent too so that the reader has no hint at all about the source of the material. The Internet makes it easier for instructors to search for the source of suspicious words and passages.

If you are careful in always marking which words have been copied in your research and then either placing these words in quotation marks or in thoroughly paraphrasing the words, you will avoid plagiarism. But also be sure to indicate the sources, using whatever citation style is appropriate or has been specified.

EXAMPLES

This section describes specific examples of plagiarism according to the definitions given earlier. The material that will be used is from the first paragraph of this piece, namely:

Students caught plagiarizing at the graduate level are sometimes expelled from a university, and undergraduates might be given a second chance, although failed in a particular course.

Suppose you simply copied this sentence verbatim into your paper without quotation marks or a citation to the source. That would be plagiarism. Suppose now that you added the citation but without quotation marks. That still would be plagiarism since the reader would believe the sentence consisted of your words.

If you copied the this material verbatim into you paper, the correct way to do so is as follows:

“Students caught plagiarizing at the graduate level are sometimes expelled from a university, and undergraduates might be given a second chance, although failed in a particular course.” [from: Noll, “Plagiarism,” 2011]

There are many acceptable ways to reference a citation, and the way used here is just one of many.

Suppose you decide you want to copy the sentence, but change it a little so it appears somewhat different. You drop and add a word here and there, finally writing:

Students plagiarizing are sometimes expelled from a university.

Since you have essentially copied from the original but have not informed the reader that neither the sentence structure nor most of the words are yours, you have plagiarized. Adding a citation would not remedy the plagiarism. The correct way to copy the sentence with the changes would be:

“Students ... plagiarizing ... are ... sometimes expelled ... from [school].” [from: Noll, “Plagiarism”]

In most cases, this kind of copying would be considered somewhat sloppy writing. If you are going to copy material, it is usually best to copy it exactly and enclose it in quotation marks, rather than adding and dropping words.

Lastly, suppose you decide to paraphrase the source. A correct way of doing this would be to write:

Noll points out that plagiarism must be important since students are sometimes expelled because of it. [see: Noll, “Plagiarism”]

In paraphrasing, you have referred to and have learned from the source, but you restate the material in your own words. You give credit to the source with a citation, sometimes writing “see:” as an indication that you are paraphrasing.

EXCUSES

Students are inventive in their excuses when caught plagiarizing. A frequent excuse is “I always wrote all my papers that way and have never been told that it was wrong.” Of course, the instructor was not told that the material in the papers was copied from sources without the use of quotation marks and thus had no way to know that plagiarism had occurred.

Another excuse is that the student is from a different country, and the standards there are different. However, the academic standard against copying the written words of others is universal. It is understandable that an international student with English problems might be more tempted to plagiarize, but native English-speaking students plagiarize just as frequently.

There are also excuses involving pressure to get the paper done, along with various family and personal crises, such as “I had a migraine.” “I just forgot this one time to use quotation marks” is another excuse, although upon investigation it is

usually discovered that every paper has been written that way.

Plagiarism is the one academic violation in which the simple fact of comparing the plagiarized material with the work of the student proves the case. Excuses simply do not matter, which is why many academic institutions do not consider them.

HOW TO GET AWAY WITH PLAGIARIZING

There are ways to minimize your chances of getting caught plagiarizing. One way is to always take courses taught by adjunct faculty members who will not have the time or inclination to investigate and report plagiarism.

The sources to be copied should be books and articles that are not on the Internet. These would be ancient books and articles from decades ago in the dusty rear of a library. Since these kinds of very old sources are usually not on the Internet, cut-and-paste would not work and they would need to be copied by actually typing them into your paper. Reference citations would be needed but should never be the sources from which you actually copied. You would therefore need to find relevant other citations to add to your paper. All this sounds like a lot of work, and it would probably be much easier – and more honest – to write your paper yourself without plagiarizing.

FOR INSTRUCTORS & FACULTY

At some schools and departments, as many as a quarter of graduate students might have plagiarized their way through courses and formal examinations. Even doctoral students have plagiarized. There is real cause for concern and to be vigilant.

Many instructors and faculty do not appreciate being placed in the position of always being suspicious of the writing of their students. The formal paperwork required by a university to document cases of plagiarism is quite extensive to create a fair process and to protect the student. Hearings and appeals are routine, requiring

much work by the faculty member who discovers and reports a case. Few adjunct faculty members would want to involve themselves in such a process, nor would many tenured faculty members. Thus many instructors and faculty members ignore plagiarism, redefine it loosely, or accept the flimsy excuses of students caught in the act. A culture of tolerance toward plagiarism and cheating is the result.

Furthermore, administrators do not want to expel paying students and thus lose a source of income. Students rate faculty, which has an impact on faculty merit review and pay, and students might down-rate faculty who are strict towards plagiarism. Some universities generate yearly lists of academic violations by department, and no department wants to top that kind of list. All this creates an environment of avoidance and an acceptability of plagiarism.

Most students are honest and write their own papers, properly referencing sources and using quotation marks where appropriate. In some ways, it is the honest student who is penalized by plagiarism since the students who plagiarize receive a higher grade than they merit and thereby push the grade scale to unwarranted levels. Also once plagiarism goes unpunished the guilty student learns that a little cheating is an easy way to get ahead – and perhaps even is acceptable. After graduation this kind of behavior might continue, explaining the cheating and corruption seen today so often in politics and business.

In the end, it is the responsibility of instructors and faculty members to be alert to the possibility of plagiarism, to investigate it when suspected, and to report it to the academic institution. It is the responsibility of the institution to act accordingly and not to place peer or other pressures on faculty members who do discover and report plagiarism. In some ways, the departments at the top of the academic violations list are the diligent ones.