

PLAGIARISM: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

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Plagiarism is the intentional or **unintentional** use of the work of another without proper acknowledgment.

You may be aware that reproducing the published words of another without acknowledging the source of the words is plagiarism; however, you might be unaware of the scope of the concept of plagiarism. The term *plagiarism* applies not only to the published word, but also to unpublished materials, the spoken word, opinions, theories, pictures, graphs, and statistics. In fact, plagiarism might occur at any time when the material of another is being used, regardless of the source or format of the material. An example of a situation in which unintentional plagiarism can easily occur is when students work together, formally or informally, on a class assignment. If you do collaborative work with other students and then use their ideas or material in the work you submit, you must credit the work of the other students. If you do not properly acknowledge that you have incorporated the work of other students into your materials, you are guilty of plagiarism.

In addition, you might not appreciate that plagiarism is not limited to copying verbatim from a source but also occurs when you paraphrase the work of another.

The sole exception to the rule that all materials being used must be properly acknowledged is if the material being used is **common knowledge**. Information and ideas that appear in many places or that are readily available to anyone would be regarded as common knowledge. You may not know what is “common knowledge” in your discipline. When in doubt, err on the side of citing your source.

The appropriate method of acknowledging source materials varies from discipline to discipline and from instructor to instructor. References to source materials might be given in footnotes, endnotes, a bibliography together with pointers in the text indicating where and which bibliographical item was used, or possibly in the body of your text. You should talk to your instructors about their requirements for properly acknowledging sources.

Types of Plagiarism

If you use a sentence (or sentences), a phrase (or phrases) or possibly even a single word (if the word is unique or newly coined) lifted directly from a source, you must enclose the sentence

(phrase or word) in quotation marks¹ and you must cite the source of the material.² Otherwise you are committing plagiarism. In general, direct quotes should be used sparingly and only when the wording of the source material is particularly effective or salient. Quotations should not be used as a mechanism for avoiding the often challenging task of expressing ideas in your own words.

Although not word-for-word copying, the reproduction of source material in which the basic structure is unchanged but in which you substitute synonyms for certain words or in which the structure is rearranged is considered plagiarism, even if you cite the source. Use your own words; avoid paraphrasing. Not only will this assure you avoid this form of plagiarizing, but it will also allow you to demonstrate that you truly understand the concepts you are discussing.

Although many students recognize and carefully avoid the forms of plagiarism just described, they are sometimes unaware that using the ideas, opinions, findings, or theories of another is also plagiarism unless the source is given credit. Therefore, it is imperative that you credit your source whenever you use the ideas, opinions, findings, or theories of another, even when you are expressing them in your own words.

To repeat: any use of words taken directly from the source should be placed in quotation marks and you should cite the source. Avoid paraphrasing or using slight variations in the language. Even if you are not using direct quotes, you must cite the source when you are using ideas and information contained in the source material unless the ideas are common knowledge.

In order to help you understand what constitutes plagiarism, consider the following text written by Fleming in 1998:

An attribute of high-quality education is, most certainly, the quantity of knowledge conveyed to, and learned by, a student. In addition to possessing a good knowledge base, a student who has been fully educated should be able to: communicate effectively; apply critical thinking skills; and adapt to unanticipated circumstances.

Now consider four excerpts from (fictitious) student papers where the above original text was used as a source. Each excerpt is followed by a discussion of whether, and how, the excerpt exhibits plagiarism.

¹Formatting of direct quotes depends on their length and the style manual you are following. Consult your instructor.

²Determining which source to credit is not always readily apparent, especially when you wish to repeat a quotation that you read; that is, you wish to quote from a quote. Consult your instructor for assistance in citing the source.

Excerpt 1: A characteristic of a good education is, most certainly, the amount of information conveyed to, and assimilated by, a student. As well as having a broad knowledge base, a student who has been completely educated should be able to: speak well; use critical thinking skills; and adapt to unforeseen circumstances (Fleming, 1998).

Comment: Even though the source is cited, this is quite clearly plagiarism. A number of words have been replaced by synonyms but the underlying structure of the original statement is unchanged. In addition, the sense of the original statement is not fully preserved — the ability to “communicate effectively” is not the same as the ability to “speak well.”

Excerpt 2: A student who has been fully educated should be able to: apply critical thinking skills; communicate effectively; and adapt to unanticipated circumstances. Although an attribute of high-quality education is, most certainly, the quantity of knowledge conveyed to, and learned by, a student, the possession of a good knowledge base does not constitute a complete education (Fleming, 1998).

Comment: Again the source is cited, but this is still plagiarism. The original statement has simply been rearranged but still consists of the original author’s words.

Excerpt 3: There are many different ideas of what makes a high-quality education. Most people believe that an important attribute of a high-quality education is the quantity of knowledge conveyed to, and learned by, a student. However, it is also believed that the tangible skills and knowledge gained from education do not constitute a complete education. A complete education must also give a student the ability to communicate effectively; apply critical thinking skills; and adapt to unanticipated circumstances.

Comment: This is still plagiarism. The ideas being conveyed in this version are unattributed. Even if the ideas were properly credited, this would still be plagiarism since the text borrows phrases from the original. The borrowed phrases should be placed in quotation marks or, preferably, where possible the ideas should be expressed in words other than the original author’s.

Excerpt 4: There are many different ideas of what makes a high-quality education. An important part of a good education is that a student gain a significant body of knowledge and also that the student master the tangible skills appropriate to their discipline. However, it is also believed that the tangible skills and knowledge gained from education do not constitute a complete education. Fleming (1998) believes that a complete education must also give a student the ability to: “. . . communicate effectively; apply critical thinking skills; and adapt to unanticipated circumstances” (p. 2). A student should also leave college with the ability to work successfully with other people as well as independently.

Comment: This is not plagiarism. The ideas being conveyed in this text are attributed and the phrases lifted from the original text are enclosed in quotation marks.

Avoiding Plagiarism

When using source materials in your work, you should:

- ◆ Express the ideas, facts, etc. in your own words.
- ◆ Ensure that the information being conveyed accurately reflects the original material.
- ◆ Place the spoken or written words of another person in quotation marks.
- ◆ Cite the source material using the format appropriate to your discipline. If you are unsure as to whether a source should be cited, then err on the side of including a citation.

Recommended References

You might want to consult the following books for further information on avoiding plagiarism and for in depth advice on scholarly writing.

Chicago Manual of Style (14th ed.). (1993). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Crews, F. (1991). *The Random House Handbook* (6th ed.). New York: McGraw Hill.

Gibaldi, J. (1998). *MLA Style Manual & Guide to Scholarly Publishing* (2nd ed.). New York: Modern Language Association of America.

Hacker, D. (1994). *The Bedford Handbook for Writers* (4th student ed.). Boston: Bedford Books.

Turabian, K. L., Grossman, J., & Bennett, A. (1996). *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (6th ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

A Final Caution

Claiming “I’ve always written papers this way and no one ever told me it was wrong” is no defense for plagiarism. Perhaps you have been “lucky” until now. The only way to ensure you do not get caught plagiarizing is to avoid it. The penalties are very severe.

Sources

In preparing this document, the following web pages were used

<http://www.hamilton.edu/academics/resource/wc/AvoidingPlagiarism.html>

<http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/wts/plagiarism.html>

<http://nlu.nl.edu/ace/Guidelines.html>

<http://sja.ucdavis.edu/SJA/plagiarism.html>