



# Calumet College of St. Joseph, Specker Library

## What is Plagiarism?

Many people think of plagiarism as copying another's work, or borrowing someone else's original ideas. But terms like "copying" and "borrowing" can disguise the seriousness of the offense:

According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, to "plagiarize" means

- to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own
- to use (another's production) without crediting the source
- to commit literary theft
- to present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source.

In other words, plagiarism is an act of fraud. It involves both stealing someone else's work and lying about it afterward.

### **But can words and ideas really be stolen?**

According to U.S. law, the answer is yes. The expression of original ideas is considered intellectual property, and is protected by copyright laws, just like original inventions. Almost all forms of expression fall under copyright protection as long as they are recorded in some way (such as a book or a computer file).

### **All of the following are considered plagiarism:**

- turning in someone else's work as your own
- copying words or ideas from someone else without giving credit
- failing to put a quotation in quotation marks
- giving incorrect information about the source of a quotation
- changing words but copying the sentence structure of a source without giving credit
- copying so many words or ideas from a source that it makes up the majority of your work, whether you give credit or not (see our section on "fair use" rules)

Most cases of plagiarism can be avoided, however, by citing sources. Simply acknowledging that certain material has been borrowed, and providing your audience with the information

necessary to find that source, is usually enough to prevent plagiarism. See our section on citation for more information on how to cite sources properly.

## **Educational tips on plagiarism prevention**

The most important steps in preventing plagiarism are those taken to address its causes. The strategies in this section are intended as guidelines to help you:

1. become aware of the reasons plagiarism occurs
2. identify the different forms of plagiarism
3. integrate plagiarism prevention techniques into your courses

## **Why Students Plagiarize**

There are many reasons students plagiarize. Sometimes deadlines come around more quickly than expected, sometimes assignments feel overwhelming, and sometimes the boundaries of plagiarism and research just get confused. But what situations are most likely to result in plagiarism? More importantly, how can they be avoided? Learning to identify the factors that make plagiarism an attractive alternative is the best way to stop it before it starts.

## **Intentional Plagiarism**

Just like hacking into websites, plagiarizing papers can be something of a thrill in itself. For many students it becomes a question of ingenuity: "can I sneak a plagiarized paper past my professor?" But there is usually more behind intentional plagiarism than just the thrill of deception.

## **Searching vs. Researching**

Today's students learn quickly that finding and manipulating data on the Internet is a valuable skill. With the wealth of information available online, the production of original analysis and interpretation may seem like "busy work" compared to finding the best or most obscure sources.

Teach your students that the real skills they need to learn are interpretation and analysis how to process the information they find. Tell them that anyone with some basic knowledge can find information on the internet -- it's what they do with that information that is important.

### **"But their words are better"**

Some students might think, "Why sweat over producing an analysis that has already been done better, by someone who knows more?" Students may also be intimidated by the quality of work found online, thinking their own work cannot compare.

Tell your students that what interests you most is seeing how they understand the assigned topic, and how they develop their own style and voice. This might go a long way toward making them feel more comfortable with writing. Explain to them that you know writing is a learning process, and that you do not expect them to be as brilliant as experts who have devoted years to the subject. You may also want to let them know that their experiences and the context of your class give them a unique perspective that may give them a far more interesting angle on the issues than those of the "experts."

### **Making the Grade**

Students are under enormous pressure from family, peers, and instructors to compete for scholarships, admissions, and, of course, places in the job market. They often see education as a rung in the ladder to success, and not an active process valuable in itself. Because of this, students tend to focus on the end results of their research, rather than the skills they learn in doing it.

Explain to your students that while they may be able to hide ignorance of particular facts or theories, research and writing skills make themselves very apparent to anyone evaluating them. In other words, your students' grades won't matter if they don't have the skills to show for them. Also, you may wish to emphasize improvement as a factor in grading, as this can encourage students to try developing their own abilities. This depends entirely upon your own pedagogical style, of course.

### **"Everyone else is doing it"**

Students often justify plagiarism by pointing out that since their peers plagiarize, they must do the same to keep up. They feel faced with a choice: put in several hours of work and risk a mediocre grade with less time for other subjects, or do what their peers do and copy

something good from the internet for an easy A with time to spare.

One of the only ways to deal with this is by catching those students who do plagiarize. It takes a great deal of the pressure off of those who want to work honestly but are afraid of falling behind their peers.

## **Poor Planning**

Students are not always the best judges of how much time their assignments will take. They may not be aware of the extent of work involved in a research paper, or may simply be overwhelmed by the task and put it off until the last minute, leaving them with no time for original work of their own.

Scheduling stages of progress on their papers is a very effective way to deal with this. Having them submit bibliographies, outlines, thesis statements, or drafts on specified dates before the final draft is due will give them a good idea of the amount of work involved. It will also help them organize their time and make the task seem less overwhelming.

## **Unintentional Plagiarism**

No honest student would walk out of a neighbors' house accidentally carrying their television. But even the most well-intentioned writers sometimes "appropriate" the work of others without proper authority. How does this happen?

## **Citation Confusion**

Perhaps the most common reason for inadvertent plagiarism is simply an ignorance of the proper forms of citation. See how to cite sources properly.

## **Plagiarism vs. Paraphrasing**

Many students have trouble knowing when they are paraphrasing and when they are plagiarizing. In an effort to make their work seem "more original" by "putting things in their own words," students may often inadvertently plagiarize by changing the original too much or, sometimes, not enough.

Doing exercises in class where you hand out paraphrased and plagiarized passages in order to discuss the differences might be very helpful. Explain that your students must retain the essential ideas of the original, but significantly change the style and grammatical structure to fit

in the context of their argument. You may also want to send your students to our [What is Plagiarism?](#) page.

### **"I was just copying my notes"**

Students often mix their own ideas and those of their sources when they take sloppy notes, creating confusion when they begin writing their papers. It may be worthwhile to go over some note-taking methods with your students. Teaching them to document their sources using different colored pens and "post-it" tabs to mark pages, for example, will save time and keep references clear.

### **"I couldn't find the source"**

Students are often sloppy about writing down the bibliographic information of their sources, leaving them unable to properly attribute information when it comes to writing the paper. Explain how important it is to keep careful track of references during the note-taking stage. Students may be eager to focus entirely on the content of their research, and need to be told that how they handle their reference material is a significant part of the assignment. Having them turn in bibliographies before they turn in the paper itself will also encourage them to pay more attention to their sources.

### **"I thought we didn't have to quote facts"**

Because the internet makes information so readily available, students may find it difficult to tell the difference between "common knowledge" they are free to use, and original ideas which are the intellectual property of others. The easiest thing to do is teach your students the maxim "When in doubt, cite sources."

### **Confusion About Expectations**

Students may not be aware of what proper research requires. They may think they are being asked simply to report critical commentary, or to "borrow" from a number of sources to show that they have "done their homework." In either case, it becomes a problem if what they turn in tends to be predominantly the work of others.

One of the most common sources of confusion is the ambiguity of terms such as "analyze" and "discuss." You should explain to your students that these words have specific meanings in academic discourse, and that they imply a degree of original thought that goes

beyond mere "reporting." Emphasizing your interest in their own ideas will also help them understand what you expect from them.

## **Cultural Perspectives on Plagiarism**

Not all cultures take the same view of plagiarism. The Western notion that "ideas" can be the property of individuals may actually seem absurd to those with different views on what constitutes shared information or public discourse. Students from cultures which have a more collective sense of identity, for example, may have a difficult time understanding the distinctions some cultures draw between individual and public property. You might spend some very productive class time discussing your students' perspectives on this issue.

## **Types of Plagiarism**

Anyone who has written or graded a paper knows that plagiarism is not always a black and white issue. The boundary between plagiarism and research is often unclear. Learning to recognize the various forms of plagiarism, especially the more ambiguous ones, is an important step towards effective prevention. Many people think of plagiarism as copying another's work, or borrowing someone else's original ideas. But terms like "copying" and "borrowing" can disguise the seriousness of the offense:

## **Sources Not Cited**

1. **"The Ghost Writer"**

The writer turns in another's work, word-for-word, as his or her own.

2. **"The Photocopy"**

The writer copies significant portions of text straight from a single source, without alteration.

3. **"The Potluck Paper"**

The writer tries to disguise plagiarism by copying from several different sources, tweaking the sentences to make them fit together while retaining most of the original phrasing.

4. **"The Poor Disguise"**

Although the writer has retained the essential content of the source, he or she has altered the paper's appearance slightly by changing key words and phrases.

5. **"The Labor of Laziness"**

The writer takes the time to paraphrase most of the paper from other sources and make it all fit together, instead of spending the same effort on original work.

6. **"The Self-Stealer"**

The writer "borrows" generously from his or her previous work, violating policies concerning the expectation of originality adopted by most academic institutions.

### **Sources Cited (But Still Plagiarized)**

1. **"The Forgotten Footnote"**

The writer mentions an author's name for a source, but neglects to include specific information on the location of the material referenced. This often masks other forms of plagiarism by obscuring source locations.

2. **"The Misinformer"**

The writer provides inaccurate information regarding the sources, making it impossible to find them.

3. **"The Too-Perfect Paraphrase"**

The writer properly cites a source, but neglects to put in quotation marks text that has been copied word-for-word, or close to it. Although attributing the basic ideas to the source, the writer is falsely claiming original presentation and interpretation of the information.

4. **"The Resourceful Citer"**

The writer properly cites all sources, paraphrasing and using quotations appropriately. The catch? The paper contains almost no original work! It is sometimes difficult to spot this form of plagiarism because it looks like any other well-researched document.

5. **"The Perfect Crime"**

Well, we all know it doesn't exist. In this case, the writer properly quotes and cites sources in some places, but goes on to paraphrase other arguments from those sources without citation. This way, the writer tries to pass off the paraphrased material as his or her own analysis of the cited material.

### **Plagiarism FAQs**

Plagiarism in the information age is not always a cut and dry issue. Read on to find answers for frequently asked questions about plagiarism and its consequences.

## **What is plagiarism?**

Simply put, plagiarism is the use of another's original words or ideas as though they were your own. Any time you borrow from an original source and do not give proper credit, you have committed plagiarism and violated U.S. copyright laws. (See our [What is Plagiarism?](#) page for more detailed information on plagiarism.)

## **What are copyright laws?**

Copyright laws exist to protect our intellectual property. They make it illegal to reproduce someone else's expression of ideas or information without permission. This can include music, images, written words, video, and a variety of other media.

At one time, a work was only protected by copyright if it included a copyright trademark (the © symbol). According to laws established in 1989, however, works are now copyright protected with or without the inclusion of this symbol.

Anyone who reproduces copyrighted material improperly can be prosecuted in a court of law. It does not matter if the form or content of the original has been altered -- as long as any material can be shown to be substantially similar to the original, it may be considered a violation of the Copyright Act.

## **Are all published works copyrighted?**

Actually, no. The Copyright Act only protects works that express original ideas or information. For example, you could borrow liberally from the following without fear of plagiarism:

1. Compilations of readily available information, such as the phone book
2. # Works published by the U.S. government
3. Facts that are not the result of original research (such as the fact that there are fifty U.S. states, or that carrots contain Vitamin A)
4. Works in the public domain (provided you cite properly)

## **Can facts be copyrighted?**

Yes, in some situations. Any "facts" that have been published as the result of individual research are considered the intellectual property of the author.

## **Do I have to cite sources for every fact I use?**

No. You do not have to cite sources for facts that are not the result of unique individual research. Facts that are readily available from numerous sources and generally known to the public are considered "common knowledge," and are not protected by copyright laws. You can use these facts liberally in your paper without citing authors. If you are unsure whether or not a fact is common knowledge, you should probably cite your source just to be safe. Please visit Purdue's guide, "Deciding if Something is Common Knowledge."

## **Does it matter how much was copied?**

Not in determining whether or not plagiarism is a crime. If even a small part of a work is found to have been plagiarized, it is still considered a copyright violation. However, the amount that was copied probably will have a bearing on the severity of the punishment. A work that is almost entirely plagiarized will almost certainly incur greater penalties than a work that only includes a small amount of plagiarized material.

## **If I change the words, do I still have to cite the source?**

Changing only the words of an original source is NOT sufficient to prevent plagiarism. You must cite a source whenever you borrow ideas as well as words.

## **If I cite the source, can I still be accused of plagiarism?**

You are allowed to borrow ideas or phrases from other sources provided you cite them properly and your usage is consistent with the guidelines set by fair use laws. As a rule, however, you should be careful about borrowing too liberally -- if the case can be made that your work consists predominantly of someone else's words or ideas, you may still be susceptible to charges of plagiarism. Also, if you follow the words of a source too closely, and do not use quotation marks, it can be considered plagiarism even if you cite the source.

## **If I write something somebody else already wrote, but I didn't know they wrote it, is that still plagiarism?**

While it is possible that you might write on the same topic as someone else, odds are that you will not have exactly the same ideas or express them in exactly the same way. It is highly unlikely that you would be accused of plagiarizing a source you have never read. Be

careful, however, of "accidentally" plagiarizing from sources you have read and forgotten -- if your ideas turn out to have been influenced by a source that you read but failed to cite for any reason, you could be guilty of plagiarism.

## **What are the punishments for plagiarism?**

As with any wrongdoing, the degree of intent (see below) and the nature of the offense determine its status. When plagiarism takes place in an academic setting, it is most often handled by the individual instructors and the academic institution involved. If, however, the plagiarism involves money, prizes, or job placement, it constitutes a crime punishable in court.

### **Academic Punishments**

Most colleges and universities have zero tolerance for plagiarists. In fact, academic standards of intellectual honesty are often more demanding than governmental copyright laws. If you have plagiarized a paper whose copyright has run out, for example, you are no less likely to be disciplined than if you had plagiarized copyrighted material. A plagiarized paper almost always results in failure for the assignment, frequently in failure for the course, and sometimes in expulsion.

### **Legal Punishments**

Most cases of plagiarism are considered misdemeanors, punishable by fines of anywhere between \$100 and \$50,000 -- and up to one year in jail.

Plagiarism can also be considered a felony under certain state and federal laws. For example, if a plagiarist copies and earns more than \$2,500 from copyrighted material, he or she may face up to \$250,000 in fines and up to ten years in jail.

### **Institutional Punishments**

Most corporations and institutions will not tolerate any form of plagiarism. There have been a significant number of cases around the world where people have lost their jobs or been denied positions as a result of plagiarism.

## **Does intention matter?**

Ignorance of the law is never an excuse. So even if you did not realize you were plagiarizing, you may still be found guilty. However, there are different punishments for willful infringement, or deliberate plagiarism, and innocent infringement, or accidental plagiarism. To distinguish between these, courts recognize what is called the good faith defense. If you can demonstrate, based on the amount you borrowed and the way you have incorporated it in your own work, that reasonably believed what you did was fair use, chances are that your sentence will be lessened substantially.

## **What is "fair use," anyway?**

The United States government has established rough guidelines for determining the nature and amount of work that may be "borrowed" without explicit written consent. These are called "fair use" laws, because they try to establish whether certain uses of original material are reasonable. The laws themselves are vague and complicated. Below we have condensed them into some rubrics you can apply to help determine the fairness of any given usage.

### **The nature of your use.**

If you have merely copied something, it is unlikely to be considered fair use. But if the material has been transformed in an original way through interpretation, analysis, etc., it is more likely to be considered "fair use."

### **The amount you've used.**

The more you've "borrowed," the less likely it is to be considered fair use. What percentage of your work is "borrowed" material? What percentage of the original did you use? The lower the better.

### **The effect of your use on the original**

If you are creating a work that competes with the original in its own market, and may do the original author economic harm, any substantial borrowing is unlikely to be considered fair use. The more the content of your work or its target audience differs from that of the original, the better. We recommend the following site for more information on "fair use" and Copyright laws: [University of Maryland - Copyright Laws](#)

## **What is the "public domain?"**

Works that are no longer protected by copyright, or never have been, are considered "public domain." This means that you may freely borrow material from these works without fear of plagiarism, provided you make proper attributions.

## **How do I know if something is public domain or not?**

The terms and conditions under which works enter the public domain are a bit complicated. In general, anything published more than 75 years ago is now in the public domain. Works published after 1978 are protected for the lifetime of the author plus 70 years. The laws governing works published fewer than 75 years ago but before 1978 are more complicated, although generally copyright protection extended 28 years after publication plus 47 more years if the copyright was renewed, totaling 75 years from the publication date. If you are uncertain about whether or not a work is in the public domain, it is probably best to contact a lawyer or act under the assumption that it is still protected by copyright laws.

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