

# A Primer on Plagiarism

## Introduction

Plagiarism is a form of cheating that constitutes the academic equivalent of theft. Indeed, the word “plagiarism” comes from the Latin *plagiarius*, which means “kidnapper” (Lucas, p. 43). A student who plagiarizes a paper is no different from one who sneaks a peek at a fellow student’s answer sheet during an exam or one who copies homework answers from a classmate without having done the homework. Simply put, a plagiarist is a cheat and a liar who has no place in the academy.

## Exactly What *Is* Plagiarism?

The definition below is taken primarily from *Avoiding Plagiarism — A Guide for Students* on the University of Oregon Web site:

**Plagiarism is the representation of someone else’s words, ideas, or data as one’s own work. When a student submits work for credit that includes the words, ideas, or data of others, the source must be acknowledged by the use of complete, accurate, and specific references, such as footnotes or parenthetical citations that lead to complete references at the end of the paper. . . . By placing his or her own name on work submitted for credit, the student certifies the originality of all work not otherwise identified by appropriate acknowledgements. On written assignments, verbatim statements from other sources must be enclosed by quotation marks or set off from regular text as indented block quotes, and full credit must be given via citation. Failure to follow these guidelines constitutes plagiarism (University of Oregon, 2006).**

Even if all sources in the paper are properly quoted, paraphrased, cited and referenced, the following actions still constitute plagiarism:

- ◆ Copying an entire paper or sections of a paper from one or more Internet sources.
- ◆ Borrowing or stealing a paper written by someone else for a current or previous class.
- ◆ Buying a paper from a term-paper service and turning it in as if it were your own.
- ◆ Hiring someone else to write your paper and then putting your name on it.
- ◆ Submitting a paper written primarily by another person who acts as a tutor or editor.

## Types of Plagiarism

In his excellent textbook *The Art of Public Speaking*, Professor Stephen E. Lucas (2004) of the University of Wisconsin has identified three distinct types of plagiarism:

- ◆ **Global plagiarism** occurs when an author steals an entire paper word-for-word from another source and passes it off as his or her own. Lucas calls this “the most blatant — and unforgivable — kind of plagiarism” and refers to it as “grossly unethical” (p. 43).
- ◆ **Patchwork plagiarism** occurs when an author copies sections of a paper word-for-word from several sources and then fits them together so that they make sense, more or less. Lucas refers to patchwork plagiarism as “essentially a cut-and-paste job of ideas and words that are not your own” (p. 45). Patchwork plagiarism is still cheating.
- ◆ **Incremental plagiarism** occurs when the author fails to give credit for specific parts or “increments” of the paper that were borrowed from other sources. A fair amount of plagiarism among college students falls into this category. You will save yourself a lot of trouble if you remember that any time you quote or paraphrase a source, you are obliged to credit the original source.

## Does That Mean You Should Include a Citation for Every Single Fact in Your Paper?

No, it doesn’t. Citation is not required for information that is considered **common knowledge**. Common knowledge has been defined as “facts, dates, events, information, and concepts that belong generally to an educated public. No individual owns the facts about history, physics, social behavior, geography, current events, popular culture, and so on” (Hairston & Ruszkiewicz, 1993, p. 614).

Regarding common knowledge, an article titled *Plagiarism: What It is and How to Recognize and Avoid It* on Indiana University's Web site provides two examples. Here's the first:

**John F. Kennedy was elected President of the United States in 1960.**

This information is considered general knowledge; it is not necessary to document this fact. On the other hand, facts not generally known and ideas or opinions that interpret facts must always be cited. Here's the second example:

**According to the American Family Leave Coalition's new book, *Family Issues and Congress*, President Bush's relationship with Congress has hindered family leave legislation (p. 6).**

The idea that "Bush's relationship with Congress has hindered family leave legislation" is **not** a fact. It is an opinion, and the source of this interpretation must be cited (Indiana University, 2006).

### **How Can You Avoid Plagiarism?**

Students tend to run into plagiarism problems when they fail to quote sources properly. When you use someone else's words, you quote that person. Any such passage must be placed inside quotation marks or indented in a block quote. The source thereof must be clearly documented with a parenthetical citation and a reference at the end of the paper. **Failure to do so is plagiarism.**

In this example, the source material in the left column has been properly quoted in the right column:

<b>Original Source</b>	<b>Proper Quotation</b>
"Buddhadasa's conception of human beings as active controllers of their own material and spiritual progress is most clearly presented in his view of work as integrating both social and spiritual activity." — Peter Jackson, <i>Buddhadasa: A Buddhist Thinker for the Modern World</i> , page 200.	Jackson (1988) wrote, "Buddhadasa's conception of human beings as active controllers of their own material and spiritual progress is most clearly presented in his view of work as integrating both social and spiritual activity" (p. 200).

To avoid plagiarism when quoting a source, the author must do three things:

- ◆ Accurately quote the original author's words.
- ◆ Enclose the quotation within quotation marks or indent it in a block quote.
- ◆ Follow each quotation with a citation of the page number, like this: (p. 200)

Students also run into plagiarism problems when they fail to paraphrase sources properly. Anytime you use someone else's ideas but put them in your own words, you are paraphrasing that source. Although the words are yours, the ideas upon which the words are based come from another source, and that source must be documented with a parenthetical citation and a reference at the end of the paper, per APA Style. **Failure to do so is plagiarism.**

In this example, the material in the left column has been properly paraphrased in the right column:

<b>Original Source</b>	<b>Proper Paraphrase</b>
"If the existence of a signing ape was unsettling for linguists, it was also startling news for animal behaviorists." — Flora Davis, <i>Eloquent Animals: A Study in Animal Communication</i> , page 26.	According to Flora Davis (1988), linguists and animal behaviorists were unprepared for the news that an ape could communicate with its trainers through sign language (p. 26).

To avoid plagiarism when paraphrasing a source, the author must do three things:

- ◆ Create a distinct sentence structure that is appreciably different from the original work while maintaining the substance of the author's ideas. (Paraphrasing or summarizing does **not** mean merely changing a couple of words from the original work.)
- ◆ Check the paraphrase carefully against the original text. Be sure the information is accurate, but that the same words or phrases have not been used inadvertently.
- ◆ Acknowledge the source through correct parenthetical citations that refer the reader to the reference section.

## Examples: Is it Plagiarism?

Here is a passage taken directly from a master's thesis by Diane Rousseau:

Tobacco use is a costly destructive behaviour in our society, responsible for social, economic and personal costs. Thus, many non-profit groups and government agencies world-wide have turned to social marketing to try to reduce the incidence of smoking. Social marketing has been viewed as a force for change and is defined as "the application of the logic of marketing to societal goals" (Kotler and Zaltman, 1971, p. 3). Governments have actively tried to reduce cigarette consumption by banning cigarette advertising, by providing legislation to control smoking and by issuing public service advertisements.

Rousseau, D. (1996). *Effectiveness of fear appeals in anti-smoking advertisements*. Unpublished master's thesis, Concordia University, Montreal.

Compare the passage above to the paragraph below, which was submitted as part of the research rationale in a student paper. The student wrote:

Tobacco use is a costly destructive behavior in our society, responsible for social, economic and personal costs. This is the reason many non-profit groups (such as the "Truth" campaign) have turned to social marketing to try to reduce smoking. Governments have tried to reduce cigarette consumption by banning cigarette ads, banning smoking in public buildings, and by issuing public service advertisements.

Is this plagiarism? Absolutely. Other than changing the British spelling of *behaviour* to the American version *behavior* and adding a parenthetical aside about the "Truth" campaign, the student copied Rousseau's words verbatim without giving her credit.

If plagiarism can be described in degrees of egregiousness, this is certainly the worst kind: verbatim theft of someone else's words and ideas without as much as a parenthetical citation.

Some students mistakenly believe that they can use a scholarly source's exact words without quotation marks as long as they provide some type of credit at the beginning or end of the paragraph. Suppose, for example, the plagiarist above had given Rousseau credit at the beginning of the paragraph, like this:

Rousseau (1996) said tobacco use is a costly destructive behavior in our society, responsible for social, economic and personal costs . . .

Is that plagiarism?

Yes, it is. Although the student gave proper credit to the source at the beginning of the passage, the student still used the source's exact words without quotation marks. **This is plagiarism.**

Suppose the student included a parenthetical citation at the end of the passage, like this:

Governments have tried to reduce cigarette consumption by banning cigarette ads, banning smoking in public buildings, and by issuing public service advertisements (Rousseau, 1996).

Is that plagiarism?

Yes, it is. The student gave proper credit to the source in a parenthetical citation at the end of the passage, but the student used the source's exact words without quote marks. **This is plagiarism.**

## What's Your Best Bet for Avoiding Plagiarism?

Purdue University (2006) cautions students to **cite a source** whenever they do any of the following:

- ◆ Use quotation marks around another person's exact words, whether spoken or written.
- ◆ Use another person's words as the basis for their own words (paraphrasing).
- ◆ Build their ideas around another person's ideas, opinions, or theories.
- ◆ Refer to facts, statistics, graphs, or information not considered common knowledge.

## **Plagiarism: A Web of Temptation**

Indiana University (2006) recognizes that the Internet and World Wide Web have made plagiarism easier for students who would rather take the easy way out or who don't know any better. IU's Web site acknowledges that the Web "has become a more popular source of information for student papers, and (that) many questions have arisen about how to avoid plagiarizing these sources."

The rule is simple: If you would cite material taken from a book, periodical or other scholarly source, you must cite the same material when it is taken from a Web or Internet source.

Selecting vast sections of text from one or more Web sites, pasting them onto a page in your word-processing software, and then slapping a title and your name on top is one of the most egregious — and obvious — examples of global plagiarism off the World Wide Web. However, you'd be surprised how many students do just that. Don't be one of them.

## **What Will Happen If You Plagiarize and Get Caught?**

The consequences of plagiarism can be severe. Each faculty member in the SUU Communication Department deals with plagiarists in his or her own way. Some professors seek to use plagiarism as a "teaching moment" and assess an "F" for a plagiarized assignment only. However, a few other professors recognize plagiarism for the academic crime it is and assess an "F" for the entire course.

Some students believe that the risk of being caught is worth the "reward" of stealing someone else's academic labor, but they deceive themselves. True, some professors are more vigilant than others, and it's possible to cheat and get away with it. Nevertheless, plagiarism is a dangerous trap to fall into. It is habit-forming, and at some point down the road, you're bound to get caught. Getting caught and receiving an "F" in college is one thing, but getting caught in the workforce, being fired, and becoming a pariah in your profession is quite another.

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