

WHAT IS PLAGIARISM?*

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According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to “plagiarize” means:

to take and use as one's own the thoughts, writings, or inventions of another person; to copy literary work or ideas improperly or without acknowledgement; to pass off as one's own the thoughts or work of another.

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 US and Canadian 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 medium (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 a few words but copying the sentence structure of a source without giving credit.

Changing the words of an original source is *not* sufficient to prevent plagiarism:

If you have retained the essential idea of an original source, and have not cited it, then no matter how drastically you may have altered its context or presentation, **you have still plagiarized**.

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.

TYPES OF PLAGIARISM

I. SOURCES NOT CITED

“The Ghost Writer”

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

“The Photocopy”

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

“The Potluck Paper”

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.

“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.

“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 (including STU).

II. SOURCES CITED

“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.

“The Misinformer”

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

“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.

“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.

UNINTENTIONAL PLAGIARISM

No honest person would walk out of a neighbour's 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 ignorance of the proper forms of citation.

Plagiarism vs. Paraphrasing

Many students have trouble knowing when they are paraphrasing and when they are plagiarizing. Students may inadvertently plagiarize by not changing the original enough.

"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. Documenting your sources using different coloured pens and "post-it" notes 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. It is vital to keep careful track of references during the note-taking stage. You may be eager to focus entirely on the content of your research, but how you handle your reference material is a significant part of every assignment.

"I thought we didn't have to cite the source of facts"

Because the internet makes information so readily available, students may find it difficult to tell the difference between "common knowledge" you are free to use, and original ideas which are the intellectual property of others. When in doubt, cite sources.

Confusion About Expectations

Students may not be aware of what proper research requires. You may think you are being asked simply to report critical commentary, or to "borrow" from a number of sources to show that you have "done your homework." In either case, it becomes a problem if what you 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." These words have specific meanings in academic discourse, and they imply a degree of original thought that goes beyond mere "reporting."

THE MLA SUMS UP PLAGIARISM

You have plagiarized if:

- § you took notes that did not distinguish summary and paraphrase from quotation and then you presented wording from the notes as if it were all your own;
- § while browsing the Web, you copied text and pasted it into your paper without quotation marks or without citing the source;
- § you repeated or paraphrased someone's wording without acknowledgment;
- § you took someone's unique or particularly apt phrase without acknowledgment;
- § you paraphrased someone's argument or presented someone's line of thought without acknowledgement;
- § you bought or otherwise acquired a research paper and handed in part or all of it as your own.

You can avoid plagiarism by:

- § making a list of the writers and viewpoints you discovered in your research and using this list to double-check the presentation of material in your paper;
- § keeping the following three categories distinct in your notes: your ideas, your summaries of others' material, and exact wording you copy;
- § identifying the sources of all material you borrow—exact wording, paraphrases, ideas, arguments, and facts;
- § checking with your instructor when you are uncertain about your use of sources.

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