

How to protect yourself from committing plagiarism

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This text is adapted from Prof. Thomas E. Payne's directions for plagiarism, from the University of Oregon, much of which is in turn adapted from the Purdue University Online Writing Lab document entitled "Avoiding Plagiarism." That original can be found at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r_plagiar.html. This use of the lab's material is consistent with their stated acceptable use policy.

Plagiarism is presenting the intellectual work of others as if it is your own. It is considered to be the worst infringement of academic integrity, right alongside cheating on exams. In all reputable universities worldwide, plagiarism is grounds for expulsion from the university. Students put their academic and economic future in jeopardy when they commit plagiarism. Plagiarism should be taken more seriously by the University of Cyprus and by your professors. **Note that any student who commits plagiarism in my classes will immediately fail the class.**

In this handout I would like to present a clear definition of what constitutes plagiarism, some inherent tensions that make plagiarism tempting and easy to fall into, and finally, give some concrete guidelines on how to avoid it.

What is plagiarism?

Actions that may be considered plagiarism fall along a continuum, from the most deliberate to the possibly accidental. Of course the most deliberate forms of plagiarism are the most serious. However, there are more and less serious forms of "accidental" plagiarism as well. We will see some examples following this introduction.

- Most deliberate** - Buying, stealing or borrowing someone else's paper, assignment, test, or research plan or results.
Hiring someone to write your paper.
Writing a paper in one language and hiring someone to translate it into another language, and presenting the translation as your original work.
Copying whole sentences or substantive sentence fragments without citing the source.
- Possibly accidental** - Presenting ideas that you got from others, in your own words, without citing the source.
Building on the ideas of others without citing the source.
Using a source too closely when paraphrasing.
Improperly or imprecisely citing a source.

Since professors may not distinguish between deliberate and accidental plagiarism, the only way to avoid being accused of plagiarism is to make sure you always give credit where it is due. This means telling your readers whenever you are making reference to something someone else has published, written, emailed, drew, or mentioned in a personal conversation.

Why does “accidental” plagiarism occur?

Accidental plagiarism often occurs because of a set of conflicting pressures that students and other scholars find themselves under. These conflicting pressures include the following:

On the one hand scholars must...	On the other hand they also should...
... demonstrate that they know what other authors have said.	... contribute something new.
... appeal to experts and authorities.	... improve upon, disagree and criticize experts and authorities.
... cite the source of all ideas that come from others.	... come up with their own brilliant ideas in a short period of time.
... write in fluent “academic” English.	... use their own words and “voice.”

How to choose when to give someone else credit and when not to

Citing sources too often makes your writing cumbersome and hard to follow. It also may give the impression that you have no new ideas of your own. Furthermore, too many long quotes from external sources can cause you (and your reader) to lose track of the main point of your argument and give the impression that you have not thought through or understood the topic of the paper yourself. The following are general principles about when to cite and when not to cite sources:

You need to cite a source...	No need to cite a source...
When you are using or referring to somebody else’s words or ideas from a magazine, book, journal, newspaper, song, TV program, movie, web page, computer program, letter, advertisement, or any other public source.	When you are describing your own experiences, your own observations, your own insights, your own thoughts, your own conclusions about a subject.
When you use information gained through interviewing another person, either in person, by e-mail, telephone or letter.	When you are using “common knowledge” (see below) — folklore, common sense observations, shared information within your field of study or cultural group.
When you copy the exact words or a “unique phrase” from somewhere.	When you are compiling generally accepted facts.
When you reprint any diagrams, illustrations, tables, charts, and pictures.	When you are describing your own findings or experimental results.

What does it mean to “critically evaluate” the work of an esteemed professional scholar?

Anyone can cut and paste quotes from a website or other published document. Writing a good academic paper requires the ability to synthesize and critically evaluate previous scholarship, rather than simply repeat what others have said. An excellent paper is internally consistent – it follows a clear, and well designed plan. If you borrow whole sections from someone else’s writing (even with proper citation), the result becomes a muddled combination of the original author’s plan and your own plan. Your reader is likely to become confused about what you are trying to say.

Synthesis: “Synthesis” means a “bringing together.” When you write an academic paper of any sort you are “bringing together” the ideas of several different people, including possibly:

1. One or more scholars who have written on the topic before.
2. Your professor.
3. General knowledge available to all members of your discipline or other culture group.
4. Yourself.

Different scholars use different terms to describe the same or similar concepts. For example, suppose scholar A uses the term “subject” to refer to “Lucretia” in a sentence like:

“Lucretia ate my turnips.”

Let’s say scholar B uses the term “agent” to refer to the same clause element, while scholar C uses the term “actor,” and scholar D just calls it a “noun.” What do *you* do?

First you must understand the concepts that all previous scholars intend by their use of terminology. Are they using different terms to describe the same concept, or is each one focusing on different characteristics of one complex notion?

Then you must decide for the purposes of your paper, which of the concepts intended (not necessarily the terms used) by each previous scholar is most appropriate for the purposes of your work. Then you must define this concept clearly in your own words.

This is the essence of synthesis – creating something new (and hopefully beautiful) out of the bringing together of thoughts and ideas of others.

Critical evaluation: “How can I critically evaluate the intellectual work of someone who has published famous books and is a recognized senior scholar in my field?” This is a question often asked by university students. Part of the answer to this is in the definition of the word “critically.” Another part of the answer involves the notion of “synthesis,” discussed above.

“Critical evaluation” in an academic sense does not necessarily mean “belittle,” “treat with contempt” or “find all kinds of errors in something.” It simply means clarify what range of data the previous research accounts for, and what additional data need to be accounted for. For example, Einstein’s theory of relativity accounted for the bending of neutron rays as they entered the earth’s atmosphere (among many other facts). It didn’t account for certain properties of sub-atomic particles. Another theory, quantum mechanics, was needed for that. Physicists who developed quantum mechanics needed to critically evaluate Einstein’s theory in order to understand a wider range of facts. This didn’t mean they were being “disrespectful” of Einstein, or belittling his work. To the contrary, they would never have been able to make their important contributions if Einstein hadn’t gone before them. It is the highest form of intellectual compliment to have younger scholars take your work and extend it in new directions.

Looking at it from the other side, it does not in the slightest detract from the work of the younger scholars that they based their research on that of Einstein. They needed to know (and cite) the previous research well enough to know where and how it could be extended. All good researchers stand on the shoulders of others, so there is no reason to “hide” this fact.

Knowledge is created when minds come together. Different people look at the same phenomenon from different perspectives. No one person has all of the truth about anything. For this reason, synthesis is absolutely important in the construction of a beautiful piece of writing. Creatively “bringing together” different perspectives, including your own, is what will make for an excellent piece of writing.

How to protect yourself from plagiarism in the writing process

Here are some guidelines on how to avoid plagiarism in the research and writing process:

	Action during the writing process	Appearance on the finished product
When researching, note-taking, and interviewing	<p>Mark everything that is someone else's words with a big Q (for quote) or with big quotation marks.</p> <p>Indicate in your notes which ideas are taken from sources (S) and which are your own insights (ME).</p> <p>Record all of the relevant documentation information in your notes.</p>	<p>Proofread and check with your notes (or photocopies of sources) to make sure that anything taken from your notes is acknowledged in some combination of the ways listed below:</p> <p>In-text citation</p> <p>Footnotes</p> <p>Bibliography</p> <p>Quotation marks</p> <p>Indirect quotations</p>
When paraphrasing and summarizing	<p>First, write your paraphrase and summary without looking at the original text, so you rely only on your memory.</p> <p>Next, check your version with the original for content, accuracy, and mistakenly borrowed phrases.</p>	<p>Begin your summary with a statement giving credit to the source: According to Jonathan Kozol, ...</p> <p>Put any unique words or phrases that you cannot change, or do not want to change, in quotation marks: ... "savage inequalities" exist throughout our educational system (Kozol).</p>
When quoting directly	<p>Keep the person's name near the quote in your notes, and in your paper.</p> <p>Select those direct quotes that make the most impact in your paper – too many direct quotes may lessen your credibility and interfere with your style.</p>	<p>Mention the person's name either at the beginning of the quote, in the middle, or at the end.</p> <p>Put quotation marks around the text that you are quoting.</p> <p>Indicate added phrases in brackets ([]) and omitted text with ellipses (...).</p>
When quoting indirectly	<p>Keep the person's name near the text in your notes, and in your paper.</p> <p>Rewrite the key ideas using different words and sentence structures than the original text.</p>	<p>Mention the person's name either at the beginning of the information, or in the middle, or at that end.</p> <p>Double check to make sure that your words and sentence structures are different than the original text.</p>

Deciding if Something is “Common Knowledge”

Material is probably common knowledge if...

- You find the same information undocumented in at least five other sources.
- You think it is information that your readers will already know.
- You think a person could easily find the information with general reference sources.

Exercises for Practice

Below are some situations in which writers need to decide whether or not they are running the risk of plagiarizing. In the Y/N column, indicate if you would need to document (Yes), or if it is not necessary to provide quotation marks or a citation (No). If you do need to give the source credit in some way, explain how you would handle it. If not, explain why.

Situation	y/n	If yes, what do you do? If no, why?
1. You are writing new insights about your own experiences.		
2. You are using an editorial from your school's newspaper with which you disagree.		
3. You use some information from a source without ever quoting it directly.		
4. You have no other way of expressing the exact meaning of a text without using the original source verbatim.		
5. You mention that many people in your discipline belong to a certain organization.		
6. You want to begin your paper with a story that one of your classmates told about her experiences in Bosnia.		
7. The quote you want to use is too long, so you leave out a couple of phrases.		
8. You really like the particular phrase somebody else made up, so you use it.		

Sources used in preparing this handout

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Swales, John, and Christine B. Feak. *Academic Writing for Graduate Students*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

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And this is another very good website, with the table of contents copied below the link:

<http://gervaseprograms.georgetown.edu/hc/plagiarism.html>

1. They Said It So Much Better. Shouldn't I Use Their Words?
2. What is a Paraphrase, Anyway?
3. My Friends Get Stuff From the Internet
4. I Don't Have Time to Do It Right
5. A Citation is Not a Traffic Ticket
6. What If My Roommate Helped Me?
7. In My Country/High School, Using Someone Else's Work is a Sign of Respect
8. I Really Didn't Do It!
9. What About Copyright?
10. Examples of Plagiarism
11. Acknowledging Work of Others

The Georgetown people have also prepared a printable version of this page:

http://gervaseprograms.georgetown.edu/hc/plagiarism_print.html