

Avoiding Plagiarism Quick Guide

I. Defining Plagiarism

What exactly *is* plagiarism? Unfortunately, there is no one agreed-upon definition! So, let's start with a good, general definition, one sufficiently **broad** to account for what most people consider plagiarism most of the time:

Plagiarism is intentionally representing the intellectual property of another—including words, images, or ideas—as one's own in any academic exercise. Plagiarism may occur on any paper, report, or other work submitted to fulfill course requirements. Plagiarism includes:

1. *The failure to properly cite sources.*
2. *The failure to properly paraphrase sources.*
3. *Submitting, as one's own, work done by or copied from another, including work done by a fellow student, work done by a previous student, or work done by anyone other than the student responsible for the assignment.*

Now, notice a few things about this definition:

1. Plagiarism can occur on **any** academic assignment, not just papers.
2. Plagiarism is not limited to copying other peoples' work, but includes failing to cite your sources properly or revising others' work to make it **sound like** your own.
3. If you don't use quotation marks correctly, you **are** plagiarizing! If you don't use footnotes correctly, you **are** plagiarizing! If you copy someone else's work and try to mask it by changing words or sentences around, you **are** plagiarizing!

II. Avoiding Plagiarism

Avoiding plagiarism is not as hard as it sounds. It just requires having the right mindset and using skills you already know about. Additionally, avoiding plagiarism takes practice. Every assignment is an opportunity for you to ask yourself, am I doing the right thing? Am I modeling ethical behavior in my course work? If you want to avoid plagiarism, here are some things you should do:

Commit Yourself to Not Plagiarizing!

The first step to avoiding plagiarism is to decide that you are not going to do it! With the proliferation of the Internet, plagiarizing online texts is easier and more tempting than ever. Most plagiarism occurs just because it is so easy, but that doesn't make it right. Procrastination is not an excuse for plagiarism. Rather, avoiding plagiarism is a reason not to procrastinate! Commit yourself to learning how to quote, cite, and paraphrase your sources correctly, and make this part of your scholarly practice.

Cite Your Sources!

The second step to avoiding plagiarism is to make sure you give credit where credit is due. The way you do this is by using a citation style. The Modern Language Association and American Psychological Association, among others, provide detailed guides for how to cite sources, and you should check with your instructor what citation style he or she wants you to use. Regardless of style, however, here is a brief list of what needs to be documented in most assignments:

- When you copy exact words or a unique phrase.
- Words or ideas presented in a magazine, book, newspaper, song, TV program, movie, web page, computer program, letter, advertisement, or any other medium.
- Information you gain through interviewing or conversing with another person, face to face, over the phone, or in writing.
- When you reprint any diagrams, illustrations, charts, pictures, or other visual materials.
- When you reuse or repost any electronically-available media, including images, audio, and video.

On the other hand, certain things do not require documentation, including:

- Writing your own lived experiences, your own observations and insights, your own thoughts, and your own conclusions.
- When you are writing up your own results obtained through lab or field experiments.
- When you use your own artwork, digital photographs, video, audio, etc.
- When you are using "common knowledge," things like folklore, common sense observations, myths, urban legends, and historical events (but not historical documents).
- When you are using generally-accepted facts, e.g., pollution is bad for the environment, including facts that are accepted within a particular discourse community (e.g., in the field of composition studies, "writing is a process" is a generally-accepted fact).

Generally speaking, you may regard something as common knowledge if you find the same information undocumented in at least five credible sources. Additionally, it may be common knowledge if you think the information you're presenting is something your readers already know. But if in doubt, cite!

Quote Your Sources Correctly!

The next important step to avoiding plagiarism is to make sure you are quoting your sources correctly. Plagiarism often occurs because writers are unsure of how to present quotations in their writing, thus making others' words appear as if they were their own. Here is some good general advice for avoiding this:

- Keep the original author's name in the same sentence as the quotation.
- According to the style guide you are using, identify the quotation with quotation marks or with a block quotation.
- Quote no more material than is necessary. If a short phrase from a source will suffice, don't quote an entire paragraph.
- Use ellipsis marks (...) to shorten quotations when you do not need an entire sentence or passage.
- When providing context for a quotation, place added words in brackets, []. However, do not editorialize or change the meaning of a quotation by adding words to it. Express your **own** opinions in your **own** writing. For example:

Right: Kozol claims there are "savage inequalities" in our educational system, which is obvious.

Wrong: Kozol claims there are "[obvious] savage inequalities" in our educational system.

- Limit your use of direct quotations. Using too many direct quotations weakens your credibility (as though you have nothing to say yourself), as well as it will interfere with your own, personal style.

Paraphrase Your Sources!

In addition to quoting sources correctly, you need to paraphrase effectively. A paraphrase is a restatement of another author's writing in your own words. Paraphrasing is often the most effective way to present material you have located through your research. Why is it so effective? Because paraphrasing allows you to maintain a consistency of style and voice in your writing, while at the same time benefiting from the authority that outside sources lend to your argument.

Paraphrasing is the best way to avoid one of the biggest complaints that instructors have about students' writing: that it reads like a cut-and-paste scrapbook of quotations from other people. Paraphrasing shows that you are in control of your paper; you understand what you have read and you can use it to make a strong case. Paraphrasing, if done correctly, can also help you to avoid plagiarism.

Sometimes writers commit plagiarism accidentally because they do not know how to paraphrase correctly. To be acceptable, a paraphrase must do all three of the following:

1. Restate the information and ideas from the source accurately—whether it is a print or electronic source.
2. Use your own language and style, not the original author's. It is okay to mix some key phrases from the original source into the paraphrase, *but only if* you put those words or phrases in quotation marks. As Booth, Colomb, and Williams put it, "you plagiarize when you use words so close to those in your source that, if your work were placed next to the source, it would be obvious that you could not have written what you did without the source at your elbow."
3. Identify clearly the original author and source of the paraphrased material.

Booth, Colomb, and Williams offer the following advice for how to avoid plagiarizing in a paraphrase:

"Be conscious of where your eyes are as you put words on paper or on a screen. If your eyes are on your source at the same moment your fingers are flying across the keyboard, you risk doing something that weeks, months, even years later could result in your public humiliation. . . . You are least likely to plagiarize inadvertently if, as you write, you keep your eyes not on your source but on the screen or on your own page, and you report what your source has to say after those words have filtered through your own understanding of them." *The Craft of Research* by Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 170.

Proofread!

Unfortunately, a good bit of plagiarism occurs just because we do not give ourselves time to look over and check what we have written. **Not** proofreading can leave quotation and citation errors in your assignment that are tantamount to plagiarism when you turn it in! Again, sloppiness is no excuse because we all **know** when we should be giving more time to proofreading our assignments. Proofreading gives us time to check ourselves, and ask whether we are confident about how we have treated our sources.

Ask a Librarian or Your Professor!

Last but not least, if in doubt, ask a librarian or your professor! Just as it is your job to avoid plagiarism, it is our job to help you understand what it is and how to avoid it. There is no reason to stay in the dark, and asking first is always better than paying consequences later!

Use the Library's Online Resources and Tutorials!

The library is constantly expanding its online resources for learning how to use citation manuals and style guides, analyzing websites, and how to avoid plagiarism. Check us out at our website, available by following the Library links at www.bennett.edu!