

Plagiarism

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

- 1) to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own
- 2) to use (another's production) without crediting the source
- 3) to commit literary theft
- 4) 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. In the United States and many other countries, 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 media (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

ATTENTION! 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

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 in the fight to prevent it.

I. 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.

II. 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.

What is citation?

A “citation” is the way you tell your readers that certain material in your work came from another source. It also gives your readers the information necessary to find that source again, including:

- ✓ information about the author
- ✓ the title of the work
- ✓ the name and location of the company that published your copy of the source
- ✓ the date your copy was published
- ✓ the page numbers of the material you are borrowing

Why should I cite sources?

Giving credit to the original author by citing sources is the only way to use other people’s work without plagiarizing. But there are a number of other reasons to cite sources:

1. Citations are extremely helpful to anyone who wants to find out more about your ideas and where they came from.
2. Not all sources are good or right – your own ideas may often be more accurate or interesting than those of your sources. Proper citation will keep you from taking the rap for someone else’s bad ideas.
3. Citing sources shows the amount of research you’ve done.
4. Citing sources strengthens your work by lending outside support to your ideas.

Doesn’t citing sources make my work seem less original?

Not at all. On the contrary, citing sources actually helps your reader distinguish your ideas from those of your sources. This will actually emphasize the originality of your own work.

When do I need to cite?

Whenever you borrow words or ideas, you need to acknowledge their source. The following situations almost always require citation:

- ✓ Whenever you use quotes
- ✓ Whenever you paraphrase
- ✓ Whenever you use an idea that someone else has already expressed
- ✓ Whenever you make specific reference to the work of another
- ✓ Whenever someone else’s work has been critical in developing your own ideas.

How do I cite sources?

This depends on what type of work you are writing, how you are using the borrowed material, and the expectations of your instructor.

First, you have to think about how you want to *identify your sources*. If your sources are very important to your ideas, you should mention the author and work in a sentence that introduces your citation. If, however, you are only citing the source to make a minor point, you should use parenthetical citation. For help with this, ask your teacher or consult either your MLA resource on the WV splash page, or your planner.

There are also different *forms* of citation for different disciplines. For example, when you cite sources in a psychology paper you would probably use a different form of citation than you might in a paper for an English class. We will be using MLA citation in English class.

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Preventing Plagiarism: Student Resources

In a research paper, you have to come up with your own original ideas while at the same time making reference to work that's already been done by others. But:

- ✓ How can you tell where their ideas end and your own begin?
- ✓ What's the proper way to integrate sources in your paper?
- ✓ If you change some of what an author said, do you still have to cite that person?

Confusion about the answers to these questions often leads to **plagiarism**. If you have similar questions, or are concerned about preventing plagiarism, we recommend using the checklist below.

A. Consult with your instructor

Have questions about plagiarism? If you can't find the answers on our site, or are unsure about something, you should ask your instructor. He or she will most likely be very happy to answer your questions. You can also check out the [guidelines for citing sources properly](#). If you follow them, and the rest of the advice on this page, you should have no problems with plagiarism.

B. Plan your paper

Planning your paper well is the first and most important step you can take toward preventing plagiarism. If you know you are going to use other sources of information, you need to plan **how** you are going to include them in your paper. This means working out a balance between the ideas you have taken from other sources and your own, original ideas. Writing an outline, or coming up with a thesis statement in which you clearly formulate an argument *about* the information you find, will help establish the boundaries between your ideas and those of your sources.

C. Take Effective Notes

One of the best ways to prepare for a research paper is by taking thorough notes from all of your sources, so that you have much of the information organized before you begin writing. On the other hand, poor note-taking can lead to many problems – including improper citations and misquotations, both of which are forms of plagiarism! To avoid confusion about your sources, try using different colored fonts, pens, or pencils for each one, and make sure you clearly distinguish your own ideas from those you found elsewhere. Also, get in the habit of marking page numbers, and make sure that you record bibliographic information or web addresses for every source right away – finding them again later when you are trying to finish your paper can be a nightmare!

D. When in doubt, cite sources

Of course you want to get credit for your own ideas. And you don't want your instructor to think that you got all of your information from somewhere else. But if it is unclear whether an idea in your paper really came from you, or whether you got it from somewhere else and just changed it a little, **you should always cite your source**. Instead of weakening your paper and making it seem like you have fewer original ideas, this will actually strengthen your paper by: 1) showing that you are not just copying other ideas but are processing and adding to them, 2) lending outside support to the ideas that are completely yours, and 3) highlighting the originality of your ideas by making clear distinctions between them and ideas you have gotten elsewhere.

E. Make it clear **who** said **what**

Even if you cite sources, ambiguity in your phrasing can often disguise the real source of any given idea, causing inadvertent plagiarism. Make sure when you mix your own ideas with those of your sources that you always clearly distinguish them. If you are discussing the ideas of more than one person, watch out for confusing pronouns. For example, imagine you are talking about Harold Bloom's discussion of James Joyce's opinion of Shakespeare, and you write: "He brilliantly portrayed the situation of a writer in society at that time." Who is the "He" in this sentence? Bloom, Joyce, or Shakespeare? Who is the "writer": Joyce, Shakespeare, or one of their characters? Always make sure to distinguish **who** said **what**, and give credit to the right person.

F. Know how to Paraphrase:

A paraphrase is a restatement **in your own words** of someone else's ideas. Changing a few words of the original sentences does NOT make your writing a legitimate paraphrase. You must change **both** the **words** and the **sentence structure** of the original, **without** changing the content. Also, you should keep in mind that paraphrased passages **still require citation** because the ideas came from another source, even though you are putting them in your own words. The purpose of paraphrasing is not to make it seem like you are drawing less directly from other sources or to reduce the number of quotations in your paper. It is a common misconception among students that you need to hide the fact that you rely on other sources. Actually it is advantageous to highlight the fact that other sources support your own ideas. Using quality sources to support your ideas makes them seem stronger and more valid. Good paraphrasing makes the ideas of the original source fit smoothly into your paper, emphasizing the most relevant points and leaving out unrelated information.

G. Evaluate Your Sources

Not all sources on the web are worth citing – in fact, many of them are just plain wrong. So how do you tell the good ones apart? For starters, make sure you know the **author(s)** of the page, where they got their information, and when they wrote it (getting this information is also an important step in avoiding plagiarism!). Then you should determine how credible you feel the source is: how well they support their ideas, the quality of the writing, the accuracy of the information provided, etc. We recommend using Portland Community College's "[rubrics for evaluating web pages](#)" as an easy method of testing the credibility of your sources.

Good luck and happy writing!

