

PLAGIARISM: How to Define and Avoid It

N. L. Gleason, Pierre LaCledé Honors College

Plagiarism is a serious academic offense and a growing concern among educators. The Pierre LaCledé Honors College Handbook states that "plagiarized course work will be treated as each case seems to deserve, but worked judged to be substantially plagiarized will normally be given a grade of 'F'. For apparently innocent offenses, you may be permitted (at the discretion of the instructor) to rewrite and resubmit the essay. But plagiarism can incur much more serious penalties than that. . ." (Handbook 4). No one doubts the seriousness of plagiarism, and most teachers agree that the issue has become more complicated due to the availability of electronic sources. In an effort to eliminate plagiarism, it is necessary to define it in detail, understand the ways to avoid it, and then take the necessary steps to document sources correctly when writing a paper.

What is plagiarism? Briefly, it is using another author's words or ideas without giving credit to that author. According to Dr. Colin Gordon, Department of History of the University of British Columbia, "plagiarism is intellectual theft. Any use of another author's research, ideas, or language without proper attribution may be considered plagiarism". Plagiarism may be intentional or unintentional; unfortunately, the results of both types of plagiarism may be the same. Understanding the different types of plagiarism and ways to avoid them will assist student writers.

Complete and Intentional Plagiarism

Complete and intentional plagiarism occurs when a student submits an essay that has been written by someone else. The original source may be an article, another student's essay, a chapter from a book, information from the Internet, or a purchased essay. Yes, unfortunately, there are those companies that make money by selling papers to students. Since the writing in all of these cases is the work of another individual, this is academic dishonesty—plagiarism.

Other more subtle methods of plagiarism exist. In an effort to explain them and the ways to avoid them, the following passage will be used. Please note that MLA (Modern Language Association) style of documentation will be used in each of the examples; however, at the close of this document other available style sheets will be discussed. This passage has been taken from John Trimble's book Writing with Style.

"The chief difficulty with writing is that it's a one-way process. You can't see your reader's face, you can't hear him, you can't get any feedback from him whatsoever. The novice writer, as we have seen, is oblivious to this handicap. The skilled writer, though, is supersensitive to it; but he overcomes it by actively *imagining* a reader—in fact, imagining many different readers—just as an experienced TV newscaster, looking into the camera's unwinking eye actively imagines a viewer" (Trimble 22).

Word-for-word Plagiarism

Word-for-word plagiarism occurs when a student lifts portions of another author's text and fails to give credit to the author by correct documentation. Using MLA, the writer must place quotation marks at the beginning and the end of the borrowed text and place in parenthesis the author's last name and page number of the borrowed information followed by a period. The following is the correct way to document the example:

"The chief difficulty with writing is that it's a one-way process. You can't see your reader's face, you can't hear him, you can't get any feedback from him whatsoever" (Trimble 22).

If a writer copies substantial portions of a source's work word-for-word yet omits words, phrases, or sentences, and does not document correctly, it is plagiarism. To correctly document in this situation, the writer must place quotation marks at the beginning and the end of the borrowed text, insert ellipses where words have been deleted, and place in parenthesis the author's last name and page number of the borrowed information followed by a period. The following is the correct way to document the example:

"The chief difficulty with writing is that it's a one-way process. You can't see your reader's face . . . you can't get any feedback from him whatsoever. The novice writer . . . is oblivious to this handicap" (Trimble 22).

The Mosaic or Patchwork Plagiarism

When a writer uses words or phrases from the source but does not document them, it is plagiarism. "In many cases, a student will lift ideas, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs from a variety of sources and 'stitch' them together into an essay. These situations often seem difficult to assess. Most essays, after all, are attempts to bring together a range of sources and arguments. But the line between plagiarism and the original work is not difficult to draw" (Gordon). When the weave of borrowed work and the student's words becomes too complex to decipher, the writer might be wise to revise the draft and make the borrowed material more obvious to the reader.

To document segments of quotations correctly, the writer must place quotation marks around the borrowed material and include the author's last name and page number in parenthesis at the end of the sentence in which the material appears. It should be noted that if the author's name is mentioned in a signal phrase within the sentence, the page number is sufficient when using the MLA style sheet. The following are correct examples of the mosaic or patchwork borrowing:

According to writing theorist John Trimble, writing presents a challenge because it is a "one-way process" (22).

Or

Writing is difficult because "you can't see your reader's face, you can't hear him, you can't get any feedback" (Trimble 22).

Or

An experienced writer knows this about the process and "overcomes it by actively *imagining* a reader" (Trimble 22).

Paraphrasing and Plagiarism

Restating the text in different words, usually sentence-by-sentence, is paraphrasing. When a writer paraphrases or puts the ideas in his or her own words without proper documentation, it is plagiarism. To correctly document paraphrased material, the writer must place the author's last name and page number in parenthesis at the close of the material. Please note that quotation marks are not needed when a writer paraphrases borrowed ideas:

The main challenge in writing is that the writer does not see the reader. In fact, the writer receives no input from the audience. The beginning writer doesn't realize this and may be unable to overcome this challenge. On the other hand, the experienced writer addresses it by visualizing not one, but many, readers. In short, the seasoned writer invents or imagines an audience (Trimble 22).

Summarizing and Plagiarism

A summary is a short version of the original. It may state the major points and omit some of the supporting details, or it may state a few of the supporting details in a way that implies the major points. In any case, the summary often causes student writers the most problems. Like the paraphrase, the summary must be documented correctly by including the name of the author and page number in parenthesis at the close of the summarized segment. Note that quotation marks are not needed what a writer summarizes a passage.

A main difficulty in writing is the absence of a reader or the unknown audience. The writer can't see or hear the reader. Unlike beginning writers, the experienced writer overcomes this difficulty by imagining many different readers (Trimble 22).

Summaries will vary in style and detail from writer to writer. There are many variations of summaries and methods of integrating them into a writer's text; however, credit must be given to the source writer for the ideas and details of the original material.

Common Knowledge

Though a writer must always document a source's exact words or ideas, there are ideas that nobody "owns" and for which no one deserves credit. These ideas or facts are generally known by the audience and need not be documented. That Columbus discovered America, that poverty is a global concern, need not be documented. It is not difficult to "draw the distinction between original and thoroughly plagiarized work, but the 'grey areas' between these extremes are more vexing" (Gordon). As Gordon suggests it is true that common knowledge can be difficult to determine in some cases. When in doubt, the student should discuss the issue with the teacher. If the student remains uncertain, it is wise to document the source correctly. The following pointers will assist student writers in issues of documentation, research, and writing.

Documentation

When a writer has borrowed any words or ideas, correct documentation is required. The preceding examples illustrate the internal citation requirements and have been given using the MLA format. In addition to the internal citations shown above, MLA style requires a Works Cited page. Various handbooks outline the specific requirements for many types of sources that writers may use. The following is the Works Cited entry for the borrowed examples used in this document.

Trimble, John. Writing with Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing. Englewood Cliff, NJ:

Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975.

Please note that the citation is double-spaced, and it would not be typed in bold lettering; this was done for emphasis purposes of this instructional handout.

Documentation Styles

There are several styles used in academic writing. Teachers usually indicate the required style sheet for courses based on the discipline, requirements for the class, etc. These are the most widely used styles:

CMS: Chicago Manual Style—Uses the footnote or endnote style.

MLA: Modern Language Association—Uses in-text citations and a Works Cited page.

This is used primarily in the humanities disciplines and has been illustrated in this handout.

APA: American Psychological Association—In-text style for sciences and social sciences

CBE: Council of Biology Editors—In-text style for sciences and social sciences

In some cases, an instructor may require students to cite using a code citation or the ayp approach, which includes the author, year and page number. Students should check with the instructors for more information on these two forms of documentation (Harvey 35-42).

Lastly, some instructors may require a style not listed above. In that case, the student writer should confer with the teacher for specific requirements. In all cases, students should ask instructors specific questions regarding documentation requirements.

Research Suggestions

Many mistakes in borrowing information or ideas correctly may occur during the research stage of writing. Taking accurate notes, complete with full publication information, is essential for all writers. Students must distinguish between their ideas and the ideas of others. It is useful to prewrite about topics before beginning research. It may also be helpful to take word-for-word notes. Once a writer paraphrases in the research stage, it can become more difficult to adequately represent the original ideas, and if notes are paraphrased, it is impossible to include a direct quotation later without returning to the actual source. However, others may suggest that translating borrowed material during the research process is helpful. If students elect to do this, then making note of the full publication information and page numbers is vital.

When students begin writing the first draft, it helps to organize the essay "in an original manner" (Gordon). If a writer begins by imitating a source, it makes it much more difficult to break from that source's pattern of argument. Gordon suggests that "as you weave the ideas and language of others into your work, make clear choices about the use of quoted material and don't mess around with close paraphrases." This is useful advice. Having a clear outline or pattern of development before writing a draft, assists the writer in developing an original approach to a topic. Don't make documentation a game of trying to "get by" with using another's writing and ideas without giving accurate credit. It is necessary to take the extra step in drafting an essay. Once the draft is complete, it is useful to highlight all of the passages that summarize, paraphrase or directly quote phrases, sentences, or paragraphs. Then, ask the following questions: Have I documented all of the borrowed information and ideas, including summaries and paraphrases? Is there enough of my own work and development in the essay? If the answer is "no" to either question, more work is required.

One other important area of research requires attention: electronic sources. Credibility and correct documentation both present problems. Students must assess the credibility of all of their sources; the Internet is no exception. Just because something appears on-line does not mean that it is reliable. Writers must investigate sources by asking questions about the author, his or her background, previous publications, peer reviews, and availability of supporting research. Scholarly journals usually offer much more assurance of credibility as opposed to popular media sources because journals require peer review boards. Internet sources must be treated with extra caution. Once a writer explores the issue of credibility, correct documentation style for electronic resources can be problematic. Writing the word "Internet" as an internal citation is incorrect and unacceptable. Refer to a recent writing handbook for documentation form for electronic sources or check with your instructor. The following two books provide the most recent information on electronic source documentation; both are available in the office of the Director of Writing.

Harnack, Andrew and Eugene Kleppinger. Online: A Reference Guide to Using Internet Sources.

New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.

Harvey, Gordon. Writing with Sources: A Guide for Students. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1998.

Closing Remarks

Avoiding plagiarism requires work, but it is a vital element of academic achievement. When writing papers, students should not avoid using research because they are unsure about correctly documenting sources. They should discuss research issues with their instructors, use available resources that explain citations, question the credibility of their research sources, and continue to develop their research and writing skills.

Works Cited

Gordon, Colin. <zoology.ubc.ca/bpg/lagiarism.htm> "Plagiarism: What it is, and How to Avoid It."

1999. (20 March 2000).

Harvey, Gordon. Writing with Sources: A Guide for Students. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc.

1998.

Trimble, John. Writing with Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing. Englewood Cliffs, NJ:

Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975.