Avoiding Plagiarism

What is plagiarism? Plagiarism refers to “literary theft,” derived from the colorful Latin root plagiarus, meaning kidnapper or plunderer (OED, s.v. “plagiarism”). The Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) describes plagiarism in plain terms: “In an instructional setting, plagiarism occurs when a writer deliberately uses someone else’s language, ideas, or other original (not common-knowledge) material without acknowledging its source” (WPA, 2003). Research writers need to be familiar with the main types of plagiarism to avoid bad practices.

Types of Plagiarism

Blatant: The easiest type of plagiarism to understand (and avoid) is the act of buying, borrowing, or stealing another person’s entire paper and claiming it as one’s own work. Such plagiarism is an intentional and criminal act of fraud. Consequences range from failure in the class to expulsion from the university, college, or seminary. These severe but just consequences can put an end to a career before it starts.

Failure to Cite Sources: Another type of plagiarism is using someone else’s words or ideas without using an accepted citation style (such as Chicago, MLA, or APA) to give the author credit. A student-writer can avoid this offense by keeping careful track of sources and citing the material gathered from the outside sources. When drafting an essay, a good writer documents source information while writing, either with full information or with partial information, and the writer plans to complete and check citation information at a later stage of the writing process.

Multiple submission: A species of failing to cite sources is double or multiple submission. In academic situations, a student-writer may not simply copy and paste material from one paper to another without the prior written permission of the instructor. When a student is given permission to use his or her prior scholarly work in subsequent research writing, the student must cite his or her previous work as an unpublished paper.

Blurring the Line: Another type of plagiarism involves “attempting to blur the line between one’s own ideas or words and those borrowed from another source” (WPA, 2003). Instead, a writer needs to distinguish carefully which ideas and words derive from other writers. When blurring shows a deliberate attempt to conceal the true source of information, it is an act of intentional plagiarism. When blurring results from a student-writer’s inability to summarize effectively the ideas of others, it is an act of unintentional plagiarism. The safest, most ethical way to avoid plagiarizing in this way is to learn how to (a) introduce sources by naming authors and using punctuation to distinguish (or set off) the source information, (b) summarize authors’ language in one’s own words, and (c) cite carefully all source material.

Patchwriting: Patchwriting consists of piecing together multiple sources of information into a paper that is little more than a quilt composed of other authors’ words and ideas. When writing an essay, one must not rely too heavily on other writers’ words, sentence structures, or ideas, such as paraphrasing too closely another’s paragraphs and line of argument. An ethical writer uses others’ words and ideas as support for his or her own argument. An ethical writer reflects upon and summarizes others’ ideas in his or her own words. Writers avoid patchwriting by developing their own argument, paragraphs, and sentences. What distinguishes unethical patchwriting from ethical use of sources are considerations ranging from argument to sentences to citation.

- **Argument**: A writer should use sources as reasons and evidence to support one’s own argument, rather than taking another writer’s thesis and line of argument.
- **Sentences**: A writer should synthesize and integrate source information into one’s own sentences, rather than slavishly parroting another writer’s language, syntax, and paragraph development.
- **Citation**: A writer should document all sources of borrowed information, also indicating the extent to which one has relied on particular sources.

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Good: Ethical Examples

Below are some examples of ethical ways to use other people’s words and ideas. Many disciplines discourage and frown upon the extensive quotation of sources. So whether the examples of ethical quoting apply to a given student’s project will depend on the discipline and audience expectations of the particular discourse community. The original passage below comes from J. C. Gregory’s The Nature of Laughter (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1924). The examples below employ parenthetical citation style.

Original Passage:

Anger and all aggressive emotions appear in the human being tense for action and remain till the final stroke is made; they perish naturally in the relief of laughter when there is no need to strike and aggression is at an end. The ending of aggression, which is a necessary consequence of laughter, does not necessarily purge the laugher of all hostility nor result in prompt sympathy. But it obviously provides an opportunity for sympathy to enter. (Gregory, 33)

One of the simplest ways to avoid plagiarism is to carefully introduce and cite the above quotation (or a portion of it) in one’s own text. For example, depending on the purpose, a writer might quote and cite the entire passage, summarize and cite the entire passage, or summarize and cite a portion of the quotation and directly quote the rest, as in the following:

Philosopher J. C. Gregory (1924) argues that a bout of laughter reduces tension and hostility in people and “provides an opportunity for sympathy to enter” (33).

A longer summary that attempts to retain much of the original meaning, while citing the source using parenthetical style, follows:

As philosopher J. C. Gregory (1924) contends, laughter relieves anger and aggression that build up in people under stress. Although the laughter may not entirely eliminate these negative emotions, Gregory adds, it may help reduce hostility and open the way to more positive emotions, such as sympathy (33).

Please note, in the second example, the difference in diction and sentence structure between the original and the summary. Also, note that by introducing and correctly citing the author’s name and date of publication, the summary writer gives Gregory credit for all ideas in the passage. By these two techniques of integrating sources, the summary writer avoids patchwriting (explained above).

Bad: Unethical Example

An unethical paraphrase of the second and third sentences in the passage might read as follows:

Anger shows up in a person who tenses for action, and stays until the person finally lashes out. But anger dies in the relief of laughter. The end of aggression, a natural consequence of laughter, does not always purge the one who laughs of all hostility or result in sympathy. But it does give sympathy a chance to enter (Gregory, 1928).

This passage constitutes plagiarism in the forms of blurring the line and patchwriting (explained above). The writer seems to take credit for the words and some ideas but, in fact, has merely replaced a few key words with synonyms; the paraphrase does not vary sufficiently from the original in terms of sentence structure or diction. The writer has not worked hard enough to understand Gregory’s claims in order to write a suitable summary. As a major mistake, then, the paraphrase reflects no contribution in terms of original thinking or writing and therefore constitutes plagiarism. A related mistake consists in neglecting to include the page number in the citation, which is a sign of blurring the line by hiding information.