

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 doing the following:

Cite your 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 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 as if 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.

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.

Take Effective Notes:

One of the best ways to prepare for a paper is by taking thorough notes from all of your sources, so that you have the information organized before you begin writing. 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!

Test your knowledge of plagiarism. Take a plagiarism test at:

https://www.indiana.edu/~istd/plagiarism_test.html

More resources

The LAVC Writing Center handout: [http://www.lavc.edu/0-Kentico-Training/document-library/docs/Plagiarism-\(2\).aspx](http://www.lavc.edu/0-Kentico-Training/document-library/docs/Plagiarism-(2).aspx)

A site devoted to plagiarism: www.plagiarism.org

How to avoid plagiarism from the Online Writing Lab at Purdue University:
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/589/01/>

Guide to recognizing and avoiding plagiarism:
<http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml>