

How to Recognize and Avoid Plagiarism

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Scholarly writing extends human knowledge in ways that may be abstract or practical. It also passes on learning from one generation to the next. Each scholar and researcher is responsible for presenting original work. That work is made credible by identifying things that influence their ideas and conclusions, which may be other research, comments, or artistic expressions. Creative writing adds dimensions to the human experience.

Students are intimately involved with other people's words and ideas: reading them in texts, discussing them in classes, hearing them in lectures, and using them into their own writing. As learners, students participate in scholarship and are thus required to follow the same standards as professionals.

Sharing both ideas and expressions of those ideas is fine, so long as readers and writers at every level follow long-established principles of integrity, originality, and verifiability. These qualities not only acknowledge individual contributions to human knowledge, they reinforce the credibility of scholarship. Plagiarism compromises both the fundamental nature of scholarship, and your learning—and it can cost you big.

What is Plagiarism and Why is it Important?

Plagiarism is using others' ideas or words without clearly acknowledging the source. Boiled down, plagiarism means passing off someone else's work or ideas as your own, whether or not the source is identified. Copying all or part of a Website, document, or presenting an image without a correct citation, constitutes plagiarism.

For a student, turning in a test, paper, or assignment serves as "publication" *and makes an explicit, legally binding claim* of original authorship. Any assignment turned in for a grade or credit that has sections copied from another work is admissible in any court as *prima facia* ("before the fact"—proof of thought before acting) evidence of plagiarism.

Remember this:

- Just like with copyright infringement, there is no "innocent until proven guilty" clause with plagiarism. Simply turning in a paper with your name on it constitutes legal proof of guilt in the case of plagiarism, which makes the act prosecutable, even if the writer claims that it was accidental.
- Plagiarism shares the same burden of proof as copyright infringement—you have to prove your work was original and not copied unfairly, by providing documentation (notes, outlines, drafts, revisions) demonstrating clear progress in the process of creation.

Professionals can lose a job over plagiarism. For a student, accidental plagiarism stemming from careless note-taking or writing can result in academic discipline. Purposeful plagiarism can get you expelled from school. Either one will affect grades and class standing, may compromise collegiate financial aid, and will become part of your permanent student record. Those consequences will affect your career options later in life. Plagiarism may look like an easy way to finish an assignment or show up well as a student, but it is a dangerously expensive educational shortcut. Presenting your original work to readers is a good business decision.

How Writers Avoid Plagiarizing

Avoiding plagiarism is strictly a writer's responsibility, but once you have presented your work to readers, you cannot influence them further about what you have written. Only readers or reviewers decide whether or not a writer has plagiarized another writer. Be careful to leave nothing in any stage of your writing that would raise a question about your work.

To avoid accidental plagiarism in your writing, you must do two things: 1) present your own ideas and expressions (especially when writing about someone else's work); 2) identify the origin whenever you use ideas or words not your own, including things like:

- another person's idea, opinion, or theory
- facts, statistics, graphs, drawings—any pieces of information—that are not common knowledge
- quotations of another person's actual spoken or written words
- paraphrase of another person's spoken or written words

Being smart about how you do research and take notes will help a lot. This tutorial walks you through a series of examples and activities to help you recognize what plagiarism looks like and what strategies you can use to avoid it. Words in **bold** are terms defined at the end of the document.

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Quotation

Quotation is nothing more than including someone else's words in your work, usually by copying them exactly. Wait—isn't that plagiarizing? Well, no. Quoting is a perfectly acceptable practice in scholarship if your use of a quote employs ALL of the following three conditions:

It is short There are no standards for how much text may be quoted, but it is always good practice to quote as little as possible, unless you are including specific textual examples for criticism. Properly quoted material is presented as either an in-text quote, or as a block quote; and lengthy quotes might require **permission**. Consult the style manual your discipline uses to see how block quotes are set and cited.

It is exact Wording in a quote must be exactly as it appears in the source—exactly. The words should not be pulled out of context or “misquoted” by the user. The text you use is indicated as exact or precise—quoted—by putting quotation marks around the section taken directly from the source—“ ”.

It is cited The precise source of a quotation is given in the standard documentation style used by the discipline. Ask about style manuals at the campus writing center or library reference desk.

Learning how to use quoted material is an important skill strengthening good writing.

How to Recognize and Avoid Plagiarism

Some things are **common knowledge** and do not need to be either quoted or cited. Facts that can be found in a variety of places and are likely known by a lot of people are considered common knowledge.

Example A: George W. Bush was elected President of the United States in 2006.

This fact is generally known information and you would not need to document it in a paper. Facts that are not generally known are documented in a **citation**. The citation not only provides a way to prove a writer has done their homework, they are evidence readers use to help them determine whether the fact (and writer) is credible.

Always document a comment, opinion, or interpretation made ABOUT facts.

Example B: Despite serving two terms as president, George W. Bush was popularly elected only once, in 2006.

Example C: According the American Family Leave Coalition's book, *Family Issues and Congress*, President Bush's relationship with Congress has hindered family leave legislation (6).

The first statement, though stated as fact, would be considered opinion or interpretation and should be documented. In the second, the idea that "Bush's relationship with Congress has hindered family leave legislation" is not a fact but an *interpretation*. You would cite the source of that interpretation, as is shown in the example.

A writer may shorten, explain, and sometimes correct quoted material. Any change to a text made by a later writer must be evident to a reader. This can be done in different ways:

Deleted text within a quoted sentence is indicated with an ellipsis.

Example D: The research concluded the reaction provided "clear evidence that . . . the fundamental chemistry of the process was being interrupted," although at what point the interruption occurs remains to be demonstrated (Tinker/Walsh, 3776).

Quotes taken from different part of the same paragraph or page would be quoted separately but cited together.

Example E: Ellis observed that "the decay of the family has long been a favorite theme of social alarmists" but that in a sense they are "completely justified" (Ellis, 21).

Quotes from widely separated parts of a work, or from more than one work are typically quoted AND documented independently.

Example F: The essayist says on one hand that geologic time "is itself only fractional when compared to universe's scale of creation and destruction" but in saying so contradicts himself, having stated earlier that it "is essentially the same scale that bounds the stars and planets" (Smith, 86, 13).

Example G: Citing the report, one city official suggested that "youth are less likely to be involved in violence" because of the program, but another whose more stringent bill was voted down dismisses the report as "hasty conclusions based on inadequate study" (*Gazette-Times*, 2012 Apr 7; *Herald-Tribune*, 2012 Apr 10).

How to Recognize and Avoid Plagiarism

You may insert your comments into a quote by setting off your addition with opening and closing brackets— []. Bracketed text may qualify or explain a point, identify a referent, replace or explain an abbreviation, and sometimes clarify usage or add necessary punctuation for the reader.

Example H: The CEO finally decided “not to file a challenge to the court’s acceptance of *amicus* briefs [comments on legal points filed by parties not involved in the lawsuit]” to counter an assertion that DetCo feared its case was built on inappropriate precedents.

Example I: In the Saturday-evening address his biographer “would not attempt to explain how the reclusive novelist would allow them [the anonymous *Times* reviewer] to go unchallenged.”

Example J: The practitioner was certain that “the case has been properly diagnosed by DSM-IV-TR [*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fourth edition, revised] standards” and that “clinical professionals had followed established standards.”

Example K: In a touching letter to a close friend after the skirmish, the commanding captain admitted being “sikken[ed] by the loss[,] and [he] made a chanct to see his soljurs as thay lay on the feeld of battel.”

Each example above would have a note documenting the source of the quote.

Paraphrasing

A **paraphrase** presents someone else’s ideas, but puts them in your own words. This is probably the skill you will use most often when weaving research sources into your writing as a student. Although you use your own words to paraphrase, you will still acknowledge the source of the information.

Here’s is a piece of ORIGINAL text from pages 16–17 of *The Impending Crisis* by David M. Potter (1976):

Example L: The American victory over Mexico and the acquisition of the Southwest had sealed the triumph of national expansion, but it had also triggered the release of forces of sectional dissention. Much of the national harmony had rested upon the existence of a kind of balance between the northern and southern parts of the United States. The decision to fight the war had disturbed this balance, and the acquisition of a new empire which each section desired to dominate endangered the balance further.

Here is an UNACCEPTABLE paraphrase that would be considered plagiarism:

Example M: Acquiring the Southwest in the war with Mexico had sealed the conquest of national expansion, but it had also prompted forces of sectional dissent. A lot of the national harmony had rested upon the existence of a balance between the southern and northern parts of the country. The presidential decision to fight the conflict had upset this balance, and the acquisition of a new territory which each section desired to dominate threatened the balance even more.

What makes paraphrase in example *M* plagiarism? The passage is considered plagiarism for two reasons:

- the writer has only changed around a few words and phrases, or changed the order of the original’s sentences.
- the writer has failed to cite a source for any of the ideas or facts.

If you do both OR EITHER of these things, you are plagiarizing.

NOTE: The revision (example *M*) is also problematic because some word choices change the sense of the sentence in places (for example, “conquest of national expansion” in the second sentence misses the original’s emphasis on the treaty as a historical high point of national expansionism).

Here is an ACCEPTABLE paraphrase:

Example N: The treaty transferring the Southwest from Mexico to the US presented a new problem for American politics. Prior to the Mexican Cession, Congressional representation of northern and southern states had been reasonably balanced. Each section saw the new territory as a place for their interest to expand, and their interest required political organization and legislative representation favorable to their established interests. Thus, the war’s successful conclusion itself unbalanced the nation (Potter, 16–17).

Why is this passage acceptable? This is acceptable paraphrasing because the writer:

- uses their own words to accurately relay the ideas from the original text
- lets the reader know the source of the information.

Here’s an example of quotation and paraphrase used together, which is also ACCEPTABLE:

Example O: The treaty transferring the Southwest from Mexico “sealed the triumph of national expansion, but it had also triggered the release of forces of sectional dissention.” Prior to the Mexican Cession northern and southern sectional representation had been reasonably balanced in Congress. Each section saw the new territory as a place for their economic patterns to expand. Their interest required adequate political organization and legislative representation. Thus, the “acquisition of a new empire which each section desired to dominate endangered the balance further” (Potter, 16–17).

Why is this passage acceptable? This is acceptable paraphrasing because the writer:

- accurately presents the ideas from the original passage
- gives credit for the ideas in this passage
- indicated which part is taken directly from the source by putting the passages in quotation marks
- cites the source specifically

NOTE: If the writer had used the quoted phrases or sentences in a paper without putting quotation marks around them, they would unquestionably be plagiarizing, even though using only a small portion of the original work. Using another writer’s phrases or sentences without presenting them within quotation marks is considered plagiarism EVEN IF the writer later correctly cites the source of the unmarked phrases or sentences.

Here is one great way to learn paraphrasing and to paraphrase acceptably: read carefully over what you want to paraphrase until you feel you understand it. Cover the text with your hand or close the text so you can’t see any of it (and so aren’t tempted to use the text as a “guide”). Write out the idea in your own words without peeking. Check your paraphrase against the original text to be sure you have not accidentally used the same phrases or words, and that the information and way you phrase general ideas is accurate. Make a note clearly identifying the source. Congratulations—you have just written a paraphrase!

Once you have paraphrased a source, you can work your own thoughts into the text, contradict what is discussed, or add additional evidence to support the paraphrase—but you will always document or cite the source you have just paraphrased.

Citation/Documentation

It is not enough just to use quotes to signal that words were copied, the original source needs to be documented as well. A citation provides information in enough detail and in a specific format to allow a reader to locate the words or ideas being cited. A citation is something like a “street address” for the quote.

Depending on the style for your discipline, a citation may be set up as an in-text citation, footnote, or endnote. Word processing functions make creating notes into an easy process, but the form (citation style) and content is still your responsibility. This tutorial uses one form of in-text citations; other note forms will vary, though some styles share similarities.

Citations follow specific rules about what sort of data is and is not used in a citation, and in what standardized form the data will appear. Both the Writing Center and library reference desk have copies of style manuals to help you format citations. Be sure to follow the style manual for the discipline in which you are writing.

Never put off or omit making a citation as you take notes or draft your writing, assuming you will return later to insert the reference. If you plan to confirm a detail or insert a citation later, mark the spot clearly, perhaps by inserting a note that says nothing more than “re-check source”.

Plagiarism and Electronic Media

Scholarly databases and the World Wide Web have become rich and accessible sources to allow professionals to communicate about their work and to help students learn. Both are great source of information for student writing. Both professors and students are justifiably concerned about avoiding plagiarism since it is easy to copy electronic text and images. Keep in mind that if it is easy to locate material to support a research and writing assignment, it is just as easy for a professor to locate and document the source you exploited.

In most cases, the same standards apply to using electronic media as to printed sources: when you refer to ideas or quotes from an online article or Web site, cite that source. Most style manuals now include sections on citing online material. The same responsibility for making correct citation applies when a writer uses a graphic object from a Web site. Images or graphics from a Web site (or from a printed source) can be documented like quoted text, and the source of the visual information or graphic must be cited.

Working with Drafts

Students sometimes get into trouble when they throw together a draft of a paper that may draw too heavily on a source and lack proper citations to save time while writing, then ask for a professor’s review suggestions. If a professor later forgets that the submission was intended for comment only, they may mis-remember the paper as a completed submission and therefore grounds for referral to Student Discipline.

To keep a draft from involving you in a disciplinary action, get in the habit of taking three simple steps:

- Properly paraphrase, quote, and cite sources fully at every stage of your writing, beginning with your notes so that you always have a full citation on hand and never have to return for bibliographic details
- Identify any document you give someone to review—print or electronic—with the current date, the date the work is due for class, and a return-to-me date
- Clearly mark at least the first page of any printed or electronic copy as a “Draft” or “For comment only” so there is no question where it stands in your writing process (header or footer functions in word processing software is great for this)

Copyright and Permissions

People sometimes confuse plagiarism with **copyright**. Copyright covers only some works, while plagiarism covers everything. Plagiarism is a moral issue; copyright is a legal issue.

Copyright is a legally stated list of rights belonging to the author of a work. It is not the same as plagiarism. Copyright law provides users with some exceptions to an author's exclusive rights, a **fair use**, but "fair use" does not provide grounds or a defense for plagiarism. If you are challenged, the alleged infringer carries the legal burden of proof to show a source has been used fairly.

Some published material is not subject to copyright and is considered to be in the **public domain**. Work produced by government employees in their jobs, work for which copyright has expired (like Shakespeare's plays) are two examples of materials in public domain. Intentional collaborative works, like *Wikipedia*, are often protected under flexible **Creative Commons** agreements. Because public domain is a legal status and not a moral one, the standards about what constitutes plagiarism still apply if you use works in public domain.

It is assumed that writing and presentations you produce for class assignments will not be shown or available beyond class. Once a student portfolio, project, or entry in any sort of competition is accessible beyond campus in any form, that work is no longer "educational." Any text you might have quoted extensively (including poetry), any graph, photo, or illustration would require permission to include, even if you have correctly cited it.

Permission simply means contacting a copyright owner with a request to use their material in your project or writing. If you do not receive written permission to use something, then it *might* still be used in your schoolwork (properly quoted and cited) but could not appear in something that would be circulated beyond campus (including a Web page). You might, however, paraphrase the text appropriately or produce a new graph or illustration based on the original, citing either one properly.

How much can you quote before seeking permission? There are no legal standards, but more than one or two sentences would probably be too much. Quotation, when lengthy, need permission. Better to paraphrase.

Citation is not a substitute for getting permission. Permission must be stated in a printed form (email counts, but texting would probably not). Keep a hard copy of any permission request and response, otherwise the courts consider that no permission has been granted.

Here is an example: say a student is constructing a Web page as a class project. If they copy graphics or visual information from other sites (but not layout or design elements), they must also provide information about the source in their own site or presentation. If that Web page is accessible only to class members and the professor, perhaps through course-management software like Blackboard, such use is not a problem. But, Web pages are generally public and are accessible beyond the course; it might be a good idea to get permission from the Website's owner before using graphics even in schoolwork.

The current edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style* includes a section that is a good help for structuring permission requests. Copies are available in the library.

Habitual PQPCM

Making the effort to avoid plagiarism has great payoffs. It helps you learn more effectively, strengthens your writing skills, and ultimately provides a useful skill for any job involving ideas or writing.

Avoiding plagiarism involves adopting a few good writing habits.

1. Learn to **paraphrase** effectively. Present someone else’s ideas by restating and summarizing a text in your own words, being careful to do more than just rearrange or replace a few words.
2. Practice careful **quotation**, putting quotes— “ ” —around everything that comes directly from a text. Be especially careful to use quotes when taking notes from a source.
3. Get **permission** for any extensive use of quoted text and for individual graphic objects.
4. Create full, correct **citations** for sources you use, appropriate to the style for your discipline.
5. Date and clearly **mark** all drafts submitted for review and comment.

Definitions

Citation	An amendment to text, usually a note, which specifies the precise source of a quote or idea
Copyright	Control over an original work that by law (17 USC) belongs to the author
Common knowledge	Facts that are widely known
Creative Commons	An alternative to exclusive copyright control, where a creator states up front what users may do with a given work (www.creativecommons.org)
Documentation	The process of compiling accurate citations
Fair use	A limited right to quote another’s work and distribute it in your own
Paraphrase	Restating an idea to capture the concept without copying specific language
Plagiarism	Presenting someone else’s work as your own
Public domain	Works for which the author’s rights have expired, or never existed
Permission	Limited grant of authority by a copyright holder to use part of their work in a specific way (but only in that way)
Quotation	Inserting a short, exact transcription from another source, set off by quotation marks

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Produced by the University of Tennessee at Martin, based on a Website maintained by Writing Tutorial Services, Indiana University, Bloomington, Ind.