

Academic Integrity and Avoiding Plagiarism

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Most students know that submitting work written by someone else as if it were one's own work is a kind of stealing called plagiarism. A student (or other scholar) who has been caught plagiarizing can expect serious consequences, ranging from an F on a paper or in a course, to dismissal from an academic or scholarly community.

These days, when it is so easy to copy-paste text from electronic documents, the definition of plagiarism has been expanded to include use of text from a source in the following situations:

- Using the exact words from the source without enclosing the words in quotation marks, even if a reference number is included
- Patching together quotes rather than writing one's own text
- Using graphs, charts or photos from another source without crediting the source
- Using another author's discussion or analysis with a few words changed here and there, whether or not a reference number is included.

For a more detailed discussion of ethics in research and what does or does not constitute plagiarism, go to the Penn Office of Academic Integrity website:

<http://www.upenn.edu/academicintegrity/>

Common misperceptions and how they lead to plagiarism

Misperception: It's okay to copy someone else's Introduction/Background section when writing a research paper. No. It is true that this section reports on the work of others, and it is already neatly laid out with citations. However, the Introduction itself is the work of another author. Even if you cite the author, you're letting someone else's work take the place of research and analysis that you yourself should have done. In general, you would only cite someone else's analysis if you wanted to critically analyze it, perhaps to say that it had missed one important paper.

Misperception: Graphics such as photos and charts don't need to be cited. Wrong. Such graphics do have 'authors' who must be given credit. Give the source of the graphic in the caption. (Make sure any graphics you use actually make the point you want to make, and that they come from reliable sources.)

Misperception: Listing sources in a List of References is enough to avoid being accused of plagiarism. No; each source listed in a List of References should be linked to specific information in the text of your report, and conversely, each specific claim, bit of data, or quote from another source must be marked with an in-text citation which links directly to the List of References.

Guidelines for using sources of information

When you use sources of information in your writing, be sure to use them appropriately and with discernment. To avoid plagiarism, you must never use the ideas or the words of another author without giving appropriate credit. In addition, even if you give references, if you have simply pasted the work of various authors together into your paper, your work will not be accepted. And finally, use discernment about the quality of the sources you use. Don't try to use them to support arguments that they can't support.

Here is more detail about how to observe these guidelines:

- 1. State general information in your own words.** When information is of a general nature, you do not need to cite a reference for it. This includes generally accepted truths ('Nighttime air is generally colder than daytime air'), or background information found in many sources. **However, you should still state the information in your own words** rather than pasting in someone else's wording.
- 2. Select information from a source to support your own point. Then say the information in your own words.** A sure giveaway that a writer is simply copy-pasting from sources is to find that the writer includes material that has little to do with his or her stated topic. Another giveaway is a sudden change in writing style.
- 3. Make sure you're citing the source you really used.** If you read about Thorndike's experiments in a textbook written by Gleitman, your source is Gleitman, not Thorndike:

Thorndike, a prominent scholar of the early 20th century, pioneered the study of learning by his experiments on animals. As reported by Gleitman (1991), Thorndike's experiments showed that cats can learn to perform specific actions in order to receive a reward.

Your reference section will include this entry:

Gleitman, Henry (1991) *Psychology 3rd Edition*. W. W. Norton & Co., NY, London.

Of course, if an understanding of Thorndike's work is central to the paper you are writing, your best bet is to read Thorndike's work directly instead of relying on Gleitman's summary of it.

- 4. Use discernment about the value or probable bias of source material.** The source of your information is just as important as the information itself. Always ask yourself whether the source can be trusted, if it is likely to contain reliable data, and whether the writer is likely to be biased in any way. If you are writing a paper on the issue of smoking bans in public places, information from the R.J. Reynolds website might be useful, but will be decidedly biased in favor of protecting the 'rights' of smokers to light up in public. If you go to the Merck website for information about one of its products, be sure to balance any claims made there with data

from independent tests. Be suspicious of vague statements in company literature: “Twenty thousand companies are using our product” might just mean, “We provided samples to twenty thousand companies and asked them to test the product.”

Make a habit of looking for information in reputable published journals with peer-reviewed articles, and then exercise discernment in judging the application of the information you find in such articles.

Avoiding plagiarism: final suggestions

- **Conducting research:** When you read an article on your topic, follow these steps:
 - Decide what information you will use from the article. You might mark the sentences, or you might take notes in outline form.
 - If you are going to quote, make sure you have the necessary information for a complete citation. If you are going to paraphrase, **REWRITE** the sentences from the article. Make sure to record a clear citation of the information, whether you quote or paraphrase. (Include page numbers from the journal in your notes.)
- **Preparing to write:** Decide how you will organize and develop the topic. Write an outline of your paper and note in it where you will use information from your sources.
- **Writing the paper:** Make sure the information from sources is integrated into your own development of the topic. Add information about each source, both in your text and as a citation.