

# Nine Things You Should Already Know About PLAGIARISM

Plus . . .  
Six Excuses That Don't Work

And . . .  
Three Things You Don't Need To Worry About



An informational tool brought to you by the Office of the Provost, the Office of Academic Integrity Programs, and the Integrity Council, with special thanks to the First-Year Composition Program, Department of English.

**If you are reading this**, it is probably because you are interested in avoiding the number one kind of academic misconduct reported at the University of Oklahoma: plagiarism. Reading the material below and completing the accompanying quiz will help ensure that you know what plagiarism is, why it is unacceptable, and how you can avoid it.

The concept of plagiarism may seem vague or complicated. Perhaps you have heard it discussed in vague or complicated ways, or perhaps you have never heard it discussed it at all. The basics are very simple -- as long as you stay focused on what writing really is, and what written assignments in college are for.

Some of the material in the following lessons may seem extremely simple. If so, a quick review can't hurt. Some of the material may seem naive or unrealistic -- for example, the idea that college is above all an opportunity to "learn and grow." There are plenty of reasons for universities and students to consider plagiarism unacceptable on less idealistic grounds as well. The approach taken here is not the only one, but it is probably the shortest and simplest.

Once you have read through the material, you can take a quiz to show your mastery of all the material. The quiz is available at <http://libraries.ou.edu/help/tutorials/academicintegrity/player.html>. Once you pass the quiz, you will be able to print off a certificate of completion.

# Nine Things You Should Already Know About Plagiarism

## 1. *What is the point of writing assignments?*

The point of any writing assignment is to *improve your understanding* of a particular topic or problem, to *help you express* your understanding in writing, and to *let the professor evaluate* how well you can understand and write. As with any academic assignment, the important part of a writing assignment is not the paper itself or the grade you get, but the opportunity to learn and grow.

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## 2. *What is academic misconduct?*

Academic misconduct is cheating. More precisely, it is **any action that a student knows (or should know) will lead to the improper evaluation of academic work**. If the professor does not detect it, academic misconduct *defeats the purpose* of academic work because you are *pretending* to know more or write better than you actually do.

## 3. *What is plagiarism?*

Plagiarism is a form of academic misconduct in which you represent someone else's words or ideas as your own. **The basic expectation in every class is that whatever you write will be your own words, generated from your own understanding**. Therefore it is acceptable to incorporate someone else's words in your paper only if you *clearly indicate* the words are someone else's. (It is also possible to plagiarize other forms of expression -- someone else's computer code, mathematical expressions, technical designs, artistic works, etc. Here we are concentrating on plagiarism of words.)

#### 4. *What's wrong with plagiarism?*

First, plagiarism *defeats the purpose of writing assignments*. When you substitute someone else's understanding or expression for your own, you avoid the work of using and improving your own expressive ability. Therefore, plagiarism also defeats the university's goal of teaching students to write, not just copy.

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Second, plagiarism is a form of *lying*, because the professor is expecting to read your words, not someone else's. Plagiarism **destroys the mutual respect** that should exist between professor and student. Many professors take plagiarism very personally. If you have ever taken your time to teach someone something you consider valuable and then found that your time was wasted, you will understand the feeling.

Third, plagiarism *defeats the purpose of scholarship*. Thus it is unacceptable from all scholars, not just students. The goal of scholarship is to discover, understand, and create. That purpose is defeated when old knowledge is fraudulently presented as original and new. For the same reason plagiarism is also unacceptable in many nonacademic professional fields such as journalism and creative writing.

**Exceptions in certain fields do not extend to students.** There are certainly some times in industry and the professions where originality and authorship are not important and it is appropriate to take other people's words without citing them. (For example, an executive might copy text for a business plan without being expected to cite the source, or a lawyer might copy language from one contract to another.) However, even if you are training for such a profession, you are a student who is still learning the craft. Whatever the conventions are in the "real world" of employment, in the real world of teaching and learning you are expected to do your own writing and avoid plagiarism no matter what class you are in.

Sometimes plagiarism is described as a form of *stealing or copyright infringement*. It can be. However, it is always unacceptable to plagiarize, even if the author of the work says you can use it.

## 5. *How do I avoid plagiarism?*

There are three things you need to do to avoid plagiarism: *Think, Write, and Signal*. "Putting in the references" is only one-third of the job.

**Think.** Think about your paper topic and the research you have done. Make sure you have actually thought about everything in your paper well enough to explain it in your own words. Make sure you start the assignment soon enough to **think and understand, not just research and type**.

**Write.** Generate your own words to express your own understanding. If you cannot get started, or if you think your words are just too clumsy or inadequate, get help from your professor or the Writing Center. Other people's words should always be a supplement, not a substitute, for your own writing.

**Signal.** Clearly signal whenever you are using someone else's words, whether you are using them by direct quotation or paraphrase. **Any direct quotation must be indicated by two things:** "quotation marks" (or else "block quotation") plus a "reference" (also called a "citation") to the source. A reference alone is not sufficient to signal a direct quotation. In addition, **when you are writing your own words you will naturally tend to signal a quotation** with an indication in your paper, in your own words, about where the quotation comes from and why you included it -- perhaps because it is well-known, or was written by an expert, or even that it expresses an idea that is particularly mistaken or silly.

Avoiding plagiarism: Think. Write. Signal.
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## 6. *How do quotation marks, block quotations, and references work?*

**Quotation marks are a form of punctuation used to indicate that words were said or written by someone else.** Unless you are writing in a foreign language, a quotation mark looks like this: " Put one quotation mark at the beginning of the quotation and another one at the end. Quotation marks are usually used with quotations no longer than 20 or 25 words.

A *block quotation* separates a quotation from the rest of the text by beginning a new line for the quotation, indenting it, then indenting each additional line of the quotation in the same way. "Indenting" means making the line of text farther from the left-hand edge of the paper, usually one inch farther than the rest of the text. Block indentation is usually used with quotations longer than 20 or 25 words. Some systems of citation also require single-spacing and indenting both margins of any block quotation, so be sure to check the appropriate style for your paper.

A "*reference*" or "*citation*" tells the reader where quoted material comes from. The most common reference forms are text references, footnotes, and endnotes. Which form you should use depends on what class your paper is for. Text references provide source information within the body of the text, usually in parentheses. Footnotes and endnotes consist of a signal in the text, usually a numeral, that is inserted right after the quotation or paraphrase then is reproduced, along with information about the source, either at the bottom of the page (footnote) or at the end of the paper (endnote). All three kinds of references may be accompanied by an extra page at the end of the paper, usually entitled "Bibliography" or "Works Cited" that lists all of the paper's sources in alphabetical order. Merely including the source in your bibliography is totally insufficient to indicate that a passage quoted from that source is not your own writing.

Your professor may or may not care which citation system you use. For the purpose of avoiding plagiarism, it doesn't matter, as long as you clearly indicate where every quotation and paraphrase comes from.

## 7. What is "*paraphrase*"?

**Paraphrase is repeating in your own words the thought expressed in someone else's words.** Paraphrase ranges from a *very loose* rewording of the text's basic idea (okay) to a *nearly-identical* version of the words or sentence structure of the original text (not okay). This spectrum means there is no sharp boundary between appropriate and inappropriate paraphrase. **Basically, paraphrase is inappropriate where a reasonable person would say that you have stopped thinking and writing in your own words and are simply restating someone else's thoughts without admitting it.**

Most commonly, students get in trouble by writing words that stay *too close* to the original for *too long* with *no signal but a reference* to

indicate the source. Here are three tips to avoid those problems:

***Don't stop thinking.*** Understand your source well enough to explain its meaning in your own words. Never paraphrase by copying someone else's words into your paper and then changing them around.

***Keep paraphrase as short as possible.*** If your paraphrase goes over a sentence or two, you've probably stopped writing your own words.

***Signal your source in the text,*** not just with a reference. If you are in a conversation and think someone else's words are important enough to repeat, you ordinarily explain who said it. Similarly, if a source is important enough to paraphrase, it is important enough to mention in your text, not just in a footnote.

Never paraphrase by copying someone else's words into your paper and then changing them around.

#### 8. *What are the most common kinds of plagiarism?*

At OU there are three common kinds of plagiarism: whole-paper, cut-and-paste, and cut-and-paste with references.

***Whole-paper plagiarism.*** In this form of plagiarism, all or most of the student's paper is lifted from another student or a published source, for example the Internet, a book, or a print article. It is especially bad to buy a paper from any source that offers ready-made term papers. Students who have engaged in this form of plagiarism in the past have been expelled from the University.

***Cut-and-paste plagiarism.*** In this form of plagiarism, parts of a paper ranging from phrases and sentences to entire paragraphs are taken from the Internet or somewhere else and incorporated into the student's paper with no signal that they are not the student's own expression.

***Cut-and-paste plagiarism with references.*** In this form of plagiarism, words or ideas in a paper are included from another source, a reference to the source is included, but there is no quotation signal. Again, the problem is that a reference indicates only that the accompanying text is somehow

derived from or related to the cited source. A reference alone does not show that the text is a direct quotation from that source. Thus a reference alone does not suspend the professor's expectation that the words are your own words. A direct quotation with a reference but without quotation marks is plagiarism.

9. *What are the penalties for plagiarism?*

At OU, acts of plagiarism can receive institutional penalties ranging from a letter of reprimand to required coursework to expulsion. All academic misconduct offenses also receive grade penalties determined by the instructor. Grade penalties are not restricted to the value of the assignment and may be **up to an F in the course**. Juniors and seniors who plagiarize any significant portion of a paper should expect at least a suspension for a spring or fall semester. Under the right circumstances even freshmen and sophomores may also receive suspensions or even be expelled for plagiarism.

## Six Excuses That Don't Work

*"But I didn't mean to plagiarize!"*

**"I didn't mean to" is the most common excuse to a charge of plagiarism.** The test in an academic misconduct case is whether the student knew *or should have known* that his or her actions amounted to misconduct. Whether or not you learned them in high school, whether or not you took freshman English, whether or not you ever heard a teacher mention them, as an OU student you are expected to know the basic rules of academic integrity. If those basic rules get broken, you are guilty of academic misconduct.

"I didn't mean to" is the most common excuse to a charge of plagiarism.

*"But I just forgot to go back and add the references!"*

Another frequently-heard excuse is that the student included material from another source and then either "just forgot to add the references" or else

put them in but "accidentally turned in the wrong draft." Unless the plagiarism is truly minor, the student would still be in trouble even if such excuses are true. Cut-and-paste papers usually contain lots of directly-quoted material that substitutes for the student's own writing, appears without quotation marks, and lacks any textual indication that the material is quoted. In such cases, the quoted text substitutes for the student's own writing. Merely "adding the footnotes" never cures plagiarism if words have been directly quoted. Curing the plagiarism with footnotes and quotation marks often reveals that the student did a lot of copying but very little actual thinking or writing. **Really curing plagiarism means starting from the beginning: thinking and writing first, quoting and signaling as appropriate.** Stringing together words downloaded or copied from elsewhere has nothing to do with true writing and is never, ever a good way to write even a first draft.

*"I just wasn't careful enough to make the writing my own words!"*

Sometimes students "write" a paper not by generating words from their own understanding, but by copying text, then changing a few words so the passage is no longer an exact quotation. This approach is a form of improper paraphrase. It defeats the purpose of the writing assignment, which is to form a real understanding and then express it in one's own words. If the words and structure of the original are changed enough, the end result of the copy-then-change approach may be different enough from the source that it finally becomes your "own," sort of. Usually, that requires far more work than just writing your own words in the first place. Far more often, the work is only superficially different and the result is a charge of plagiarism. Never paraphrase by copying someone else's words into your paper and then changing them around.

*"But I'm presenting facts, not ideas."*

Sometimes students think they only need to use their own words for ideas, not facts. Even when it's possible to tell the difference between the two (and it's usually not) **the fact-idea distinction is irrelevant.** Except for clearly-signaled quotations, every bit of any writing exercise needs to reflect the student's own expression of the student's own understanding. Sometimes it may seem that there is only one way to express some things -- highly technical lab procedures, for instance. Don't worry too much about this: once



you have understood it, put the original source away and rely only on your own understanding when you write your own words. When you write from your own understanding, you will express yourself uniquely enough to avoid plagiarism.

*"But this writer said it so much better than I can."*

**Maybe so, but students who only copy will never learn to say anything very well.** This excuse points to another possible problem. In order to write from your own understanding, you must give your understanding a chance to operate. If you limit your research to one source, you might truly start to think there is only one thing to say on a topic, and it has already been said. The cure for that is more research, and more thinking too.

*"But plagiarism only applies to term papers or English classes."*

**All writing for any class** is presumed to be the student's own expression of the student's own understanding. Even in open-book, open-note exams, even in highly technical courses, even when the professor says he or she "isn't particular" or "doesn't care" about references, it is always plagiarism to present copied words as the expression of your own understanding. It is still plagiarism if you copy from a source like the class textbook or the professor's website. And although it's not plagiarism if you signal those words appropriately, you should be aware that there is almost no assignment at the college level that can be appropriately completed just by copying large amounts of text.

Using other people's work means understanding it well enough to use it in your own thought and explain it in your own words.

*And finally...*

# Three Things You Don't Need To Worry About

*"How can I ever do research for my paper if it's wrong to use other people's words and ideas?"*

It's not wrong to use other people's words and ideas. It's wrong to present them as your own. Using other people's work without simply copying it means you have to understand it well enough to explain it in your own words and use it in your own thought.

*"How can I ever be sure my paper doesn't include some phrase I forgot I read somewhere?"*

The "your own words" requirement doesn't mean you have to make up a language. Some English phrases are very common and will obviously show up in the writing of many different people. Plagiarism only arises when a string of words or thoughts is long enough that individual variations in expression are likely to occur. Most people are unable to remember enough consecutive words from another source to make unintentional quotation a real problem.

*"What if someone else had an idea first and I don't know about it?"*

The "your own understanding" requirement doesn't mean you have to discover ideas no one else has ever had. It doesn't mean you have to give a reference for ideas or facts that everyone is aware of. It doesn't mean you are in trouble if a similar idea was expressed in a book you haven't read. A problem arises only when the idea is so unusual, or your expression of the idea comes so close to its expression in the other text, that reasonable people would think you probably copied it. Is it possible that could happen by accident? Despite the theoretical possibility of such a coincidence, there is no record at OU that it has ever happened.