

Plagiarism Information Series 07/05

Plagiarism is the use without proper acknowledgement of someone else's material. It is considered dishonest and carries the highest penalties in the university. However, while some of the most obvious forms of plagiarism are easily recognised, there are more subtle forms which one can fall into, often without even realising it.

It is important to recognise that all scholarship involves using other people's material in a whole variety of ways. Since normal essays, articles and books all rely heavily on previous scholarship, it is important for a writer to distinguish between the contributions of this scholarship and his or her own contribution. In most cases a writer's original contribution to scholarship consists mainly of selecting, ordering, summarising and interpreting what other scholars have said. It is therefore important to learn how to reference properly, that is, how to specify clearly exactly what your debts are and how to acknowledge them. Then your own contribution can be more clearly identified and appreciated.

Common forms of Plagiarism: From the Obvious to the More Subtle

- (a) Copying an essay from another student and submitting it as your own.
- (b) Copying a journal article or a section of a book and submitting it as your own.
- (c) Lifting sentences or paragraphs from someone else (essay, article, book, etc.), that is, quoting from them verbatim, without using quotation marks and without proper acknowledgement.
- (d) Lifting sentences or paragraphs from someone else, without using quotation marks, but with proper acknowledgement. Here the impression is that the idea or information comes from the source cited, but that the phrasing, the choice of words to express it, is your own contribution.
- (e) Using significant ideas from someone else, but putting them in to your own words and not acknowledging the source of the ideas. Here the impression is that both the ideas as well as the form of expressing them belongs to you.
- (f) Heavy reliance on phrases and sentences from someone else without proper acknowledgement, thus giving the impression that these phrases as well as the idea they express are your own.

At this point plagiarism begins to give way to practices which, while not dishonest in themselves, are nonetheless indicative of weak scholarship.

- (g) Excessive reliance on other people's material, that is, direct quotations (with quotation marks and with proper acknowledgement), so that your sources speak for you and your own contribution is minimal. While this is not dishonest, your own contribution would be

greater if you used your own words more and relied less on quotations. Try not to rely excessively on quotations.

Among the most common legitimate uses of quotations are:

1. when you want to comment on (for example, to criticise it) what someone else has said, and it is important not to distort it by putting it into your own words;
2. when someone else's phrasing is uniquely appropriate and you do not wish to lose this. Excessive use of quotations for this reason indicates a lack of originality and should be avoided;
3. when the person being quoted really is an authority, so that what they say counts as evidence for the truth of a claim. Students often think that their lecturers, or the authors of books their lecturers recommend, are authorities in this sense, but this is not normally the case. An example of an authoritative quotation would be the words of a cabinet member on the functioning of cabinet meetings. Normally authorities are people whose situation gives them a unique point from which to observe something.

See also Plagiarism and Documentation: A Self-instructional Lesson (Information series 01/05).

If you are in any doubt about whether something constitutes plagiarism, please ask your lecturer before you hand in your essay.

The Learning Skills Centre would like to thank the Political Science Department for permission to reproduce their handout *Conventions of Scholarly Style and the Need for Academic Honesty*.