

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 (see our section on "fair use" rules)

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 citing sources. Simply acknowledging that certain material has been borrowed, and providing your audience with the information necessary to find that source, is usually enough to prevent plagiarism.

Types of Plagiarism

Anyone who has written or graded a paper knows that plagiarism is not always a black-and-white issue. The boundary between plagiarism and research is often unclear. Learning to recognize the various forms of plagiarism, especially the more ambiguous ones, is an important step in the fight to prevent it.

I. SOURCES NOT CITED

1) “The Ghost Writer”

The writer turns in another’s work, word-for-word, as his or her own.

2) “The Photocopy”

The writer copies significant portions of text straight from a single source, without alteration.

3) “The Potluck Paper”

The writer tries to disguise plagiarism by copying from several different sources, tweaking the sentences to make them fit together while retaining most of the original phrasing.

4) “The Poor Disguise”

Although the writer has retained the essential content of the source, he or she has altered the paper’s appearance slightly by changing key words and phrases.

5) “The Labor of Laziness”

The writer takes the time to paraphrase most of the paper from other sources and make it all fit together, instead of spending the same effort on original work.

6) “The Self-Stealer”

The writer “borrows” generously from his or her previous work, violating policies concerning the expectation of originality adopted by most academic institutions.

II. SOURCES CITED (but still plagiarized!)

1) “The Forgotten Footnote”

The writer mentions an author's name for a source, but neglects to include specific information on the location of the material referenced. This often masks other forms of plagiarism by obscuring source locations.

2) "The Misinformer"

The writer provides inaccurate information regarding the sources, making it impossible to find them.

3) "The Too-Perfect Paraphrase"

The writer properly cites a source, but neglects to put in quotation marks text that has been copied word-for-word, or close to it. Although attributing the basic ideas to the source, the writer is falsely claiming original presentation and interpretation of the information.

4) "The Resourceful Citer"

The writer properly cites all sources, paraphrasing and using quotations appropriately. The catch? The paper contains almost no original work! It is sometimes difficult to spot this form of plagiarism because it looks like any other well-researched document.

5) "The Perfect Crime"

Well, we all know it doesn't exist. In this case, the writer properly quotes and cites sources in some places, but goes on to paraphrase other arguments from those sources without citation. This way, the writer tries to pass off the paraphrased material as his or her own analysis of the cited material.

What is plagiarism?

Simply put, plagiarism is the use of another's original words or ideas as though they were your own. Any time you borrow from an original source and do not give proper credit, you have committed plagiarism and violated U.S. copyright laws. (See our [What is Plagiarism?](#) page for more detailed information on plagiarism.)

What are copyright laws?

Copyright laws exist to protect our intellectual property. They make it illegal to reproduce someone else's expression of ideas or information without permission. This can include music, images, written words, video, and a variety of other media.

At one time, a work was only protected by copyright if it included a copyright trademark (the © symbol). According to laws established in 1989, however, works are now copyright protected with or without the inclusion of this symbol.

Anyone who reproduces copyrighted material improperly can be prosecuted in a court of law. It does not matter if the form or content of the original has been altered – as long as any material can be shown to be substantially similar to the original, it may be considered a violation of the **Copyright Act**.

For information on how long a copyright lasts, see the section below on the [public domain](#).

Are all published works copyrighted?

Actually, no. The Copyright Act only protects works that express original ideas or information. For example, you could borrow liberally from the following without fear of plagiarism:

- Compilations of readily available information, such as the phone book
- Works published by the U.S. government
- Facts that are not the result of original research (such as the fact that there are fifty U.S. states, or that carrots contain Vitamin A)
- Works in the [public domain](#) (provided you cite properly)

Can facts be copyrighted?

Yes, in some situations. Any “facts” that have been published as the result of individual research are considered the intellectual property of the author.

Do I have to cite sources for every fact I use?

No. You do not have to cite sources for facts that are not the result of unique individual research. Facts that are readily available from numerous sources and generally known to the public are considered “common knowledge,” and are not protected by copyright laws. You can use these facts liberally in your paper without citing authors. If you are unsure whether or not a fact is common knowledge, you should probably cite your source just to be safe.

Does it matter how much was copied?

Not in determining whether or not plagiarism is a crime. If even the smallest part of a work is found to have been plagiarized, it is still considered a copyright violation, and its producer can be brought to trial. However, the amount that was copied probably will have a bearing on the severity of the sentence. A work that is almost entirely plagiarized will almost certainly incur greater penalties than a work that only includes a small amount of plagiarized material.

But can't I use material if I cite the source?

You are allowed to borrow ideas or phrases from other sources provided you **cite them properly** and your usage is consistent with the guidelines set by fair use laws. As a rule, however, you should be careful about borrowing too liberally – if the case can be made that your work consists predominantly of someone else's words or ideas, you may still be susceptible to charges of plagiarism.

What are the punishments for plagiarism?

As with any wrongdoing, the degree of intent (see below) and the nature of the offense determine its status. When plagiarism takes place in an academic setting, it is most often handled by the individual instructors and the academic institution involved. If, however, the plagiarism involves money, prizes, or job placement, it constitutes a crime punishable in court.

Academic Punishments

Most colleges and universities have zero tolerance for plagiarists. In fact, academic standards of intellectual honesty are often more demanding than governmental copyright laws. If you have plagiarized a paper whose copyright has run out, for example, you are less likely to be treated with any more leniency than if you had plagiarized copyrighted material.

A plagiarized paper almost always results in failure for the assignment, frequently in failure for the course, and sometimes in expulsion.

Legal Punishments

Most cases of plagiarism are considered misdemeanors, punishable by fines of anywhere between \$100 and \$50,000 – and up to one year in jail.

Plagiarism can also be considered a felony under certain state and federal laws. For example, if a plagiarist copies and earns more than \$2,500 from copyrighted material, he or she may face up to \$250,000 in fines and up to ten years in jail.

Institutional Punishments

Most corporations and institutions will not tolerate any form of plagiarism. There have been a significant number of cases around the world where people have lost their jobs or been denied positions as a result of plagiarism.

Does intention matter?

Ignorance of the law is never an excuse. So even if you did not realize you were plagiarizing, you may still be found guilty. However, there are different punishments for *willful infringement*, or deliberate plagiarism, and *innocent infringement*, or accidental plagiarism. To distinguish between these, courts recognize what is called the *good faith* defense. If you can demonstrate, based on the amount you borrowed and the way you have incorporated it in your own work, that *reasonably* believed what you did was fair use, chances are that your sentence will be lessened substantially.

What is “fair use,” anyway?

The United States government has established rough guidelines for determining the nature and amount of work that may be “borrowed” without explicit written consent. These are called “fair use” laws, because they try to establish whether certain uses of original material are reasonable. The laws themselves are vague and complicated. Below we have condensed them into some rubrics you can apply to help determine the fairness of any given usage.

- **The nature of your use.**
 - If you have merely copied something, it is unlikely to be considered fair use. But if the material has been transformed in an original way through interpretation, analysis, etc., it is more likely to be considered “fair use.”
- **The amount you’ve used.**
 - The more you’ve “borrowed,” the less likely it is to be considered fair use. What percentage of your work is “borrowed” material? What percentage of the original did you use? The lower the better.

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- **The effect of your use on the original**
 - If you are creating a work that competes with the original in its own market, and may do the original author economic harm, any substantial borrowing is unlikely to be considered fair use. The more the content of your work or its target audience differs from that of the original, the better.

We recommend the following sites for more information on “Fair Use” and Copyright laws.

<http://www.umuc.edu/library/copy.html>

http://www.sp.edu.sg/departments/asd/hk_1261.htm

What is the “public domain?”

Works that are no longer protected by copyright, or never have been, are considered “public domain.” This means that you may freely borrow material from these works without fear of plagiarism, provided you make proper attributions.

How do I know if something is public domain or not?

The terms and conditions under which works enter the public domain are a bit complicated. In general, anything published more than 75 years ago is now in the public domain. Works published after 1978 are protected for the lifetime of the author plus 70 years. The laws governing works published fewer than 75 years ago but before 1978 are more complicated, although generally copyright protection extended 28 years after publication plus 47 more years if the copyright was renewed, totaling 75 years from the publication date. If you are uncertain about whether or not a work is in the public domain, it is probably best to contact a lawyer or act under the assumption that it is still protected by copyright laws.

What is Citation?

A “citation” is the way you tell your readers that certain material in your work came from another source. It also gives your readers the information necessary to find that source again, including:

- information about the author
- the title of the work
- the name and location of the company that published your copy of the source
- the date your copy was published
- the page numbers of the material you are borrowing

Why should I cite sources?

Giving credit to the original author by citing sources is the only way to use other people’s work without plagiarizing. But there are a number of other reasons to cite sources:

- Citations are extremely helpful to anyone who wants to find out more about your ideas and where they came from.
- Not all sources are good or right – your own ideas may often be more accurate or interesting than those of your sources. Proper citation will keep you from taking the rap for someone else’s bad ideas.
- Citing sources shows the amount of research you’ve done.
- Citing sources strengthens your work by lending outside support to your ideas.

Doesn’t citing sources make my work seem less original?

Not at all. On the contrary, citing sources actually helps your reader distinguish your ideas from those of your sources. This will actually emphasize the originality of your own work.

When do I need to cite?

Whenever you borrow words or ideas, you need to acknowledge their source. The following situations almost always require citation:

- Whenever you use quotes
- Whenever you paraphrase
- Whenever you use an idea that someone else has already expressed
- Whenever you make specific reference to the work of another
- Whenever someone else’s work has been critical in developing your own ideas.

How do I cite sources?

This depends on what type of work you are writing, how you are using the borrowed material, and the expectations of your instructor.

First, you have to think about how you want to identify your sources. If your sources are very important to your ideas, you should mention the author and work in a sentence that introduces your citation. If, however, you are only citing the source to make a minor point, you may consider using parenthetical references, footnotes, or endnotes.

There are also different forms of citation for different disciplines. For example, when you cite sources in a psychology paper you would probably use a different form of citation than you might in a paper for an English class.

Finally, you should always consult your instructor to determine the form of citation appropriate for your paper. You can save a lot of time and energy simply by asking “How should I cite my sources,” or “What style of citation should I use?” before you begin writing.

In the following sections, we will take you step-by-step through some general guidelines for citing sources.

Preventing Plagiarism – Student Resources

In a research paper, you have to come up with your own original ideas while at the same time making reference to work that's already been done by others. But how can you tell where their ideas end and your own begin? What's the proper way to integrate sources in your paper? If you change some of what an author said, do you still have to cite that person?

Confusion about the answers to these questions often leads to **plagiarism**. If you have similar questions, or are concerned about preventing plagiarism, we recommend using the checklist below.

A. Consult with your instructor

Have questions about plagiarism? If you can't find the answers on our site, or are unsure about something, you should ask your instructor. He or she will most likely be very happy to answer your questions. You can also check out the guidelines for [citing sources properly](#). If you follow them, and the rest of the advice on this page, you should have no problems with plagiarism.

B. Plan your paper

Planning your paper well is the first and most important step you can take toward preventing plagiarism. If you know you are going to use other sources of information, you need to plan **how** you are going to include them in your paper. This means working out a balance between the ideas you have taken from other sources and your own, original ideas. Writing an outline, or coming up with a thesis statement in which you clearly formulate an argument *about* the information you find, will help establish the boundaries between your ideas and those of your sources.

C. Take Effective Notes

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

D. When in doubt, cite 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 whether 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 like 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.

E. Make it clear **who** said **what**

Even if you cite sources, ambiguity in your phrasing can often disguise the real source of any given idea, causing inadvertent plagiarism. Make sure when you mix your own ideas with those of your sources that you always clearly distinguish them. If you are discussing the ideas of more than one person, watch out for confusing pronouns. For example, imagine you are talking about Harold Bloom's discussion of James Joyce's opinion of Shakespeare, and you write: "He brilliantly portrayed the situation of a writer in society at that time." Who is the "He" in this sentence? Bloom, Joyce, or Shakespeare? Who is the "writer": Joyce, Shakespeare, or one of their characters? Always make sure to distinguish **who** said **what**, and give credit to the right person.

F. Know how to 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.

The purpose of paraphrasing is not to make it seem like you are drawing less directly from other sources or to reduce the number of quotations in your paper. It is a common misconception among students that you need to hide the fact that you rely on other sources. Actually it is advantageous to highlight the fact that other sources support your own ideas. Using quality sources to support your ideas makes them seem stronger and more valid. Good paraphrasing makes the ideas of the original source fit smoothly into your paper, emphasizing the most relevant points and leaving out unrelated information.

G. Evaluate Your Sources

Not all sources on the web are worth citing – in fact, many of them are just plain wrong. So how do you tell the good ones apart? For starters, make sure you know the **author(s)** of the page, where they got their information, and when they wrote it (getting this information is also an important step in avoiding plagiarism!). Then you should determine how credible you feel the source is: how well they support their ideas, the quality of the writing, the accuracy of the information provided, etc. We recommend using Portland Community College’s [“rubrics for evaluating web pages”](#) as an easy method of testing the credibility of your sources.

Important Terms

Attribution	<p>The acknowledgement that something came from another source.</p> <p>The following sentence properly <i>attributes</i> an idea to its original author: Jack Bauer, in his article “Twenty-Four Reasons not to Plagiarize,” maintains that cases of plagiarists being expelled by academic institutions have risen dramatically in recent years due to an increasing awareness on the part of educators.</p>
Bibliography	<p>A list of sources used in preparing a work</p>
Citation	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1) A short, formal indication of the source of information or quoted material.2) The act of quoting material or the material quoted.
Cite	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1) to indicate a source of information or quoted material in a short, formal note.2) to quote3) to ascribe something to a source
Common Knowledge	<p>Information that is readily available from a number of sources, or so well-known that its sources do not have to be cited.</p> <p>The fact that carrots are a source of Vitamin A is common knowledge, and you could include this information in your work without attributing it to a source. However, any information regarding the effects of Vitamin A on the human body are likely to be the products of original research and would have to be cited.</p>
Copyright	<p>A law protecting the intellectual property of individuals, giving them exclusive rights over the distribution and reproduction of that material.</p>
Endnotes	<p>Notes at the end of a paper acknowledging sources and providing additional references or information.</p>
Facts	<p>Knowledge or information based on real, observable occurrences.</p> <p>Just because something is a fact does not mean it is not the result of original thought, analysis, or research. Facts can be considered intellectual property as well. If you discover a fact that is not widely known nor readily found in several other places, you should cite the source.</p>

Footnotes	Notes at the bottom of a paper acknowledging sources or providing additional references or information.
Fair Use	The guidelines for deciding whether the use of a source is permissible or constitutes a copyright infringement.
Intellectual Property	A product of the intellect, such as an expressed idea or concept, that has commercial value
Notation	The form of a citation; the system by which one refers to cited sources.
Original	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Not derived from anything else, new and unique 2) Markedly departing from previous practice 3) The first, preceding all others in time 4) The source from which copies are made
Paraphrase	<p>A restatement of a text or passage in other words</p> <p>It is extremely important to note that changing a few words from an original source does NOT qualify as paraphrasing. A paraphrase must make significant changes in the style and voice of the original <i>while retaining the essential ideas</i>. If you change the ideas, then you are not paraphrasing – you are misrepresenting the ideas of the original, which could lead to serious trouble. (see examples in the students preventing page....)</p>
Peer Review	Turnitin.com’s teaching tool that allows students to anonymously review the work of their peers. This gives students a chance to build critical skills while helping them to see the strengths and weaknesses of their own writing.
Plagiarism	The reproduction or appropriation of someone else’s work without proper attribution; passing off as one’s own the work of someone else
Public Domain	<p>The absence of copyright protection; belonging to the public so that anyone may copy or borrow from it.</p> <p>See our section on <u>What is public domain?</u></p>
Quotation	Using words from another source
Self-plagiarism	Copying material you have previously produced and passing it off as a new production. This can potentially violate copyright protection, if the work has been published, and is banned by most academic policies.