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

to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own

to use (another's production) without crediting the source

to commit literary theft

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. 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 way (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)

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. See our section on citation for more information on how to cite sources properly.

WHAT ABOUT IMAGES, VIDEOS, AND MUSIC?

Using an image, video or piece of music in a work you have produced without receiving proper permission or providing appropriate citation is plagiarism. The following activities are very common in today’s society. Despite their popularity, they still count as plagiarism.

Copying media (especially images) from other websites to paste them into your own papers or websites.

Making a video using footage from others’ videos or using copyrighted music as part of the soundtrack.

Performing another person’s copyrighted music (i.e., playing a cover).

Composing a piece of music that borrows heavily from another composition.

Certainly, these media pose situations in which it can be challenging to determine whether or not the copyrights of a work are being violated. For example:

A photograph or scan of a copyrighted image (for example: using a photograph of a book cover to represent that book on one’s website)

Recording audio or video in which copyrighted music or video is playing in the background.

Re-creating a visual work in the same medium. (for example: shooting a photograph that uses the same composition and subject matter as someone else’s photograph)

Re-creating a visual work in a different medium (for example: making a painting that closely resembles another person’s photograph).

Re-mixing or altering copyrighted images, video or audio, even if done so in an original way.

The legality of these situations, and others, would be dependent upon the intent and context within which they are produced. The two safest approaches to take in regards to these situations is: 1) Avoid them altogether or 2) Confirm the works’ usage permissions and cite them properly.

<http://www.plagiarism.org/plagiarism-101/what-is-plagiarism/>

PREVENTING PLAGIARISM WHEN WRITING

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 author?

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.

PLANNING YOUR PAPER

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.

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.

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!

WRITING YOUR PAPER

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:

showing that you are not just copying other ideas but are processing and adding to them,

lending outside support to the ideas that are completely yours, and

highlighting the originality of your ideas by making clear distinctions between them and ideas you have gotten elsewhere

Also see: how to cite sources properly

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.

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.

Learn how to paraphrase properly.

ANALYZE AND 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 the "Web Page Evaluation Criteria" available through New Mexico State University's website.

<http://www.plagiarism.org/plagiarism-101/prevention/>