

Avoiding Plagiarism: A Student Survival Guide

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1. Introduction

Plagiarism is one of the most serious forms of academic misconduct; disappointingly, it is also one of the most common offenses found on university campuses. While most of us would recognize that copying, say, a term paper or project report, verbatim and in its entirety, from someone else is clearly wrong, plagiarism is much more encompassing than this simple example. Perhaps one reason for the frequency at which plagiarism occurs on university campuses is that there is often uncertainty in the minds of students (and, perhaps, professors) as to what exactly constitutes plagiarism. This set of guidelines is intended to help you identify and avoid plagiarism.

2. What Is Plagiarism?

Mississippi State's *Academic Operating Policy and Procedure, AOP 12.07–Academic Misconduct* [1], defines plagiarism as

Using the ideas, organization, or words of another from a book, article, paper, computer file, or other source... without giving proper credit following accepted citation rules

Additional perspective is given by the Humanities Department at Capital Community College [2]:

Using someone else's ideas or phrasing and representing those ideas or phrasing as your own, either on purpose or through carelessness, is a serious offense known as plagiarism. "Ideas or phrasing" includes written or spoken material, of course—from whole papers and paragraphs to sentences, and, indeed, phrases—but it also includes statistics, lab results, art work, etc. "Someone else" can mean a professional source, such as a published writer or critic in a book, magazine, encyclopedia, or journal; an electronic resource such as material you discover on the World Wide Web; another student at your school or anywhere else; a paper-writing "service" which offers to sell written papers for a fee.

Using these definitions, we make the following observations on plagiarism in order to dispel some common misconceptions:

- Key to the above definitions of plagiarism is the fact that *any* misrepresentation of *any* material as your own *original* work or idea is plagiarism. Thus, plagiarism is not limited to merely the word-for-word copying of text, but also applies to the ideas expressed in a text. You cannot merely paraphrase or "reword"—these are merely superficial manipulations of ideas that are not your own. Also included in the scope of plagiarism are figures and pictures, as well as the *ideas* conveyed by those figures and pictures.
- You do not have to steal to commit plagiarism—even if the original author "authorizes" you to use their work, if you do not provide proper documentation of the origin of the material, you have committed plagiarism.

- There is no “small” amount of plagiarism that is acceptable—for example, if your 1000-page paper contains just one phrase that is plagiarized, you have committed plagiarism and may face appropriate academic sanctions.
- Plagiarism is not limited to intentional acts—you can commit plagiarism unknowingly. This type of plagiarism usually originates in carelessness, often during initial research for a project. Consequently, it is paramount that you be ever vigilant in your work, from your initial investigation of reference material, to the final draft of your paper.
- The definition of plagiarism applies across academic domains—there is no field of study in which plagiarism is “OK” or more acceptable than in any other.
- Attention international students—the rules of proper citation, as well as the standards of acceptable use of nonoriginal material, that you may have learned in your home country may differ from what we outline in this text. However, during your stay here, it is incumbent upon you to understand and to follow procedure as it is accepted in the United States.

In short, all occurrences of plagiarism are “wrong”—intentional, unintentional, large, small, verbatim copying, or rewording. There is no circumstance or situation in which it is acceptable to plagiarize. Does this mean that you can never use somebody else’s ideas in your own work? No, it doesn’t. The definitions of plagiarism outlaw only the *misrepresentation* of someone else’s work as your own. To use someone else’s work or ideas, you must merely acknowledge the origin of each piece of material that is not your own; the way to do so is to follow accepted citation rules.

3. Accepted Citation Guidelines

Regardless of academic domain, plagiarism is considered a serious offensive, and precise use of citation is necessary for demarking borrowed material or ideas from that of your own origin. Although the concept of plagiarism is a constant across academic domains, the mechanisms used for proper citation often vary greatly from one academic discipline to the next. *It is necessary that you follow the citation rules which are accepted in the particular academic discipline that applies to your work.* Failure to give proper citation may cause misrepresentation of your work, which may be construed as plagiarism.

For example, in an English class, you may be required to use the official Modern Language Association (MLA) documentation style [3, 4], while in Electrical Engineering classes, you will be expected to use the standard citation mechanisms of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) [5]. *Sometimes it will be assumed that you, by virtual of being enrolled in a class in a particular academic domain, are familiar with, and will employ, the system of citation rules that is accepted in that domain.* If you are unsure of what citation rules to follow for an assignment, ask your instructor.

Some generally accepted guidelines for citation follow; refer to documentation on particular citation systems for more detailed information.

- For material that is paraphrased, or to reference the origin of ideas nonoriginal to the work, a citation (following accepted guidelines) as close to the idea or paraphrased material is usually sufficient.
- For *short* text (fewer than a couple of lines) culled verbatim from another source, enclose the text in quotation marks; include a citation before or after the quotation.
- For *longer* text (longer than a couple of lines), omit quotation marks and separate the borrowed text from the main body with additional indentation on each line. (See the quotations in Sec. 2 of this text for examples of such extended quotation). Include a citation before or after the quotation.

4. Examples of Plagiarism and Proper Citation

The following discussion is quoted from [2]; the examples therein originated, however, at the Center for Academic Development at Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

Here is our original text from Elaine Tyler May's "Myths and Realities of the American Family":

Because women's wages often continue to reflect the fiction that men earn the family wage, single mothers rarely earn enough to support themselves and their children adequately. And because work is still organized around the assumption that mothers stay home with children, even though few mothers can afford to do so, child-care facilities in the United States remain woefully inadequate.

Here are some possible uses of this text. As you read through each version, try to decide if it is a legitimate use of May's text or a plagiarism.

Version A:

Since women's wages often continue to reflect the mistaken notion that men are the main wage earners in the family, single mothers rarely make enough to support themselves and their children very well. Also, because work is still based on the assumption that mothers stay home with children, facilities for child care remain woefully inadequate in the United States.

Plagiarism. In Version A there is too much direct borrowing in sentence structure and wording. The writer changes some words, drops one phrase, and adds some new language, but the overall text closely resembles May's. Even with a citation, the writer is still plagiarizing because the lack of quotation marks indicates that Version A is a paraphrase, and should thus be in the writer's own language.

Version B:

As Elaine Tyler May points out, "women's wages often continue to reflect the fiction that men earn the family wage" (588). Thus many single mothers cannot support themselves and their children adequately. Furthermore, since work is based on the assumption that mothers stay home with children, facilities for day care in this country are still "woefully inadequate." (May 589).

Plagiarism. The writer now cites May, so we're closer to telling the truth about our text's relationship to the source, but this text continues to borrow too much language.

Version C:

By and large, our economy still operates on the mistaken notion that men are the main breadwinners in the family. Thus, women continue to earn lower wages than men. This means, in effect, that many single mothers cannot earn a decent living. Furthermore, adequate day care is not available in the United States because of the mistaken assumption that mothers remain at home with their children.

Plagiarism. Version C shows good paraphrasing of wording and sentence structure, but May's original ideas are not acknowledged. Some of May's points are common knowledge (women earn less than men, many single mothers live in poverty), but May uses this common knowledge

to make a specific and original point and her original conception of this idea is not acknowledged.

Version D:

Women today still earn less than men – so much less that many single mothers and their children live near or below the poverty line. Elaine Tyler May argues that this situation stems in part from “the fiction that men earn the family wage” (588). May further suggests that the American workplace still operates on the assumption that mothers with children stay home to care for them (589). This assumption, in my opinion, does not have the force it once did. More and more businesses offer in-house day-care facilities. . . .

No Plagiarism. The writer makes use of the common knowledge in May’s work, but acknowledges May’s original conclusion and does not try to pass it off as his or her own. The quotation is properly cited, as is a later paraphrase of another of May’s ideas.

5. Penalties for Plagiarism

Plagiarism is considered a very serious offense at Mississippi State; it is considered *academic misconduct*, the definition of which includes many offenses, such as cheating on a test, for example. Mississippi State’s AOP [1] states that “academic misconduct is a serious offense. Accordingly, sanctions imposed may be severe.” Maximum possible penalties range from an “F” in the course (first offense) to expulsion from the university (third offense).

Such severe sanctions are not unique to Mississippi State, as illustrated by this text from Humanities Department at Capital Community-Technical College [2]:

The penalty for plagiarism is usually determined by the instructor teaching the course involved. In many schools and colleges, it could involve failure for the paper and it could mean failure for the entire course and even expulsion from school. Ignorance of the rules about plagiarism is no excuse, and carelessness is just as bad as purposeful violation. At the very least, however, students who plagiarize have cheated themselves out of the experience of being responsible members of the academic community and have cheated their classmates by pretending to contribute something original which is, in fact, a cheap copy. [. . .] Students who do not thoroughly understand the concept of plagiarism and methods of proper documentation should request assistance from their teacher and from librarians.

Remember, it’s *your* academic integrity and reputation that are at stake—once these are lost, they can never be regained.

References

- [1] “Academic Operating Policy and Procedure, AOP 12.07–Academic Misconduct,” http://www.msstate.edu/web/student_policies.html.
- [2] “A Guide for Writing Research Papers based on Modern Language Association (MLA) Documentation,” The Humanities Department and the Arthur C. Banks, Jr., Library, Capital Community College, Hartford, Connecticut, <http://www.ccc.commnet.edu/mla>.
- [3] J. Gibaldi and P. Franklin, *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, Modern Language Association of America, 4th edition, May 1995.
- [4] J. Gibaldi and H. Lindenberger, *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing*, Modern Language Association of America, 2nd edition, April 1998.
- [5] Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers, “Information for Authors,” January 2003, <http://www.ieee.org/organizations/pubs/transactions/auinfo03.pdf>.