

The following text is excerpted from *A Pocket Guide to Writing History*, 4th edition written by Mary Lynn Rampolla and published by Bedford / St. Martin's bedfordstmartins.com (New York – Boston, 2004) pg. 70- 76.

Plagiarism: What It Is and How to Avoid It

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Plagiarism is the act of taking the words, ideas, or research of another person and putting them forward without citation as if they were your own. It is intellectual theft and a clear violation of the code of ethics and behavior that most academic institutions have established to regulate the scholastic conduct of their members. Colleges and universities have their own policies that define plagiarism and establish guidelines for dealing with plagiarism cases and punishing offenders, but the penalties for plagiarism are usually severe, ranging from an automatic F in the course to temporary suspension or even permanent expulsion from the school. Plagiarism, in short, is considered a very serious academic offense.

If we look simply at the dictionary definition, it would seem that acts of plagiarism are readily identifiable. And, indeed, some instances of plagiarism *are* obvious; deliberately copying lengthy passages from a book or journal article, or purchasing or downloading whole papers and submitting them as your own work, are clear-cut examples of plagiarism. However, although some students unfortunately make a conscious decision to plagiarize, many more do so inadvertently. This is because unlike the instances cited above, some situations in which you might use the words or ideas of another may seem murkier. Because of its seriousness, it is essential that you know exactly what kinds of acts constitute plagiarism. This chapter will clarify the concept and give you some advice on how to avoid unintentional plagiarism.

6a. What is plagiarism?

Read the following scenarios. Which of these would be considered plagiarism?

- A student borrows a friend's essay to get some ideas for his own paper. With his friend's permission, he copies portions of it, taking care, however, to cite all the sources his friend included in the original.
- A student finds useful information on a Web site that is not under copyright. She downloads and incorporates sections of this Web site into her paper, but does not cite it since it is in the public domain.
- A student derives some key ideas for his paper from a book. Since he doesn't quote anything directly from this book, he doesn't provide any footnotes. He does, however, include the book in his bibliography.

- A student modifies the original text by changing some words, leaving out an example, and rearranging the order of the material. Since she is not using the exact words of the original, she does not include a footnote.

The answer is that *all four* of these scenarios illustrate examples of plagiarism.

In the first instance, the issue is not whether the student has permission from his friend to use his or her work. As long as the student is submitting work done by another as his own, it is plagiarism. Citing the sources that his friend has used does not mitigate the charge of plagiarism. In the second example, the fact that the student has used material that is not protected by copyright is irrelevant. She is guilty of plagiarism because she has submitted the words of another as her own. The third instance illustrates that definition of plagiarism encompasses not only the use of someone else's words, but also of their ideas; you must *always* acknowledge the source of your ideas in a footnote or endnote, even if you specifically include the text in your bibliography. Finally, in the fourth example, changing some of the words, reorganizing the material, or leaving out some phrases does not constitute a genuine paraphrase; moreover, even an effective paraphrase requires a footnote.

As a historian, if only for the purposes of one class, you are part of a community of scholars; when you write history papers, you become part of the intellectual conversation of that community. The published words and ideas of other historians are there to be used – but as matter of intellectual honesty, you are bound to acknowledge their contributions to your own thought.

6b. Avoiding plagiarism

Most unintentional plagiarism can be traced to three sources: confusion about when and how to cite sources, uncertainty about how to paraphrase, and carelessness in taking notes and downloading Internet materials.

When you derive facts and ideas from other writers' work, you must cite the sources of your information. Most writers are aware that they must cite the sources of direct quotations. However, students sometimes assume, erroneously, that direct quotations are the *only* things they need to cite. In fact, "borrowing" ideas from other writers without documenting them is a form of plagiarism every bit as serious as taking their words. Therefore, you must provide citations for all information derived from another source, even if you have summarized or paraphrased the information. Furthermore, you must also cite your sources when you use other writers' interpretations of a historical event or text. In short, you should remember that any time that you use information derived from another person's work, adopt someone else's interpretation, or build on another writer's ideas, you must acknowledge your source. This enables your readers to distinguish between your ideas and those of others.

The only exception is that you do not need to provide citations for information that is common knowledge. For example, you might have learned from a particular book that

the Civil War spanned the years 1861 to 1865, but you do not have to cite the book when you include this fact in your paper. You could have obtained the time span of the Civil War from any number of sources because it is common knowledge. The more you read about your subject, the easier it will be for you to distinguish common knowledge from information that needs a citation. When in doubt, however, it is better to be safe and cite the source. (For additional information on quoting and citing sources, including documentation models, see Chapter 7.)

NOTE: One practice that will help you to avoid plagiarism is to keep all of your research notes and rough drafts in separate files. Then, as you prepare your final draft, you will be able to check your notes if you are uncertain about whether a particular phrase is a direct quote of a paraphrase or where an idea or quotation came from. (See 4c for more on careful note taking.)

6b-s. Paraphrasing to avoid plagiarism

Most students know that copying a passage word for word from a source is plagiarism. However, many are unsure about how to paraphrase. Consider, for example, this passage from a textbook and the student “paraphrase” that follows:

ORIGINAL PASSAGE

In the early twentieth century, most Latin American nations were characterized by two classes separated by a great gulf. At the top were a small group of European-descended white people, the *patrones* (landlords or patrons), who, along with foreign investors, owned the ranches, mines and plantations of each nation. Like the established families of most societies elsewhere in the world, the *patrones* monopolized the wealth, social prestige, education, and cultural attainments of their nations. Many of them aspired to the ideal of nobility, with high standards of personal morality and a parental concern for those who worked for them. Some *patrones* lived up to these ideals, but most, consciously or unconsciously, exploited their workers.¹

UNACCEPTABLE PARAPHRASE

In the early part of this century most Latin American countries were typified by two classes separated by a large chasm. At the top were a small group of white people, descended from Europeans, called *patrones*. Along with foreign investors, the *patrones* owned the plantations, ranches, and mines of their countries. Like aristocrats all over the world, the *patrones* controlled the wealth, social status, education, and cultural achievements of their countries. Many of them had high standards of morality and were concerned for their workers, but most, consciously or unconsciously, abused their workers.

¹ Richard Goff, Walter Moss, Janice Terry, and Jiu-Hwa Upshur, *The Twentieth Century: A Brief Global History*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 62.

In this example, the writer's attempt at paraphrase results in plagiarism, *despite the fact* that the second text is not an exact copy of the original. The writer has used a thesaurus to find synonyms for several words – *characterized* has become *typified*, *gulf* has been replaced by *chasm*, and *achievements* has been substituted for *attainments*. In addition, several words or phrases in the original have been left out in the second version, and the word order has occasionally been rearranged. Nevertheless, these changes are merely editorial; the new paragraph is not significantly different from the original in either form or substance.

NOTE: This paragraph would be considered plagiarism *even if* the writer acknowledged the source of the material; it is simply too close to the original to be considered the work of the student.

In a genuine paraphrase, the writer has thought about what the source says and absorbed it. Once the writer understands the content of the source, he or she can restate it in an entirely original way that reflects his or her own wording and style. Consider, for example, this paraphrase:

ACCEPTABLE PARAPHRASE

The society of Latin America at the beginning of this century was sharply divided into two groups: the vast majority of the population, made up of the workers, and a wealthy minority, the *patrones*, who were descended from white Europeans. Although the *patrones* represented a very small segment of the population, they controlled the lion's share of their countries' wealth and enjoyed most of the social and educational advantages. Like their counterparts in Europe, many *patrones* adopted an attitude of paternalistic benevolence toward those who worked for them. Even if their concern was genuine, however, the *patrones* clearly reaped the rewards of their workers' labor.²

This paraphrase is more successful; the writer has assimilated the content of the source and expressed it in his own words.

NOTE: even though this is an acceptable paraphrase of the original, and although there are no direct quotations used, the author would still need to provide a footnote or endnote indicating the source of this information. You will save time if you paraphrase as you take notes. However, if you attempt to paraphrase with the original source open in front of you, you are courting disaster. To write a genuine paraphrase, you should close the book and rewrite in your own words what you have read. (For advice on taking notes in the form of summaries, see p. 49. A shorter example of paraphrasing can be found on p. 78)

6b-3. Downloading Internet sources carefully to avoid plagiarism

² Goff, et al., 62

As with any other source, information derived from the Internet must be properly paraphrased and cited. A particular danger arises, however, from the ease with which Internet material can be downloaded into your working text. Whenever, you download material from the Internet, be sure to create a separate document file for that material. Otherwise, Internet material may inadvertently become mixed up with your own writing. Moreover, you should keep in mind that Internet sites are more volatile than print sources. Material on many Internet sites is updated on a daily basis, and a site that you find early in your research may be gone by the time you write your final draft. Therefore, you should always record *complete* bibliographic information for each Internet sources *as you use it*.

6c. Plagiarism and the Internet

While plagiarism is not a new problem, the opportunities for plagiarism have increased exponentially with the growing popularity of and dependence on the Internet. Careless “cut and paste” note taking poses a real hazard to unwary Internet users. A more distressing and significant problem, however, is the virtual explosion of Web sites offering students the opportunity to buy term papers, or even download them for free. Often presenting themselves as sources of “research assistance,” these sites afford countless possibilities for plagiarism under the guise of providing “help” to students who are “in a hurry,” “under pressure,” or “working on a deadline.” Many of these Web sites bury in the “FAQs” (Frequently asked questions) or “About Us” links the caveat that students should use the Web site’s papers only as “models” for their own papers. They are, of course, quite right to include this warning. However, before you decide to use the “research assistance” these Web sites claim to provide, consider the criteria for evaluating Internet sites provided in Chapter 2 (see 2b-3).

In determining the usefulness of an Internet site, you should always ask about the author’s credentials; for many of these “paper mill” sites, the author of the paper is anonymous and may even be another student. Why, then, should you trust the information the paper provides? Similarly, the Web site’s URL should cause you to hesitate; paper mills typically have a “.com” address, rather than the more trustworthy “.edu” or “.gov” suffix that you might expect from a true academic site. You should also consider whether you would really want to list the site in your bibliography; it is not very likely that your professor will be impressed with a bibliographic entry for “schoolisrotten.com”

Finally, if you are ever tempted, you should also realize that if you found the Web site, the chances are good that your professor can find it too. It is not very hard – indeed, it is quite simple – for a professor to track down the source of a plagiarized paper.

NOTE: Ignorance about what constitutes plagiarism is not usually considered an acceptable excuse by college professors, school judicial associations, or university administrators. Read your school’s policy on plagiarism and make sure you understand it. Finally, if you have any doubts or need clarification, ask your professors.