

RECOMMENDED STUDENT GUIDELINES: ETHICS AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

What Is “Plagiarism” and Why Do People Do It?

NOTE: The original version of this article is by John R. Edlund and is available at http://www.calstatela.edu/centers/write_cn/plagiarism.htm. It has been extensively edited and revised by Jeanne B. Stinchcomb for use at Florida Atlantic University.

We live in a capitalistic society. The concept of “ownership” is therefore fundamental to American values. Just as people can “patent” their inventions, we believe that written expressions of ideas can be owned. When an author writes a particular set of words expressing an idea, those words and that idea become the property of the author.

What if you want to use those words or that idea? You couldn’t use a patented invention without paying a fee. Usually, you don’t have to pay money to use someone else’s written words or ideas.¹ But you *do* have to give credit.

What if you don’t? What if you just “lift” those words and put them into your paper without crediting the author?

It would be considered theft to use someone’s patent without paying a fee. For theft, you could be criminally charged. In the same way, using someone’s words or ideas without giving the author credit is *stealing*. Moreover, to pass-off that person’s writing as your own is to misrepresent your own accomplishments. That is *fraud*.

Theft and fraud are criminal offenses. In the criminal justice system, they are subject to sentences ranging from probation to imprisonment. In the academic community, they are subject to punishments ranging from failing the course to expulsion from the university.

Plagiarism Defined²

Plagiarism is a direct violation of academic honesty. It exists in many forms, but essentially, plagiarism is

¹The exception is if you are publishing something, (like a book), that will produce revenue for you, in which case, you will pay a fee.

²This is a revised version of the plagiarism policy that is in effect at California State University, Los Angeles.

representing someone else's words or ideas as your own. The most extreme forms of plagiarism are:

- Submitting a paper written by another person or obtained from commercial or internet sources;
- Submitting a paper composed of passages copied word-for-word without acknowledgment.

What about paraphrasing an author's ideas? How about quoting very small portions of text without citation? *These are also examples of plagiarism.* Even putting someone else's ideas into your own words is plagiarism—if you do not cite the original source.

Why Plagiarize?

Students steal from published works for a variety of reasons. Most often, it involves *inadequate time management*. In this case, you find yourself at the end of the semester with a long paper due--and no time to do it. In a panic, you are tempted to go to the library or search the internet for something handy to turn in (or several sources to cut-and-paste). As a result, you are tempted to do something *unethical and dangerous*—that is, put your name on material that was written by other people.

It doesn't really matter where the plagiarized paper comes from. It might be downloaded from the internet.....or bought from a “research service”.....or provided by a friend who took the course before. In any case, it is *representing someone else's words or ideas as your own*. In other words, it is plagiarism.

When you do this, you are committing fraud and theft. That undermines the entire educational system. You didn't learn the material. Your writing skills didn't improve. Your grade is based on deception. Ultimately, if you get into the habit of doing this, your entire education is a fraud.

Getting Caught—Failing the “Smell Test”

Will you get caught? Probably, yes—especially if your paper fails to pass the “smell test.”

As both writers and graders of papers, faculty members have considerable experience in this area. Most importantly, they know you. They are well-aware of your expressive style. Generally, after reading the first few pages of your paper, they are able to recognize whether it reflects you.....or not.

Faculty also are also well-versed in recognizing the journalistic styles of newspapers, encyclopedias, professional journals, and other sources from which students are likely to copy. When a paper suddenly begins to sound like *Time* magazine or the American Psychological Association, it is instantly clear what is happening. Some try to grab an electronic paragraph here and there, pasting the whole collection of paragraphs into a word processor. Since the styles clash, it is easy to detect that different writers wrote different paragraphs.

Often, plagiarism is even easier for faculty to detect. For example, there have been cases where two students in different sections of the same class *turned in the same paper to the same professor*. Additionally, papers written on obscure topics, submitted without any advance drafts, or prepared without any additional referencing materials, also tend to raise eyebrows and fail the “smell test.”

Violation of Trust

Such suspicions make instructors very uncomfortable, because they violate the spirit of trust that is a key component of the learning process. In the academic community, there is an inherent bond of faith and confidence between students and faculty. Thus, faculty feel deeply insulted if students try to fool them. As a result, suspicious instructors will go to great lengths to check sources for the original document if they suspect plagiarism.

Electronic Detection

Most incidents of plagiarism are very obvious, and are therefore easy to detect. In addition to inherent knowledge of resources in their discipline, faculty now have access to on-line electronic search engines that conduct up to 1,000 searches on a typical paper, yielding a printout of websites for plagiarized passages.

Penalties and Consequences

If you engage in plagiarism and, (as is very likely), get caught, it is probable that you will at least fail the course. In that case, your transcript will be flagged to indicate that your failure was for reasons of “academic irregularity” rather than academic incompetence. A failing grade so flagged cannot be retracted, substituted, or over-ridden.

Additionally, you may experience further penalties, which can extend to expulsion from the university. This can ruin your career--and your life.

Tips for Avoiding Plagiarism

No one wants their future potential and career opportunities to be diminished by one senseless act of plagiarism. Here is what you can do to prevent that from happening to you:

- ***Don't panic***

Plan ahead, manage your time, and get help from the English Department if you don't know what you are doing. If all else fails, discuss your inability to meet the posted deadline with your instructor.

- ***Document sources.***

Any words, ideas, facts, or illustrations from another source must be cited, (unless they are “common knowledge” that would be well-known to anyone).³ When in doubt, document the source.

- ***Understand how to paraphrase***

For example, it is common knowledge to state that “many Americans are confined in prisons or jails today.” However, stating that “over 1,600,000 U.S. citizens are incarcerated in American prisons and jails” would require citation.

In order to paraphrase a passage from a source, you have to understand it very well. You have to know what all the words mean, be aware of other words that have similar meanings, and be able to interpret what the passage is actually saying.

Some students simply copy the passage and then try to substitute new words in the same sentence structure; e.g.:

Original passage: “In the long run, future generations will judge us not by what obstacles we have or have not faced today, but rather, by what opportunities we have or have not seized today to shape tomorrow’s destiny. For destiny is not a result of chance, but a reflection of choice.”⁴

Student’s plagiarized version “A”:

“Generations ahead of us will judge us not by what problems we have faced, but instead, by what chances we have or have not taken for shaping our destiny of choice.”

Here, the student has copied the same grammatical structure as the original. The only difference is that some of the words have been changed. Note that while the grammatical structure seems to be quite sophisticated, the altered words in the revised passage make it somewhat more awkward than the original. That sets off a bell for the faculty member reading the passage (i.e., it doesn’t pass the “smell test”).

Student’s plagiarized version “B”:

“The opportunities we have or have not seized will, in the long run, shape our destiny. That is because our destiny is more based on chance than choice.”

In this case, the student kept many of the same words, but reorganized the sentence structure. Again, there is just enough awkwardness in this passage to signal a red flag.

Neither of these approaches--same structure but different words, or same words but different structure--is likely to pass without detection. That is because the student is still too dependent on the original source for language and sentence structure.

To avoid plagiarism while paraphrasing, put the original passage into your own words without looking at it. By doing this, you will be able to read, understand, and re-state the author’s ideas without depending on language or sentence structure of the original passage. But you still need to cite the original source.

- ***Quote direct cites***

If you intend to include a passage exactly (or almost exactly) as it is written elsewhere, enclose it in quotation marks and include a citation of the source.

Citations achieve two purposes: (1) Giving credit where credit is due, and (2) Allowing the reader to re-trace your steps back to your original source to find more information.

The Bottom Line

Start early. Avoid panic. Give yourself plenty of time to complete your assignment. Document all of your sources. Use appropriate citations. Quote whenever you are including word-for-word narrative. Paraphrase carefully, using your own words and sentence structure without looking at the original source, (but still giving credit to the original source). When in doubt, ask for help.

Follow these guidelines and you won't have to worry about being accused of theft or fraud. Or about failing a course because of plagiarism. Or about being expelled for it.

Just as other authors own their works, you will own yours. And perhaps someday, future students will be citing *you*.

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Student Responsibilities

This section presents a summary of FAU's policy on academic irregularities. (The full text can be found in the Undergraduate Catalog). Note *mandatory reporting requirements* highlighted in italics [emphasis added].

“FAU has an honor code *requiring* a faculty member, student or staff member to notify an instructor when there is reason to believe an academic irregularity is occurring in a course. The instructor's *duty* is to pursue any reasonable allegation...”

If the faculty member determines, after a conference with the student, that an irregularity occurred, the student is provided with a written statement of the charges and proposed penalties.

Penalties vary with offense severity, ranging from an “F” on the work submitted to an “F” in the course. These grades cannot be changed by the forgiveness policy, or by dropping the course. Subsequent penalties assigned by the dean can include suspension or expulsion.

The faculty member then sends a copy of the above-described statement to the department head. The department head is *required* to send notification of the incident to the Office of the Registrar, so that an electronic notation can be made in the student's record. (This will not appear on a printed transcript. If the charges are dropped as a result of successful appeal, the notation will be erased. If there are no further irregularities, it can also be expunged upon written request by the student after graduation or following two semesters of non-attendance).

Subsequent proceedings for additional offenses:

- The Registrar's Office will notify the department head if this is the student's second (or more) offense.
- If so, the department head will recommend a sanction of suspension or expulsion to the dean.
- The dean makes the final sanction decision, and informs the student in writing.

The following list of academic irregularities is reprinted from FAU's policy on “Academic Irregularities and Students' Academic Grievances,” (6C5-4.01 FAU Honor Code):

- The use of notes, books, or assistance from or to other students while taking an examination or working on other assignments unless specifically authorized by the instructor--acts defined as cheating.
- The presentation of words or ideas from an existing source as one's own--acts defined as plagiarism.
- Other activities which interfere with the educational mission within the classroom.