Avoiding Plagiarism

Here are some materials from The Owl at Purdue web site (Do not use without permission.)

Overview and Contradictions

Research-based writing in American institutions, both educational and corporate, is filled with rules that writers, particularly beginners, aren't aware of or don't know how to follow. Many of these rules have to do with research and proper citation. Gaining a familiarity of these rules, however, is critically important, as inadvertent mistakes can lead to charges of **plagiarism**, which is the uncredited use (both intentional and unintentional) of somebody else's words or ideas.

While some cultures may not insist so heavily on documenting sources of words, ideas, images, sounds, etc., American culture does. A charge of plagiarism can have severe consequences, including expulsion from a university or loss of a job, not to mention a writer's loss of credibility and professional standing. This resource, which does not reflect any official university policy, is designed to help you develop strategies for knowing how to avoid accidental plagiarism.

There are some intellectual challenges that all students are faced with when writing. Sometimes these challenges can almost seem like contradictions, particularly when addressing them within a single paper. For example, American teachers often instruct students to:

- Develop a topic based on what has already been said and written **but** write something new and original
- Rely on opinions of experts and authorities on a topic **but** improve upon and/or disagree with those same opinions
- Give credit to researchers who have come before you **but** make your own significant contribution
- Improve your English or fit into a discourse community by building upon what you hear and read **but** use your own words and your own voice

There are some actions that can almost unquestionably be labeled plagiarism. Some of these include **buying, stealing, or borrowing a paper** (including, of course, copying an entire paper or article from the Web); **hiring someone to write your paper** for you; and **copying large sections of text** from a source without quotation marks or proper citation.

But then there are actions that are usually in more of a gray area. Some of these include using the words of a source too closely when paraphrasing (where quotation marks should have been used) or building on someone's ideas without citing their spoken or written work. Sometimes teachers suspecting students of plagiarism will consider the students' intent, and whether it appeared the student was deliberately trying to make ideas of others appear to be his or her own.

However, other teachers and administrators may not distinguish between deliberate and accidental plagiarism. So let's look at some strategies for avoiding even suspicion of plagiarism in the first place

Here, then, is **a brief list of what needs to be credited or documented**:

- Words or ideas presented in a magazine, book, newspaper, song, TV program, movie, Web page, computer program, letter, advertisement, or any other medium
- Information you gain through interviewing or conversing with another person, face to face, over the phone, or in writing
- When you copy the exact words or a unique phrase
- When you reprint any diagrams, illustrations, charts, pictures, or other visual materials
- When you reuse or repost any electronically-available media, including images, audio, video, or other media

Bottom line, document any words, ideas, or other productions that originate somewhere outside of you.

There are, of course, certain things that do not need documentation or credit, including:

- Writing your own lived experiences, your own observations and insights, your own thoughts, and your own conclusions about a subject
- When you are writing up your own results obtained through lab or field experiments
- When you use your own artwork, digital photographs, video, audio, etc.
- When you are using "common knowledge," things like folklore, common sense observations, myths, urban legends, and historical events (but **not** historical documents)
- When you are using generally-accepted facts, e.g., pollution is bad for the environment, including facts that are accepted within particular discourse communities, e.g., in the field of composition studies, "writing is a process" is a generally-accepted fact.

Deciding if Something is "Common Knowledge"

Generally speaking, you can regard something as common knowledge if you find the same information undocumented in at least five credible sources. Additionally, it might be common knowledge if you think the information you're presenting is something your readers will already know, or something that a person could easily find in general reference sources. But when in doubt, cite; if the citation turns out to be unnecessary, your teacher or editor will tell you.

here are certain practices that can help you not only avoid plagiarism, but even improve the efficiency and organization of your research and writing.

Best Practices for Research and Drafting

Reading and Note-Taking

- In your notes, always mark someone else's words with a big **Q**, for quote, or use big quotation marks
- Indicate in your notes which ideas are taken from sources with a big **S**, and which are your own insights (**ME**)
- When information comes from sources, record relevant documentation in your notes (book and article titles; URLs on the Web)

Interviewing and Conversing

- Take lots of thorough notes; if you have any of your own thoughts as you're interviewing, mark them clearly
- If your subject will allow you to record the conversation or interview (and you have proper clearance to do so through an Institutional Review Board, or IRB), place your recording device in an optimal location between you and the speaker so you can hear clearly when you review the recordings. Test your equipment, and bring plenty of backup batteries and media.
- If you're interviewing via email, retain copies of the interview subject's emails as well as the ones you send in reply
- Make any additional, clarifying notes immediately after the interview has concluded

Writing Paraphrases or Summaries

- Use a statement that credits the source somewhere in the paraphrase or summary, e.g., According to Jonathan Kozol, ...
- If you're having trouble summarizing, try writing your paraphrase or summary of a text without looking at the original, relying only on your memory and notes
- Check your paraphrase or summary against the original text; correct any errors in content accuracy, and be sure to use quotation marks to set off any exact phrases from the original text
- Check your paraphrase or summary against sentence and paragraph structure, as copying those is also considered plagiarism.
- Put quotation marks around any unique words or phrases that you cannot or do not want to change, e.g., "savage inequalities" exist throughout our educational system (Kozol).

Writing Direct Quotations

- Keep the source author's name in the same sentence as the quote
- Mark the quote with quotation marks, or set it off from your text in its own block, per the style guide your paper follows
- Quote no more material than is necessary; if a short phrase from a source will suffice, don't quote an entire paragraph

- To shorten quotes by removing extra information, use ellipsis points (...) to indicate omitted text, keeping in mind that:
    - MLA style requires ellipsis points to appear in brackets, e.g., [...].
    - three ellipsis points indicates an in-sentence ellipsis, and four points for an ellipsis between two sentences
- To give context to a quote or otherwise add wording to it, place added words in brackets, []; be careful not to editorialize or make any additions that skew the original meaning of the quote—do that in your main text, e.g.,
    - **OK**: Kozol claims there are "savage inequalities" in our educational system, which is obvious.
    - **WRONG**: Kozol claims there are "[obvious] savage inequalities" in our educational system.
- Use quotes that will have the most rhetorical, argumentative impact in your paper; too many direct quotes from sources may weaken your credibility, as though you have nothing to say yourself, and will certainly interfere with your style

Writing About Another's Ideas

- Note the name of the idea's originator in the sentence or throughout a paragraph about the idea
- Use parenthetical citations, footnotes, or endnotes to refer readers to additional sources about the idea, as necessary
- Be sure to use quotation marks around key phrases or words that the idea's originator used to describe the idea

Maintaining Drafts of Your Paper

Sometimes innocent, hard-working students are accused of plagiarism because a dishonest student steals their work. This can happen in all kinds of ways, from a roommate copying files off of your computer, to someone finding files on a disk or pen drive left in a computer lab. Here are some practices to keep your own intellectual property safe:

- Do not save your paper in the same file over and over again; use a numbering system and the Save As... function. E.g., you might have research_paper001.doc, research_paper002.doc, research_paper003.doc as you progress. Do the same thing for any HTML files you're writing for the Web. Having multiple draft versions may help prove that the work is yours (assuming you are being ethical in how you cite ideas in your work!).
- Maintain copies of your drafts in numerous media, and different secure locations when possible; don't just rely on your hard drive or pen drive.
- Password-protect your computer; if you have to leave a computer lab for a quick bathroom break, hold down the Windows key and L to lock your computer without logging out.
- Password-protect your files; this is possible in all sorts of programs, from Adobe Acrobat to Microsoft word (just be sure not to forget the password!)

Revising, Proofreading, and Finalizing Your Paper

- Proofread and cross-check with your notes and sources to make sure that anything coming from an outside source is acknowledged in some combination of the following ways:
    - In-text citation, otherwise known as parenthetical citation
    - Footnotes or endnotes
    - Bibliography, References, or Works Cited pages
    - Quotation marks around short quotes; longer quotes set off by themselves, as prescribed by a research and citation style guide
    - Indirect quotations: citing a source that cites another source
- If you have any questions about citation, ask your instructor **well in advance** of your paper's due date, so if you have to make any adjustments to your citations, you have the time to do them well

Safe Practices: An Exercise

Read over each the following passages, and respond on your own or as a class as to whether or not it uses citations accurately. If it doesn't, what would you do to improve the passage so it's properly cited?

1. Last summer, my family and I traveled to Chicago, which was quite different from the rural area I grew up in. We saw the dinosaur Sue at the Field Museum, and ate pizza at Gino's East.

2. Americans want to create a more perfect union; they also want to establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty for everybody.

3. I find it ridiculous that 57% of high school students think their teachers assign too much homework.

Numbers 4, 5, and 6 all refer to the following passage from Martin Luther King's "Letter from the Birmingham Jail":

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes. It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative.

4. Martin Luther King was certain that nobody would want to be contented with a surfacy type of social analysis that concerns itself only with effects and doesn't deal with root causes.

5. Martin Luther King wrote that the city of Birmingham's "white power structure" left African-Americans there "no alternative" but to demonstrate ("Letter from the Birmingham Jail" para. 5).

6. In "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," King writes to fellow clergy saying that although they "deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham, your statement fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations."

7. My friend Kara told me that she loves living so close to the ocean.

8. Americans are guaranteed the right to freely gather for peaceful meetings.

Here are Other ideas from the Council of Writing Program Administrators:

Definition: *In an instructional setting, plagiarism occurs when a writer deliberately uses someone else's language, ideas, or other original (not common-knowledge) material without acknowledging its source.(From the Council of Writing Program Administrators)* This definition applies to texts published in print or on-line, to manuscripts, and to the work of other student writers.

Most current discussions of plagiarism fail to distinguish between:

1. submitting someone else's text as one's own or attempting to blur the line between one's own ideas or words and those borrowed from another source, and
2. carelessly or inadequately citing ideas and words borrowed from another source.

Such discussions conflate *plagiarism* with the *misuse of sources.*

Ethical writers make every effort to acknowledge sources fully and appropriately in accordance with the contexts and genres of their writing. A student who attempts (even if clumsily) to identify and credit his or her source, but who misuses a specific citation format or incorrectly uses quotation marks or other forms of identifying material taken from other sources, has not plagiarized. Instead, such a student should be considered to have failed to cite and document sources appropriately.

understanding why students plagiarize can help teachers to consider how to reduce the opportunities for plagiarism in their classrooms.

- Students may fear failure or fear taking risks in their own work.
- Students may have poor time-management skills or they may plan poorly for the time and effort required for research-based writing, and believe they have no choice but to plagiarize.

- Students may view the course, the assignment, the conventions of academic documentation, or the consequences of cheating as unimportant.
- Teachers may present students with assignments so generic or unparticularized that students may believe they are justified in looking for canned responses.
- Instructors and institutions may fail to report cheating when it does occur, or may not enforce appropriate penalties.

Just as students must live up to their responsibility to behave ethically and honestly as learners, teachers must recognize that they can encourage or discourage plagiarism not just by policy and admonition, but also in the way they structure assignments and in the processes they use to help students define and gain interest in topics developed for papers and projects.

Students should understand research assignments as opportunities for genuine and rigorous inquiry and learning. Such an understanding involves:

- Assembling and analyzing a set of sources that they have themselves determined are relevant to the issues they are investigating;
- Acknowledging clearly when and how they are drawing on the ideas or phrasings of others;
- Learning the conventions for citing documents and acknowledging sources appropriate to the field they are studying;
- Consulting their instructors when they are unsure about how to acknowledge the contributions of others to their thought and writing.

Faculty need to design contexts and assignments for learning that encourage students not simply to recycle information but to investigate and analyze its sources. This includes:

- Building support for researched writing (such as the analysis of models, individual/group conferences, or peer review) into course designs;
- Stating in writing their policies and expectations for documenting sources and avoiding plagiarism;
- Teaching students the conventions for citing documents and acknowledging sources in their field, and allowing students to practice these skills;
- Avoiding the use of recycled or formulaic assignments that may invite stock or plagiarized responses;

- Engaging students in the process of writing, which produces materials such as notes, drafts, and revisions that are difficult to plagiarize;
- Discussing problems students may encounter in documenting and analyzing sources, and offering strategies for avoiding or solving those problems;
- Discussing papers suspected of plagiarism with the students who have turned them in, to determine if the papers are the result of a deliberate intent to deceive;
- Reporting possible cases of plagiarism to appropriate administrators or review boards.

Administrators need to foster a program- or campus-wide climate that values academic honesty. This involves:

- Publicizing policies and expectations for conducting ethical research, as well as procedures for investigating possible cases of academic dishonesty and its penalties;
- Providing support services (for example, writing centers or Web pages) for students who have questions about how to cite sources;
- Supporting faculty and student discussions of issues concerning academic honesty, research ethics, and plagiarism;
- Recognizing and improving upon working conditions, such as high teacher-student ratios, that reduce opportunities for more individualized instruction and increase the need to handle papers and assignments too quickly and mechanically;
- Providing faculty development opportunities for instructors to reflect on and, if appropriate, change the ways they work with writing in their courses.

Best Practices

College writing is a *process* of goal setting, writing, giving and using feedback, revising, and editing. Effective assignments construct specific writing situations and build in ample room for response and revision. There is no guarantee that, if adopted, the strategies listed below will eliminate plagiarism; but in supporting students throughout their research process, these strategies make plagiarism both difficult and unnecessary.

1. Explain Plagiarism and Develop Clear Policies

- **Talk about the underlying implications of plagiarism.** Remind students that the goal of research is to engage, through writing, in a purposeful, scholarly discussion of issues that are sometimes passed over in daily life. Understanding, augmenting, engaging in

dialogue with, and challenging the work of others are part of becoming an effective citizen in a complex society. Plagiarism does not simply devalue the institution and the degree it offers; it hurts the inquirer, who has avoided thinking independently and has lost the opportunity to participate in broader social conversations.

- **Include in your syllabus a policy for using sources, and discuss it in your course.** Define a policy that clearly explains the consequences of both plagiarism (such as turning in a paper known to be written by someone else) and the misuse or inaccurate citation of sources.

- **If your university does not already have one, establish an honor code to which all students subscribe; a judicial board to hear plagiarism cases; or a departmental ombudsperson to hear cases brought between students and instructors.**

2. Improve the Design and Sequence of Assignments

- **Design assignments that require students to explore a subject in depth.** Research questions and assignment topics should be based on principles of inquiry and on the genuine need to discover something about the topic, and should present that topic to an audience in the form of an exploration or an argument.

- **Start building possible topics early.** Good writing reflects a thorough understanding of the topic being addressed or researched. Giving students time to explore their topics slowly and helping them to narrow their focus from broad ideas to specific research questions will personalize their research and provide evidence of their ongoing investigations

- **Consider establishing a course theme, and then allow students to define specific questions about that theme so that they become engaged in learning new ideas and begin to own their research.** A course theme (like "literacy" or "popular culture") allows students and instructor to develop expertise and to support each other as they read, write, and engage in their research. Grounding the theme in a local context (such as the campus, or the neighborhood or city where the campus is located) can provide greater relevance to students' lives. Once students have defined a topic within the course theme, ask them to reflect frequently on their choice of topic: about what they already know about the topic when they begin their research; about what new ideas they are learning along the way; and about what new subjects for research they are discovering.

- **Develop schedules for students that both allow them time to explore and support them as they work toward defined topics.** As researchers learn more about their subjects, they typically discover new, unforeseen questions and interests to explore. However, student researchers do not have unlimited time for their work—at some point,

they must choose a focus for their papers. Conferences with students (sometimes held in the library or computer resource center) are invaluable for enabling them to refine their focus and begin their inquiry.

- **Support each step of the research process.** Students often have little experience planning and conducting research. Using planning guides, in-class activities, and portfolios, instructors should "stage" students' work and provide support at each stage—from invention to drafting, through revision and polishing. Collecting interim materials (such as annotated photocopies) helps break the research assignment down into elements of the research process while providing instructors with evidence of students' original work. Building "low-stakes" writing into the research process, such as reflective progress reports, allows instructors to coach students more effectively while monitoring their progress.

- **Make the research process, and technology used for it, visible.** Ask your students to consider how various technologies—computers, fax machines, photocopiers, e-mail—affect the way information is gathered and synthesized, and what effect these technologies may have on plagiarism.

- **Attend to conventions of different genres of writing.** As people who read and write academic work regularly, instructors are sensitive to differences in conventions across different disciplines and, sometimes, within disciplines. However, students might not be as aware of these differences. Plan activities—like close examinations of academic readings—that ask students to analyze and reflect on the conventions in different disciplines.

3. Attend to Sources and the Use of Reading

- **Ask students to draw on and document a variety of sources.** Build into your assignments additional sources, such as systematic observation, interviews, simple surveys, or other datagathering methods. Incorporating a variety of sources can help students develop ways of gathering, assessing, reading, and using different kinds of information, and can make for a livelier, more unique paper.

- **Consider conventions.** Appropriate use of citations depends on students' familiarity with the conventions of the genre(s) they are using for writing. Design activities that help students to become familiar with these conventions and make informed choices about when and where to employ them.

- **Show students how to evaluate their sources.** Provide opportunities for students to discuss the quality of the content and context of their sources, through class discussions, electronic course management programs or Internet chat spaces, or reflective

assignments. Discuss with students how their sources will enable them to support their argument or document their research.

- **Focus on reading.** Successful reading is as important to thoughtful research essays as is successful writing. Develop reading-related heuristics and activities that will help students to read carefully and to think about how or whether to use that reading in their research projects.

4. Work on Plagiarism Responsibly

- **Distinguish between misuse of sources and plagiarism.** If students have misused sources, they probably do not understand how to use them correctly. If this is the case, work with students so that they *understand* how to incorporate and cite sources correctly. Ask them to rewrite the sections where sources have been misused.

- **Ask students for documentation.** If a student's work raises suspicions, talk with him or her about your concerns. Ask students to show you their in-process work (such as sources, summaries, and drafts) and walk you through their research process, describing how it led to the production of their draft. If they are unable to do this, discuss with them the consequences of plagiarism described in your syllabus (and, perhaps, by your institution). If you have talked with a student and want to pursue your own investigation of his or her work, turn to sources that the student is likely to have used and look for evidence of replication.

- **Use plagiarism detection services cautiously.** Although such services may be tempting, they are not always reliable. Furthermore, their availability should never be used to justify the avoidance of responsible teaching methods such as those described in this document.

5. Take Appropriate Disciplinary Actions

- **Pay attention to institutional guidelines.** Many institutions have clearly defined procedures for pursuing claims of academic dishonesty. Be sure you have read and understood these before you take any action.

- **Consider your goal.** If a student has plagiarized, consider what the student should take away from the experience. In some cases, a failing grade on the paper, a failure in the course, academic probation, or even expulsion might achieve those goals. In other cases, recreating the entire research process, from start to finish, might be equally effective.

Council of Writing Program Administrators, January, 2003