

PLAGIARISM—AND HOW TO AVOID IT

Is It Plagiarism Yet?

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 student's intent, and whether it appeared the student was deliberately trying to make ideas of others appear to be their 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.

When Do We Give Credit?

The key to avoiding plagiarism is to make sure you give credit where it is due. This may be credit for something somebody said, wrote, emailed, drew, or implied. Many professional organizations, including the Modern Language Association and the American Psychological Association, have lengthy guidelines for citing sources. However, students are often so busy trying to learn the rules of MLA or APA format and style that they sometimes forget exactly what needs to be credited. 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 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.

Credit: Adapted from The Writing Lab & the OWL at Purdue and Purdue University, 2020.

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/using_research/avoiding_plagiarism/is_it_plagiarism.html.

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