

Avoiding Plagiarism

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Plagiarism is a violation of American copyright law; therefore, to plagiarize is to commit an illegal act. The consequences of plagiarism can be very serious and ignorance of the law is no excuse, yet the practice is widespread among college students. Anonymous surveys of college students over the past seven years have asked students if they have ever plagiarized another person's work. The lowest percentage of those reporting that they had plagiarized was 40% (Sinclair), while the highest percentage was 80% ("Facts").

To avoid plagiarism, you must know what plagiarism is, what the consequences of it can be, and how to avoid it. As you will see in the paragraphs below, I have been careful to avoid plagiarism by properly documenting the sources I have used. Proper documentation of sources is something that is expected of every college student. In the Arts and Humanities, the Modern Language Association (MLA) Rules are used to avoid plagiarism.

What is plagiarism?

"To plagiarize is to present another person's words or ideas as if they were your own. Plagiarism is like stealing" (Troyka 487). Most students know that they guilty of plagiarism if they copy another person's work—for example, cutting and pasting from the Internet—without giving the author or the website credit for the work. They know, too, that they should credit sources for quotations from books, websites, plays, poems, short stories, novels, lectures, or magazines if they use them in the text of a paper. But you may not know that you are also guilty of plagiarism "if you half-copy the author's sentences—either by mixing the author's well-chosen phrases with your own without quotation marks or by plugging in your synonyms into the author's sentence structure" (Hacker 211). This often happens when you are summarizing an author's ideas by merely changing some of his/her words. This type of direct paraphrasing, called "plagi-phrasing," is a common practice among students because they think that if they have changed a few words, they are not plagiarizing. Yet any time you copy an author's pattern of ideas, you are plagiarizing IF the source of the original material from which you summarized is not properly documented.

Here's an example that illustrates this point. Responding to a prompt which asked students to create a fictional speech for a "National Teacher of the Year Award," one student wrote:

I accept this award on behalf of all the incredible teachers I've known over the years who have struggled to make their connections with children respectable ones. Men and women who are never satisfied; always questioning, always wrestling to define and redefine endlessly what the word "education" should mean. A Teacher of the Year is not the best teacher around, those people are too quiet to be easily exposed, but he is a standard-bearer, symbolic of these private people who spend their lives willingly in the service of children. This is their award as well as mine. (Anonymous)

Here's what the source she plagiarized said (emphasis mine):

I accept this award on behalf of all the fine teachers I've known over the years who've struggled to make their transactions with children honorable ones, men and women who are never complacent, always questioning, always wrestling to define and redefine endlessly what the word "education" should mean. A Teacher of the Year is not the best teacher around, those people are too quiet to be easily uncovered, but he is a standard-bearer, symbolic of these private people who spend their lives gladly in the service of children. This is their award as well as mine. (Gatto)

Because this student changed some of the words in the source (those which are highlighted above), she believed that she could represent these ideas as her own. However, **even though you may change a few or a lot of an author's words, if you maintain the author's unique pattern of ideas, you MUST give the author the credit he is due for creating that pattern of ideas.**

Finally, **it is also considered plagiarism if you do not properly caption and credit the sources of any charts, graphs, statistics, visual art, illustrations, drawings, photographs, or other visuals that you have borrowed from others.**

Plagiarism is using, but not properly documenting:

- Direct quotations from the work of others;
- Direct paraphrases from the work of others, including copying an author's pattern of ideas;
- Charts, graphs, statistics, visual art, illustrations, drawings, photographs or other visuals that are the work of others.

The statistics cited in the opening paragraph indicate that plagiarism is a widespread practice among college students. Some willingly commit plagiarism, others commit it unknowingly. However, in either case plagiarism can have serious repercussions to you.

What can happen to me if I plagiarize?

At Valencia, plagiarism is an act of Academic Dishonesty, a form of cheating. According to College Policy 6HX28: (10-16),

all work submitted by students is expected to be the result of the students' individual thoughts, research, and self-expression. . . . Any student determined by the professor to have been guilty of engaging in an act of academic dishonesty shall be liable to a range of academic penalties as determined by the professor which may include, but not be limited to, one or more of the following: loss of credit for an assignment, examination, or project; a reduction in the course grade; or a grade of "F" in the course. . . . Students guilty of engaging in a gross or flagrant act of academic dishonesty or repeated instances shall also be subject to administrative and/or disciplinary penalties which may include warning, probation, suspension and/or expulsion from the College. (*Student Handbook* 114)

This means that you can be suspended or expelled from Valencia for ONE "gross or flagrant act of academic dishonesty" such as submitting another student's paper as your own or cutting-and-pasting a paper from the Internet. if you are expelled, this expulsion will be

recorded on your permanent academic record and will follow you for the rest of your life. It may mean that you will have difficulty being admitted to another college or university, that you cannot receive a “top security clearance” if you are in the military or work for a defense related contractor, or that you may not be hired as a teacher, among other things. In addition, you could be sued by the person whose work you plagiarized for copyright infringement which is a felony offense resulting in fines and/or jail time.

As you can see, **while students may not consider copying the work of others to be a serious offense “because everybody does it,” professors, professionals, and employers DO consider it a serious offense with serious consequences to you, your reputation and your career.**

How will my professors know if I plagiarized?

Since the College is serious about Academic Dishonesty, the college subscribes to a plagiarism-checking service, SafeAssign, that is made available to all professors. Professors will often expect you to submit your work to this service through Blackboard, Valencia's online instructional platform. **SafeAssign matches your work against all material in an electronic format and to all papers submitted to SafeAssign, past or present. This means that your paper will be checked against EVERYTHING submitted to SafeAssign at any college (any it is the most widely used platform in the US) AND EVERYTHING on the Internet (all books, magazines, and journals available in electronic form).** It is also possible to use search engines like Google to check for plagiarism, too. **It takes less time for your professor to check your paper for plagiarism than it does for you to cut-and-paste a passage from a website into your paper!**

Also, **professors are often on the look-out for plagiarism because it is so widespread among college students.** “A study by The Center for Academic Integrity found that almost 80% of college students admit to cheating at least once” (“Facts”). Since plagiarism is a form of cheating that professors know is widespread, most are on the lookout for it. Not only is it quick and easy to check for plagiarism, most professors can easily spot the difference between student level work and professional or scholarly sources. **In addition, because many university professors copyright their writings, they are especially sensitive when students steal others’ words, ideas, photographs, or illustrations, and pass them off as their own.** Keep in mind, ignorance of the rules is no excuse for plagiarism and many professors will penalize you for your first act of plagiarism—no matter how minor it is—because they want to protect the ownership of others’ ideas, as well as their own.

How can I avoid plagiarism?

You can avoid plagiarism by practicing good scholarship—the kind that will be expected of you at the university and in the business world. **You must: (1) cite the source of your information in the text of your work, using either the kind of citation shown above or by using a footnote or endnote; AND (2) you must provide a list of the works you have cited at the end of your text.** (See below “Works Cited.”) **Keep in mind that you must provide both an in-text citation (1) and a Works Cited list (2) “for the following types of borrowing: direct quotations; paraphrases; the author's opinions and data; visuals and graphics”** (Keene and Adams 78). Keep in mind, too, that **you must document your source(s) if you half-copy the author's sentences or if you substitute some of your own synonyms for the author's words when you are summarizing.**

Keep in mind: for proper documentation in the MLA Style which we will use in this course, you must have BOTH a CORRECT in-text citation AND a CORRECT Works Cited list.

The rules for this style and samples of correct documentation can be found in most English handbooks, such as those cited below, as well as those in the Web Links for this course. Languages, such as English and Spanish, and the fine arts, such as art history and humanities, use the MLA Style, while the social sciences (political science; psychology) and some sciences (biology, chemistry and physics) use the APA Style. Both styles are found in most handbooks and on numerous websites, including the [OWL Purdue Online Writing Lab](#). Each style has DIFFERENT rules, so be sure you are looking at the right style manual when checking your work.

Is there anything that I don't have to document?

You do not have to document anything that is considered common knowledge. For example, you do not have to document a well-known fact, like the date of President Kennedy's assassination or the birth date of Michelangelo. Also, you do not have to document common definitions or values, like the scientific method or the atomic number of sodium. **A good rule of thumb is that if you can find the same information in more than one book, you do not have to document that information IF you have not copied or borrowed the language of the author.**

For example, if you write, "Raphael came to Florence in 1505", you do not have to document this sentence even though your text states "Raphael (Rafaello Santi or Sanzio) arrived in Florence from Urbino..." (Sayre 49). **However**, if you write, "Meanwhile, in about 1505 Raphael Sanzio arrived in Florence from Urbino...", **you MUST document your source because you have borrowed the pattern of ideas of the author, even though you have changed a word or two.**

Therefore, **you do not have to document:**

- **Facts found in various sources** (but put into your own words);
- **Dates of historical events and information** (like who fought in World War I);
- **Widely known ideas** (such as the "Mona Lisa is a good example of Leonardo da Vinci's individual style");
- **Your own thoughts and opinions.**

For more information and further clarification on what must be documented and how to do it, you can consult any English handbook, either in print or online.

Why shouldn't I plagiarize? It's easier than writing stuff myself!

When you are pressed for time or don't feel up to the task assigned, it might seem easier to plagiarize, but, as you have seen, the consequences can be VERY serious—ranging from a "0" on an assignment that could ruin your grade in a course, to expulsion from the college that can ruin your career. **In addition to those serious consequences, there is another one, one that students don't often consider: you are cheating yourself out of learning the skills you are paying to acquire and that you will need in your profession.**

On every survey of the skills employers look for most in their employees, good written communications skills rank in the top five, just as highly as technical knowledge of the profession. Therefore, developing good written communication skills now can turn into salary increases later in your career. Good writing skills are acquired little-by-little over a period of semesters and years, so the more practice you have, the better off you will be in the future. And an important part of good communication skills is learning when and how to document your sources. Using proper documentation lends credibility to your work by showing that you have carefully researched your subject, as well as makes visible the kind of person you are, one with honesty and integrity. If you don't learn the processes of good writing now, as well as practice the kinds of ethical behavior that are expected of you, you will not have the skills you need to succeed in the highly competitive worlds of the university and your profession. Learning how to avoid plagiarism is more than learning how to get around the law or how to avoid being caught, it is learning how to fashion yourself into the kind of person you want to be.

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