

Plagiarism: What it is, How to avoid it

The Problem

Plagiarism is everyone's business. As cases in point, consider these recent events:

New York Times reported Jayson Blair was found to have plagiarized copy over several articles under his own byline. Popular artists have not been immune from the charge of plagiarism, as the case of Dr Dre (a rapper who has been accused of lifting a base line from a competitor's song) has shown. In all of these cases, serious consequences have followed. Jayson Blair, for example, lost his job, as did a supervisor at the Times. Dr Dre has been ordered to pay \$1.5 million in damages.

What is Plagiarism?

It is important that we all be clear about the meaning of plagiarism. Because of the need to be precise, we are here quoting verbatim from the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 6th edition:

"Using another person's ideas, information, or expressions without acknowledging that person's work constitutes intellectual theft."

You may be tempted to believe that plagiarism amounts to the theft of words alone; in fact, the offence involves appropriating as your own "the product of another person's mind" (as quoted in Gibaldi 66). In other words, when you use someone's words, ideas, or patterns of thought without acknowledging your source, you are engaging in plagiarism.

Remember:

- Plagiarism occurs whether intended or not.
- Plagiarism can be seen as both a legal issue (copyright infringement) and an ethical one (fraud).

Examples of Plagiarism

Take a look at the passages below for examples of plagiarism.

The Original	<i>Plagiarized Version A:</i> Taking phrases without quotation or citation	<i>Plagiarized Version B:</i> Appropriating ideas and patters of thought without citation
<p>Until now, the human race has undergone two great waves of change, each one largely obliterating earlier cultures of civilizations and replacing them with the ways of life inconceivable to those who came before. The First Wave of Change- the agricultural revolution- took thousands of years to play itself out. The Second Wave- the rise of industrial civilization- took a mere hundred years.</p>	<p>Up until recent years, humanity has witnessed two great waves of change, each doing away with earlier cultures. The first wave, or the agricultural, took thousands of years. The second, or industrial, only took a hundred years.</p>	<p>There have been two revolutionary periods of change in history: the agricultural revolution and the industrial revolution. The agricultural revolution determined the course of history for thousands of years; the industrial civilization lasted about a century. We are now on the threshold of a new period of revolutionary change, but this one may last for only a few decades.</p>

Avoiding Plagiarism

Acknowledging Sources

Although formats vary according to the conventions of particular disciplines and subject areas, we acknowledge our sources in two ways: through “in-text citation” and a complete bibliographical list at the end of our paper. In MLA Style this is referred to as a “Works Cited” pages; in APA it is referred to as “References.”

To “cite” a source refers to the practice of mentioning your source within the body of the sentence in which the borrowing occurs, as well as listing the source, with complete bibliographic information, at the end of your essay.

Common Knowledge

Common Knowledge refers to **information that the average, educated reader would accept as reliable without having to look it up** (MIT Academic Integrity Handbook for Students).

Examples include:

- **Information that most people know**, such as oxygen is a gas, the first president of the United States was George Washington, or that water freezes at 32 degrees.
- **Information shared by a cultural or national group**, such as the names of famous heroes or events in the nation’s history that are remembered and celebrated.
- **Knowledge shared by members of a certain field**, such as the fact that the necessary condition for diffraction of ration of wavelength from a crystalline solid is given by Bragg’s Law.

However, what may be common knowledge in one culture, nation, academic discipline or peer group may *not* be common knowledge to another.

Example:

- A description of the symptoms of Asperger’s Syndrome would need to be cited for a composition in a general writing class, but probably would not need a citation for an audience of graduate students in psychology.

Avoiding Plagiarism

Students tend to plagiarize because they are unaccustomed to using sources productively. Moreover, they find it difficult to present themselves as “experts” when quoting published authorities. So often, as a result, students yield to those sources and virtually disappear from sections of their essays.

- Before you search for sources when doing research, write down a clean and productive question that can drive your search.
- Write down, early on, an inventory of what you know and believe about your topic.
- When reading sources, employ a reliable system of note taking, taking care to separate quotations from summaries and paraphrases, citing your source in all cases.
- When quoting, paraphrasing, or summarizing your source, use “signal phrases” to indicate that you are borrowing words or thoughts (“According to Beecher...,” “According to a 2016 study...”)
- Always cite your sources.