Avoiding plagiarism

1 What is plagiarism?

Basically plagiarism means taking ideas or words from a source without giving credit (acknowledgement) to the author. It is seen as a kind of theft, and is considered to be an academic crime. In academic work, ideas and words are seen as private property belonging to the person who first thought or wrote them. Therefore it is important for all students, including international ones, to understand the meaning of plagiarism and learn how to prevent it in their work.

The main difficulty that students face is that they are expected:

(a) to show that they have read the principal experts on a subject – by giving citations

(b) to explain these ideas in their own words and come to their own original conclusions

2 Acknowledging sources

If you borrow from or refer to the work of another person, you must show that you have done this by providing the correct acknowledgement. There are two ways to do this:

Summary and citation
Smith (2009) claims that the modern state wields power in new ways.

Quotation and citation
According to Smith: ‘The point is not that the state is in retreat but that it is developing new forms of power . . .’ (Smith, 2009: 103).

These in-text citations are linked to a list of references at the end of the main text, which includes the following details:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Place of publication</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The citation makes it clear to the reader that you have read Smith and borrowed this idea from him. This reference gives the reader the necessary information to find the source if the reader needs more detail.

See Unit 1.8 References and quotations
3 Degrees of plagiarism

Although plagiarism essentially means copying somebody else’s work, it is not always easy to define.

- Working with a partner, consider the following academic situations and decide if they are plagiarism.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Yes/No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Copying a paragraph, but changing a few words and giving a citation.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Cutting and pasting a short article from a website, with no citation.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Taking two paragraphs from a classmate’s essay, without citation.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Taking a graph from a textbook, giving the source.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Taking a quotation from a source, giving a citation but not using quotation marks.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Using something that you think of as general knowledge, e.g. large areas of rainforest have been cut down in recent years.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Using a paragraph from an essay you wrote and had marked the previous semester, without citation.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Using the results of your own research, e.g. from a survey, without citation.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Discussing an essay topic with a group of classmates and using some of their ideas in your own work.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Giving a citation for some information but mis-spelling the author’s name.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This exercise shows that plagiarism can be accidental. For example, situation (10) above, when the author’s name is mis-spelt, is technically plagiarism but really carelessness. In situation (9) your teacher may have encouraged you to discuss the topic in groups, and then write an essay on your own, in which case it would not be plagiarism. Self-plagiarism is also theoretically possible, as in situation (7). It can be difficult to decide what is general or common knowledge (situation 6), but you can always try asking colleagues.

4 Avoiding plagiarism by summarising and paraphrasing

Quotations should not be over-used, so you must learn to paraphrase and summarise in order to include other writers’ ideas in your work. This will demonstrate your understanding of a text to your teachers.

- Paraphrasing involves re-writing a text so that the language is substantially different while the content stays the same.
- Summarising means reducing the length of a text but retaining the main points.

See Units 1.6 Paraphrasing and 1.7 Summarising

Normally both skills are used at the same time, as can be seen in the examples below.

- Read the following text and then compare the five paragraphs below, which use ideas and information from it. Decide which are plagiarised and which are acceptable, and give your reasons in the table.

4.1 RAILWAY MANIAS

In 1830 there were a few dozen miles of railways in all the world – chiefly consisting of the line from Liverpool to Manchester. By 1840 there were over 4,500 miles, by 1850 over 23,500. Most of them were projected in a few bursts of speculative frenzy known as the ‘railway manias’ of 1835–7 and especially in 1844–7; most of them were built in large part with British capital, British iron, machines and know-how. These investment booms appear irrational, because in fact few railways were much more profitable to the investor than other forms of enterprise, most yielded quite modest profits and many none at all; in 1855 the average interest on capital sunk in the British railways was a mere 3.7 per cent.

(From The Age of Revolution by Eric Hobsbawm, 1995, p. 45)
(a) Between 1830 and 1850 there was very rapid development in railway construction worldwide. Two periods of especially feverish growth were 1835–7 and 1844–7. It is hard to understand the reason for this intense activity, since railways were not particularly profitable investments and some produced no return at all. (Hobsbawm, 1995: 45)

(b) There were only a few dozen miles of railways in 1830, including the Liverpool to Manchester line. But by 1840 there were over 4,500 miles and over 23,500 by 1850. Most of them were built in large part with British capital, British iron, machines and know-how, and most of them were projected in a few bursts of speculative frenzy known as the ‘railway manias’ of 1835–7 and especially in 1844–7. Because most yielded quite modest profits and many none at all these investment booms appear irrational. In fact few railways were much more profitable to the investor than other forms of enterprise. (Hobsbawm, 1995: 45)

(c) As Hobsbawm (1995) argues, nineteenth-century railway mania was partly irrational: ‘because in fact few railways were much more profitable to the investor than other forms of enterprise, most yielded quite modest profits and many none at all: in 1855 the average interest on capital sunk in the British railways was a mere 3.7 per cent.’ (Hobsbawm, 1995: 45)

(d) Globally, railway networks increased dramatically from 1830 to 1850; the majority in short periods of ‘mania’ (1835–7 and 1844–7). British technology and capital were responsible for much of this growth, yet the returns on the investment were hardly any better than comparable business opportunities. (Hobsbawm, 1895: 45)

(e) The dramatic growth of railways between 1830 and 1850 was largely achieved using British technology. However, it has been claimed that much of this development was irrational because few railways were much more profitable to the investor than other forms of enterprise; most yielded quite modest profits and many none at all.

### 5 Avoiding plagiarism by developing good study habits

Few students deliberately try to cheat by plagiarising, but some develop poor study habits that result in the risk of plagiarism.

- **Work with a partner, add to the list of positive habits.**
  - Plan your work carefully so you don’t have to write the essay at the last minute.
  - Take care to make notes in your own words, not copying from the source.
  - Keep a record of all the sources you use (e.g. author, date, title, page numbers, publisher).
  - Make sure your in-text citations are all included in the list of references.

### 6 Research

Does your college or university have a policy on plagiarism? Look on the website to find out. It may raise some issues that you want to discuss with colleagues or your teachers.

If you can’t find anything for your institution try one of these sites:

- [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/589/01/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/589/01/)
- [http://ufap.com/writing/plagiar/plagfram.htm](http://ufap.com/writing/plagiar/plagfram.htm)