What is Plagiarism? January 1, 2005.

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TheNollView · 2005
Original: http://noll.uscannenberg.org/TheNollViewfiles/Plagiarism.htm
Archived copy, Internet Archive snapshot 2008-11-21

WHAT IS PLAGIARISM?

INTRODUCTION

What is plagiarism? Students caught plagiarizing at the graduate level are sometimes expelled from a university, so plagiarism clearly is a very serious matter. This short document describes and defines plagiarism in its many forms, along with an explanation for why it is so serious. More information is available at the Uuniversity of Southern California (USC) web site and from the USC Office for Student Conduct.

PLAGIARISM IS DECEPTION

When grading your work, the instructor assumes all the words, ideas, drawings, overall structure, and other aspects of your paper are yours, unless told otherwise. The way you tell your instructor that words, ideas, and other aspects of your paper are not yours is through full disclosure of what specific portions are not yours along with their sources. If you fail to do this properly and adequately, then the instructor will have assumed that all the words and other aspects of the paper were yours when they were not. Failure to inform the reader which words and other aspects of your paper are not yours is plagiarism.

Plagiarism is deception. Plagiarism is very disturbing to most faculty members and instructors, particularly when it is done deliberately. The fact that you claim that you did not intend to plagiarize and deceive your instructor is impossible to prove, and hence most universities take the position that intent does not matter in cases of plagiarism. Committing plagiarism exposes you to a host of sanctions, from reduction of a grade to expulsion.

FULL DISCLOSURE—IT'S ALL ABOUT QUOTE MARKS!

Full disclosure is accomplished through the use of quotation marks to show what words and phrases are not yours and have been copied from sources. Any words, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs copied directly and verbatim from sources must be enclosed in quotation marks.

If the copied material runs over a number of lines, the copied material is frequently indented and single spaced to inform the reader that the material comes from a source. Some writers place quotation marks around even the indented material just to be extra safe and not accidentally confuse the reader.

CITATION

Citation is the process of disclosing the source of the copied or referenced material. There are a number of ways of doing this. One way is the use of footnotes placed at the end of the material to be cited. Another way is a reference at the end of the material with more details about the source placed in a bibliography.

Citation methods can vary according to whether your work is a research academic paper or a more practical professional piece. Style manuals describe and explain specific methods. When in doubt, you should ask your instructor what specific style is desired. But the use of quotation marks and other indications of what words are not yours are always required.

PARAPHRASING

When you paraphrase material you restate it entirely in your own words. Only the overall idea of the source is used. A citation is usually required to give credit to the source of the idea.

Paraphrasing is not simply rearranging the words of the source, perhaps adding and dropping a few words along the way. If you wish to rearrange the words of the source, then you should place all the copied words within quotation marks and use square brackets [ ] to indicate the words you have added and ellipses ... to indicate where you have omitted words.

The best advice is that if you are going to copy the words of a source, you should copy them exactly. Adding and dropping words is a tricky matter and invites problems. The copied words should be placed within quotation marks and the source suitably cited.

FACTS

Using facts in a paper can be difficult because there are a limited way in which the facts can be restated. Usually, you would reword the fact using your own words as much as possible, with an appropriate citation to indicate the source of the fact. However, if you are unable to reword the fact and you copy facts exactly from a source, enclosing them in quotation marks is the best way to avoid problems.

TOO MUCH QUOTATION

Imagine that a paper is entirely quoted from various sources. Sentence after sentence in the paper is a lengthy string of quotations. Although all the quotations were enclosed in quotation marks and the sources properly cited, the student would most likely receive a failing academic grade for the reason that no analysis or thought was performed by the student. This, however, is no justification for a student to omit quote marks to avoid a paper that would otherwise have too much quotation.

DON'T BE PARANOID

A fear of accidental plagiarism should not grip you. In researching a topic, you could remember a phrase and accidentally use it in your paper without quotation marks or even a citation. Some clauses and phrases are so common in writing that anyone could use them. A few words and phrases

here and there in a long paper may be identical to a source, and this would not be plagiarism. Plagiarism usually is quite extensive and consists of many lines and instances of copied material.

The plagiarist writes a paper by copying directly and extensively from sources. Sometimes a few words are added and dropped here and there to make the copied material a little different from the original. Other times the material is copied verbatim with no changes. Usually citations are present so that the reader believes the paper has been carefully researched. But since quote marks are absent, the reader does not know that the words are not those of the student.

The shrewd plagiarist not only copies without using quote marks, but citations are absent too so that the reader has no hint at all about the source of the material. The Internet makes is easier for instructors to search for the source of suspicious words and passages.

If you are careful in always marking which words have been copied in your research and then either placing these words in quotation marks or in thoroughly paraphrasing the words, you will avoid plagiarism. But also be sure to indicate the sources, using whatever citation style is appropriate or has been specified.

This section describes specific examples of plagiarism according to the definitions given earlier. The sentence that will be used is from the first paragraph of this piece, namely: “Students caught plagiarizing at the graduate level are sometimes expelled from a university, so plagiarism clearly is a very serious matter.” (Italics are used to indicate the examples.)

Suppose you copied this sentence verbatim into your paper without quotation marks or a citation to the source. That would be plagiarism. Suppose that you now added the citation but with no quotation marks. That still would be plagiarism since the reader would believe the sentence was your words.

If you copied the sentence verbatim into you paper, the correct way to do so is as follows: “Students caught plagiarizing at the graduate level are sometimes expelled from a university, so plagiarism clearly is a very serious matter.” [from: Noll, “What Is Plagiarism?”] There are many acceptable ways to give a citation, and the way used here is just one of many.

Suppose you decide you want to copy the sentence, but change it a little so it appears somewhat different. You drop and add a word here and there, finally writing: Students plagiarizing are expelled from school, so plagiarism is a serious violation. Since you have essentially copied from the original but have not informed the reader that the sentence structure and most of the words are not yours, you have plagiarized. Adding a citation would not remedy the plagiarism. The correct way to copy the sentence with the changes would be: “Students ... plagiarizing ... are ... expelled from [school], so plagiarism is a ... serious [violation].” [from: Noll, “What Is Plagiarism?”] In most cases, this kind of copying would be considered somewhat sloppy writing. If you are going to copy material, it is usually best to copy it exactly and enclose it in quotation marks, rather than adding and dropping words.

Lastly, suppose you decide to paraphrase the source. A correct way of doing this would be to write: Noll points out that plagiarism must be important since students are expelled because of it. [see: Noll, “What Is Plagiarism?”] In paraphrasing, you have referred to and have learned from the source, but you restate the material in your own words. You give credit to the source with a citation, sometimes writing “see:” as an indication that you are paraphrasing.

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