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Writing@CSU Writing Guide

Understanding and Avoiding Plagiarism

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Main Page

Failure to document source material in a research paper, or doing so improperly, is plagiarism: a wrongful use of someone else's work. All educational and research institutions have strict rules against it and all publish clear guidelines regarding the policies by which you will be expected to live. This guide is intended to clear up any questions you may have regarding Plagiarism.

Overview: What is Plagiarism?

Plagiarism is the unauthorized or unacknowledged use of another person's academic or scholarly work. Done on purpose, it is cheating. Done accidentally, it is no less serious. Regardless of how it occurs, plagiarism is a theft of intellectual property and a violation of an ironclad rule demanding "credit be given where credit is due".

Quite often, carelessness, procrastination and inexperience are contributing factors behind a charge of plagiarism. Developing good research habits and learning how to properly cite and document your sources will keep you above suspicion and protect you from such charges.

If you intend on pursuing an academic career, your scholarship will undergo constant examination by your peers and colleagues. Your reputation will be earned when you earn their respect; how you will be judged will be based, in part, on how you treat the intellectual property of others.

Acknowledging those from whom you have learned assigns credibility to your work and creates a record that other researchers can refer to and build upon. More importantly, your own skill and talent as a scholar will begin to take shape.

As respect for your scholarship grows, so too will your inclusion in the ongoing conversation among experts, past and present, within your specific field of study. Your own body of intellectual property will not be far behind.

What is Research?

In every field of study, there are those who have blazed a trail of inquiry and, in so doing, advanced the general knowledge of the world in which we live. Research is an active process of learning from these trailblazers. Look upon your own project as an exploration of what they thought, discovered, created or, in any way added to the body of knowledge prior to your entry into the same field of study.

Look at your research project as a quest for answers to a central question, or set of related questions, that will further your own understanding of the world. Look at it also as an opportunity to contribute something of value to the already existing body of knowledge or the ongoing conversation among other individuals investigating the same

topic.

It should be fun. Pick a topic in which you are particularly interested or curious and the journey will be that much more interesting. As you read, study, and absorb ideas and facts from others, write them down. Keep detailed notes on your sources. Who said what? In which journal was it published? Why, when, where, who, etc.

As a researcher and a writer you must credit these sources. Whenever you incorporate a general concept, idea, quotation, statistic, fact, illustration, graph or data that is not your own, it must be acknowledged. Failure to do so is plagiarism.

Common Forms of Plagiarism

The most common forms of plagiarism are committed by students; the most offensive are deliberate attempts to "pull one over" on the instructor. The reasons for doing this vary but laziness and procrastination are high on the list.

Once discovered—and they are seldom not—deliberate incidences of plagiarism are handed over to a governing body for review and prosecution. Here is a list of the most common:

- Purchasing an essay or paper from a Web site (or anywhere else) and calling it your own.
- Borrowing another student's paper from a previous semester and calling it your own.
- Having someone else do your work, for free or for hire. Agreeing to do someone else's work is equally wrong.
- Claiming originality regarding material copied directly from outside sources. In other words, deliberately failing to cite sources.
- Improperly documenting quoted, paraphrased or summarized source material.
- Extending the length of a bibliography to meet project requirements by including sources not used in your research or making them up all together.
- Killing two birds with one stone. Recycling an essay or paper written for one class by using it in another class studying the same or similar material.
- Receiving help from other students on an essay or paper and turning it in under your own name as individual work.
- Collectively researching and writing a paper with other students and each turning copies into different class sections claiming it as individual work.

As you can see, most of these involve lying, cheating and stealing. The last two forms of plagiarism, however, are a bit more complicated. They involve collaboration and sometimes the line between it and plagiarizing can be a little blurry. After all, working, studying and sharing information is encouraged in most educational institutions.

Collaboration

Collaborative learning is an important educational process in which a group of students work together to achieve a common learning goal. As new ideas and information are

discussed and shared, individual critical thinking skills are strengthened.

In the sciences, research projects and lab work are regularly intermingled. Problem solving is often worked on in a group setting. In the liberal arts, although individual work is more often the norm, writing instruction is often provided in classes with a "workshop" format.

At Colorado State University, for instance, COCC150, the composition course required of all undergraduates for graduation, is workshop oriented. Instructors plan for and expect collaboration in the classroom.

If you are a CSU student, your writing assignments will be read and commented upon by your peers. Expect to participate with your fellow classmates in an active exchange of ideas and suggestions. The Writing Center is also available, free of charge, for individualized tutoring assistance and you will be encouraged to take advantage of the help provided.

Any class requiring peer review, draft sharing, brainstorming, information swapping, outside tutoring, etc., is an approved collaborative learning program and your participation is not plagiarism. Keep in mind, however, that individual effort is no less important than collaborative teamwork.

The issues that arise around collaboration involve authorized and unauthorized boundaries. What is acceptable and what is not? If the parameters on collaboration are unclear and not addressed in your class syllabus, ask your instructor.

If you are receiving help from a tutor or a friend outside of class, discuss the situation with your instructor to avoid any misunderstanding. Everything will be fine if you stay within the guidelines he or she provides.

Avoiding Plagiarism

First, do your own work - Begin your research project as early as possible. Keep up in class, do your library work and start your drafts in a timely fashion. Writing your paper will be so much easier if not put it off to the last minute. Procrastination is not a credible excuse; it's simply a bad choice. Performing under deadline pressures often pushes a student into cheating.

Second, establish your own voice - Easier said than done, but this is a key ingredient to your success and a primary difficulty all experienced writers have had to face and overcome. Learn as much as you can about your topic: it will help you develop a point-of-view from which to speak. The more you know, the easier it will be to avoid plagiarism.

Third, do your research carefully. Read the material closely. Knowing your topic well includes knowing what others have said. Strive for a mastery of your topic by introducing yourself intellectually to those who have already made a contribution, or are presently

adding to the ongoing conversation. Keep an annotated bibliography of the source material you intend to use in your paper.

Fourth, keep copies of all your drafts - In review, you will notice your own point-of-view developing, changing and growing; a voice of authority all your own, emerging. It will stand in contrast to those of your sources. The difference between yours and their voices will go a long way toward helping you avoid plagiarism.

Finally, make sure that your document is properly constructed and your sources correctly cited. Remember, if the general concept, idea, quotation, statistic, fact, illustration, graph or data you intend to include is not common knowledge in the field of your investigation, a source must be cited. Not doing so will damage your credibility.

Share hard copies of "work-in-progress" with your instructor. As you move toward completion invite—and be receptive—to constructive suggestions. It can only make your paper better. This is where errors, especially citation errors, get pointed out and corrected. After a paper is handed in, such mistakes can be grounds for plagiarism charges.

Here is a checklist of questions to ask yourself before handing in your work:

- Are all quotations surrounded by quotation marks?
- Are single and double quotation marks properly used in quotations within quotations?
- Are ellipses and brackets included in quotations where words have been deleted or comments added?
- Are any quotations, paraphrases or summaries attributed to the wrong author? Are any missing an attribution completely?
- Are your paraphrases worded significantly different than the original?
- Are your summaries written in your own voice?
- Are all your source citations included in your bibliography or sources cited page?
- Are the titles, page numbers and dates in your documentation correct?

Warning: On Copying Unique Phrasing or Terminology

When paraphrasing or summarizing, avoid copying the unique phrasing or terminology found in your source material. Many students have been charged with plagiarism for using words that are clearly too sophisticated or well-crafted to be their own.

For instance, you would not want to refer to "the textual resistant narrative that counteracts the narrative supremacy of the dominant social text" (1) when writing an essay about the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* unless your instructor is aware that you are at an advanced stage of thinking in the field of literary criticism and is familiar with and used to seeing that kind of writing style from you.

Such language includes terminology bound to raise the proverbial "red flag" when your instructor reads your work. He or she is more likely than not to be familiar with your source and, if not, will discover in short order the critical work of Fiona Barnes.

When struck by particularly impressive or compelling phrasing, it is better to quote and document it rather than represent it as your own in a paraphrase or summary.

(1) Fiona R. Barnes, "Dismantling the Master's Houses: Jean Rhys and West Indian Identity," in *International Women's Writing*, ed. Anne E. Brown and Manjarme E. Gooze (Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995), 150-61.

Penalties for Plagiarism and Your Legal Rights

Plagiarism constitutes academic dishonesty and is both prosecuted and punished at every credible institution in the world. At Colorado State University, failure to do your own work in COCC150, or any other course for that matter—or to plagiarize in any way—is a failure to meet course requirements and is a violation of long established CSU policy regarding Academic Integrity.

The penalties for plagiarism depend upon the degree of gravity. Should you be found guilty, the least is an "F" on a paper. Failing an entire course is also possible and, in cases where the charges are graver, expulsion from the university.

Should you be suspected of plagiarism at CSU, you will be notified in writing. The charges may be disputed in a meeting with the Director of Composition; however, if the matter is not resolved, your case will be handled according to the guidelines set forth in the General Catalog and the handout on "Student Rights and Responsibilities."

It's important for you to know that fair and impartial treatment is your right and that due process is guaranteed. Regardless of the outcome, your case will be held in strict confidence in accordance with the [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974](#).

Colorado State University's policy on plagiarism can be found in the CSU General Catalog, in the Policies and Guiding Principles chapter under the Academic Integrity heading in the Student Responsibilities section.

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