

PLAGIARISM - THE BIG PICTURE

H. Subashini

Principal, Abhijay Matriculation School, Chennai

Introduction

Plagiarism ("kidnapper") refers to a form of cheating that has been defined as "the false assumption of authorship: the wrongful act of taking the product of another person's mind, and presenting it as one's own". Plagiarism involves two kinds of wrongs. Using another person's ideas, information, or expressions without acknowledging that person's work constitutes intellectual theft. Passing off another person's ideas, information, or expressions as your own to get a better grade or gain some other advantage constitutes fraud. Plagiarism is sometimes a moral and ethical offense rather than a legal one since some instances of plagiarism fall outside the scope of copyright infringement, a legal offense.

Consequences of Plagiarism

Plagiarism is almost always seen as a shameful act, and plagiarists are usually regarded with pity and scorn. They are pitied because they have demonstrated their inability to develop and express their own thoughts. They are scorned because of their dishonesty and their willingness to deceive others for personal gain. As Verlyn Klinkenborg points out, "Plagiarism is an ugly word and an all-encompassing one. We make more distinction among degrees of murder than we do among kinds of plagiarism". We not only distinguish degrees of murder; we also recognize degrees of theft. These distinctions allow us to urge leniency for a starving person who steals a loaf of bread and to approve a substantial prison term for a wealthy CEO who steals from employees' pension funds. We are less likely to consider extenuating circumstances when someone takes credit for another person's work, because fraud is involved. Plagiarism is plagiarism whether the theft is committed by a student or an experienced journalist. Moreover, although many of us would agree that a starving person who steals a loaf of bread can be rehabilitated; plagiarists rarely recover the trust of those they try to deceive.

The charge of plagiarism is a serious one for all writers. Students exposed as plagiarists suffer severe penalties, ranging from failure in the assignment or in the course to expulsion from school. They must also live with the distrust that follows an attempt to deceive others for personal gain. When professional writers, like journalists, are exposed as plagiarists, they are likely to lose their jobs, and they are certain to suffer public embarrassment and loss of prestige. For example, a well-known historian charged with plagiarism was asked to resign from prominent public positions even though she admitted responsibility for the theft, compensated the author whose work she took, and announced her intention to issue a corrected edition of her book. Almost always, the course of a

professional writer's career is permanently affected by a single act of plagiarism.

The serious consequences of plagiarism reflect the value the public places on trustworthy information. A complex society that depends on well-informed citizens maintains high standards of quality and reliability for documents that are publicly circulated and used in government, business, industry, the professions, higher education, and the media. Because research has the power to affect opinions and actions, responsible writers compose their work with great care. They specify when they refer to another author's ideas, facts, and words, whether they want to agree with, object to, or analyze the source. This kind of documentation not only recognizes the work writers do; it also tends to discourage the circulation of error, by inviting readers to determine for themselves whether a reference to another text presents a reasonable account of what that text says. Plagiarists undermine these important public values.

Student plagiarism does considerable harm. For one thing, it damages teachers' relationships with students, turning teachers into detectives instead of mentors and fostering suspicion instead of trust. By undermining institutional standards for assigning grades and awarding degrees, student plagiarism also becomes a matter of significance to the public. When graduates' skills and knowledge fail to match their grades, an institution's reputation is damaged. For example, no one would choose to be treated by a physician who obtained a medical degree by fraud. Finally, students who plagiarize harm themselves. They waste their tuition and lose an important opportunity to learn how to write a research paper. Knowing how to collect and analyze information and reshape it in essay form is essential to academic success. This knowledge is also required in a wide range of careers in law, journalism, engineering, public policy, teaching, business, government, and not-for-profit organizations.

Plagiarism betrays the personal element in writing as well. Discussing the history of copyright, Mark Rose notes the tie between our writing and our sense of self—a tie that, he believes, influenced the idea that a piece of writing could belong to the person who wrote it. Rose says that our sense of ownership of the words we write “is deeply rooted in our conception of ourselves as individuals with at least a modest grade of singularity, some degree of personality”. Gaining skill as a writer opens the door to learning more about yourself and to developing a personal voice and approach in your writing.

Information Sharing Today

Innumerable documents on a host of subjects are posted on the Web apparently for the purpose of being shared. The availability of research materials and the ease of transmitting, modifying, and using them have influenced the culture of the Internet, where the free exchange of information is an ideal. In this sea of materials, some students may question the need to acknowledge the authorship of individual documents. Professional writers, however, have no doubt about the matter. They recognize the importance of avoiding plagiarism whether they base their research on print or electronic publications.

And so they continue to cite their sources and to mark the passages they quote.

In the culture of the academy, too, the free exchange of information is a long-standing ideal. Under certain circumstances, this ideal is described as academic freedom. But nothing about academic freedom or the free exchange of information implies ignoring authorship. Academic standards require student and experienced writers to acknowledge the authors whose work they use when preparing papers and other kinds of studies and reports.

New technologies have made information easier to locate and obtain, but research projects only begin with identifying and collecting source material. The essential intellectual tasks of a research project have not changed. These tasks call for a student to understand the published facts, ideas, and insights about a subject and to integrate them with the student's own views on the topic. To achieve this goal, student writers must rigorously distinguish between what they borrow and what they create.

As information sharing has become easier, so has plagiarism. For instance, on the Internet it is possible to buy and download completed research papers. Some students are misinformed about buying research papers, on the Internet or on campus. They believe that if they buy a paper, it belongs to them, and therefore they can use the ideas, facts, sentences, and paragraphs in it, free from any worry about plagiarism. Buying a paper, however, is the same as buying a book or a magazine. You own the physical copy of the book or magazine, which you may keep in your bookcase, give to a friend, or sell. And you may use whatever you learn from reading it in your own writing. But you are never free from the obligation to let your readers know the source of the ideas, facts, words, or sentences you borrow. Whether in print or electronic formats, publications are a special kind of property. You can own them physically, but the publisher or author retains rights to the content. You should also know that purchased papers are readily recognizable, and teachers can often trace downloaded materials through an Internet search.

Unintentional Plagiarism

The purpose of a research paper is to synthesize previous research and scholarship with your ideas on the subject. Therefore, you should feel free to use other persons' words, facts, and thoughts in your research paper, but the material you borrow must not be presented as if it were your own creation. When you write your research paper, remember that you must document everything that you borrow—not only direct quotations and paraphrases but also information and ideas.

Often plagiarism in student writing is unintentional, as when an elementary school pupil, assigned to do a report on a certain topic, goes home and copies down, word for word, everything on the subject in an encyclopedia. Unfortunately, some students continue to use such "research methods" in high school and even in college, not realizing that these practices constitute plagiarism. To guard against the possibility of unintentional plagiarism during research and writing, keep careful notes that always distinguish among three types

of material: your ideas, your summaries and paraphrases of others' ideas and facts, and exact wording you copy from sources. Plagiarism sometimes happens because researchers do not keep precise records of their reading, and by the time they return to their notes, they have forgotten whether their summaries and paraphrases contain quoted material that is poorly marked or unmarked. Presenting an author's exact wording without marking it as a quotation is plagiarism, even if you cite the source. For this reason, recording only quotations is the most reliable method of note-taking in substantial research projects, especially for beginning students. It is the surest way, when you work with notes, to avoid unintentional plagiarism. Similar problems can occur in notes kept electronically. When you copy and paste passages, make sure that you add quotation marks around them.

Another kind of unintentional plagiarism happens when students write research papers in a second language. In an effort to avoid grammatical errors, they may copy the structure of an author's sentences. When replicating grammatical patterns, they sometimes inadvertently plagiarize the author's ideas, information, words, and expressions.

If you realize after handing a paper in that you accidentally plagiarized an author's work, you should report the problem to your instructor as soon as possible. In this way you eliminate the element of fraud. You may receive a lower grade than you had hoped for, but getting a lower grade is better than failing a course or being expelled. It is also better than experiencing the shame of plagiarism.

Forms of Plagiarism

The most blatant form of plagiarism is to obtain and submit as your own a paper written by someone else. Other, less conspicuous forms of plagiarism include the failure to give appropriate acknowledgment when repeating or paraphrasing another's wording, when taking a particularly apt phrase, and when paraphrasing another's argument or presenting another's line of thinking.

Repeating or Paraphrasing Wording

Suppose, for example, that you want to use the material in the following passage, which appears on page 625 of an essay by Wendy Martin in the book *Columbia Literary History of the United States*.

Original Source

Some of Dickinson's most powerful poems express her firmly held conviction that life cannot be fully comprehended without an understanding of death.

If you write the following sentence without documentation, you have plagiarized because you borrowed another's wording without acknowledgment, even though you changed its form:

Plagiarism

Emily Dickinson firmly believed that we cannot fully comprehend life unless we also understand death.

But you may present the material if you cite your source:

As Wendy Martin has suggested, Emily Dickinson firmly believed that we cannot fully comprehend life unless we also understand death.

The source is indicated, in accordance with MLA style, by the name of the author ("Wendy Martin") and by a page reference in parentheses, preferably at the end of the sentence. The name refers the reader to the corresponding entry in the works-cited list, which appears at the end of the paper.

Martin, Wendy. "Emily Dickinson." *Columbia Literary History of the United States*. Emory Elliott, gen. ed. New York: Columbia UP, 1988. 609-26.

Taking a Particularly Apt Phrase

Original Source

Everyone uses the word *language* and everybody these days talks about *culture*. . . . "Languaculture" is a reminder, I hope, of the *necessary* connection between its two parts. . . . (Michael Agar, *Language Shock: Understanding the Culture of Conversation* [New York: Morrow, 1994])

If you write the following sentence without documentation, you have committed plagiarism because you borrowed without acknowledgment a term ("languaculture") invented by another writer:

Plagiarism

At the intersection of language and culture lies a concept that we might call "languaculture."

But you may present the material if you cite your source:

At the intersection of language and culture lies a concept that Michael Agar has called "languaculture".

In this revision, the author's name refers the reader to the full description of the work in the works-cited list at the end of the paper, and the parenthetical documentation identifies the location of the borrowed material in the work.

Agar, Michael *Language Shock: Understanding the Culture of Conversation*. New York: Morrow, 1994.

Paraphrasing an Argument or Presenting a Line of Thinking

Original Source

Humanity faces a quantum leap forward. It faces the deepest social upheaval and creative restructuring of all time. Without clearly recognizing it, we are engaged in building a remarkable civilization from the ground up. This is the meaning of the Third Wave.

Until now the human race has undergone two great waves of change, each one largely obliterating earlier cultures or 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. Today history is even more accelerative, and it is likely that the Third Wave will sweep across history and complete itself in a few decades. (Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* [1980; New York: Bantam, 1981])

If you write the following sentence without documentation, you have committed plagiarism because you borrowed another writer’s line of thinking without acknowledgment:

Plagiarism

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.

But you may present the material if you cite your source:

According to Alvin Toffler, 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.

In this revision, the author’s name refers the reader to the full description of the work in the works-cited list at the end of the paper, and the parenthetical documentation identifies the location of the borrowed material in the work.

Toffler, Alvin. The Third Wave. 1980. New York: Bantam, 1981.

When Documentation is not needed

Common sense as well as ethics should determine your documentation. For example, you rarely need to give sources for familiar proverbs (“You can’t judge a book by its cover”), well-known quotations (“We shall overcome”), or common knowledge (“George Washington was the first president of the United States”; “At a red light, drivers come to a full stop”). But you must indicate the source of any information or material that you took from someone else. If you have any doubt about whether you are committing plagiarism, cite your source or sources.

Other Issues

Other issues related to plagiarism include reusing a research paper, collaborative work, and copyright infringement.

Reusing a Research Paper

If you must complete a research project to earn a grade in a course, handing in a paper you already earned credit for in another course is deceitful. Moreover, you lose the opportunity to improve your knowledge and skills. If you want to rework a paper that you

prepared for another course, ask your current instructor for permission to do so.

Collaborative Work

An example of collaborative work is a group project you carry out with other students. Joint participation in research and writing is common and, in fact; encouraged in many courses and in many professions. It does not constitute plagiarism provided that credit is given for all contributions. One way to give credit, if roles were clearly demarcated or were unequal, is to state exactly who did what. Another way, especially if roles and contributions were merged and shared, is to acknowledge all concerned equally. Ask your instructor for advice if you are not certain how to acknowledge collaboration.

Copyright Infringement

Whereas summaries, paraphrases, and brief quotations in research papers are normally permissible with appropriate acknowledgment, reproducing and distributing an entire copyrighted document or significant portions of it without obtaining permission to do so from the author or publisher is an infringement of copyright law and a legal offense, even if the violator acknowledges the source. This is true for documents published on the Internet or in print.

References

1. Alexander Lindey, *Plagiarism and Originality*, New York: Harper, 1952.
2. "From the Pulpit, a Borrowed Word," *New York Times*, 16 Mar. 2002.
3. *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing*, 2nd ed. New York: MLA, 1998.