

Plagiarism and the misuse of other people's writing

Plagiarism has always been a serious concern in science (and elsewhere), but is increasingly so as scandal after scandal hits the science headlines. Especially with the advent of the internet, an increasing number of people seem unaware of what constitutes appropriate use of work created by others. In order to ensure that you understand my views on what is and is not okay, it is important that you read this document carefully. It is your responsibility to ensure that you understand what I judge to constitute plagiarism. If you are not sure, please talk to me about it so that you do not find yourself in an unfortunate position.

Representing the work of another person as your own in any way is plagiarism. There are several ways to commit plagiarism. The most obvious is to turn in a paper or project that you did not create (i.e., that you bought, borrowed, copied, or stole). Doing this will result in a grade of "F" for the paper and the course, and the possibility of further sanction under the Student Code (see http://www.community.uconn.edu/student_code.html). No matter how pressed you are for time, it is simply not worth the risk.

Another form of plagiarism is to copy the wording or sentence structure of your sources. To do so without explicitly acknowledging the original author is dishonest. Even when acknowledged (e.g. by quotation marks), direct quotes are very rarely necessary for my assignments – the sources are rarely stunning examples of literary expression and, unlike in some disciplines (English, History), the reader rarely needs to examine the specific wording of the original to gain understanding. For this reason, I will not accept papers or projects with extensive quotation. It is important in many careers to be able to express the information and ideas that you read about in your own words and one goal of my courses is for you to get practice doing this.

It is also not enough to rework the original source writing by substituting or omitting some words and phrases.

The original: "Interspecific competition between *Balanus* and *Chthamalus* was, on the other hand, a most important cause of death of *Chthamalus*. This is shown both by the direct observations of the process of crowding at each census and by the differences between the survival curves of *Chthamalus* with and without *Balanus*....In addition, the evidence is strong that the observed competition with *Balanus* was the principal factor determining the local distribution of *Chthamalus*. *Chthamalus* thrived at lower levels when it was not growing in contact with *Balanus* ." (Text taken from: Connell, J. H. 1961. The influence of interspecific competition and other factors on the distribution of the barnacle *Chthamalus stellatus*. Ecology 42: 710-723.)

An unacceptable summary: "Competition between the two barnacle species was, nonetheless, an important source of mortality for *Chthamalus* (Connell 1961). This was indicated both by the observations of crowding and by the contrasts between the survivorship schedules of *Chthamalus* with and without *Balanus*. Furthermore, there is strong evidence that competition with *Balanus* was the most important factor determining the local distribution of *Chthamalus*. *Chthamalus* prospered at lower levels when they were not touching *Balanus*."

This summary is not original writing, even though it is not identical to the original. Instead, it simply mimics the source material in the organization of the paragraph, in sentence structure, and in choice of words and phrases. Writing of this kind is both lazy and unoriginal, and will result in a low grade.

How to avoid “accidental” plagiarism – It is not unusual for students to tell me that they did not realize that their writing was so similar to their source. One way that this can happen is when you start writing just after you have read a phrase and it is fresh in your mind. Although making this mistake is easy to do, it is still not okay and it remains your responsibility to guard against it happening. (By analogy, it is easy to drive faster than the speed limit by accident, but the courts will still judge you to be at fault and penalize you accordingly.)

To reduce the chance of falling into the trap of inadvertent plagiarism, I would recommend that you avoid writing with your source papers directly in front of you. Instead, read the papers, put them aside, make notes based on what you remember (i.e., do not copy phrases directly into your notes), take a break (maybe even a day or two), then start writing without looking back at the source(s). Once you have a draft, go back to the source material to ensure that you have not mischaracterized it and to check specific details. My experience is that people who do this not only avoid inadvertent plagiarism but also learn more and write better.

Another situation where I frequently see this form of plagiarism is when the source material is quite complicated or poorly explained by the original authors. I suspect that the reason is that such material is hard to understand, so people worry that they will make a mistake if they do not use similar wording to that in the source. Unfortunately, when people take this approach it is usually still obvious when they do not really understand the source material and they get penalized because they both explained the science poorly AND they copied someone else’s work. If you think this scenario may apply to you, then you should either seek out sources that you are sure you understand or seek help understanding the material you have chosen to write about. It is also worth knowing that the parts of papers that trip people up often are not even terribly important (e.g., frequently they are very specific details from the methods or data analysis sections). This information is important to specialists, but not critical to a basic understanding of the research goals or conclusions. The bottom line is that, if you are to write well about a topic, you need to understand it. So, the first step to getting a good grade is to ensure that you know what the source material means.

Once again, please ask questions if you are unsure as I am very happy to help you learn to navigate this difficult issue. I do not like failing people or having to discuss this topic any more than the average student does and I would much rather talk to you about it before it becomes a problem.

NOTE: Parts of this document are based on similar documents produced by my faculty colleagues and are used with their permission!