Plagiarism: Basic Definition and Facts for Students

Plagiarism is using a source without credit.

In your academic work, you will most likely hear about plagiarism as an issue when you write papers or create projects (slides, speeches, presentations). Knowledge does not exist in a vacuum. To make a case, formulate an argument, give a summary, do an analysis -- all the things you do when you write a paper -- you rely on ideas, expressions, and quotations from those who have come before you, from outside sources. The whole point of finding and evaluating information is to use it in some way. And there are accepted conventions for how to do this. The most common is citing. This means whenever you take a direct quote from a source or paraphrase an idea or argument from a source you provide a citation for it. This acknowledges that the idea is not originally yours, tells whose it is, and allows readers to follow the citation and find it themselves.

There is a cultural dimension to plagiarism as well. Here in the West we put a high value on individual genius and have all sorts of laws protecting intellectual property. We own our words, feel personally attached to them, and often take it as a personal offense if someone else takes them and passes them off as their own. In other cultures less emphasis is put on individual attribution and more on the social utility of texts and ideas and these are often shared and reused without any expectation of attribution. See for example this article about problems with plagiarism in China. So social norms have a lot to do with what is considered appropriate use of sources. Consider this a little lesson in the norms for source use in our social context.

What is NOT plagiarism

So that's a little bit on what plagiarism is, here is a little bit of what it is not:

Common knowledge: For instance, stating that cancer is a deadly disease is an obvious fact. We all know this. You don't need to cite it. But if you say that recent research suggests that eating more kiwi will prevent cancer, you better have a source to back you up.

Your ideas, expressions, and words: If you then say kiwi is delicious and you should eat it both because it tastes good and it is good for you, that is your idea, your conclusion, your expression and you obviously don't need to cite that. You are the source of your own ideas, and now someone can quote and cite you!

This may seem simple and obvious and at one level it is. But there may be times when you are not sure if something is common knowledge or not. For instance, I may mention that humans and chimpanzees share about 96% of the same DNA. Is this common knowledge or not? It may depend on your intended audience. If you are presenting to a room full of specialists in genetics, it probably is. But if you’re writing for a general audience, people who don’t necessarily know much about DNA and chimpanzees, it may not be.

A good rule of thumb is if you can easily find multiple sources for something, it’s probably common knowledge. When I do a quick Google search for “human chimp DNA” I see from the first page of results that there are many potential sources for this. Though I’d want to more
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carefully evaluate these sources (for instance, some 98%, some 90%), just the fact that it is so widely circulated puts it more on the common knowledge side.

But when in doubt, cite it!

Degrees of Plagiarism: Intentional and Unintentional

Plagiarism can be malicious and intentionally dishonest or, more innocently, simply ignorance. You may know the conventions and flaunt them or you may unintentionally break the rules because you don’t know what they are.

Just as larger cultures have different practices and norms, keep in mind that different disciplines within our culture have different conventions for acknowledging sources. In general the sciences and social sciences are more strict and rigorous, demanding closer attention to how you acknowledge outside sources, while in the humanities and especially literature and artistic expression -- where making indirect references to previous writers and artists can be an art form in itself -- the conventions may be looser.

Intentional Plagiarism: This is the category for outright academic dishonesty. This includes having someone else write your paper for you, or downloading one off the internet, or wholesale copy-and-pasting chunks of text from a website. And this doesn’t just apply to students. There are well-documented cases of plagiarism amongst established scholars and writers. This is just not doing your work because you’re too lazy to do it yourself. And you’re better than that, so don’t do it.

LMU, along with most institutions of higher learning, treat intentional plagiarism as a kind of academic crime for which you will be punished (failing the assignment and/or the class). Many scholars and educators also see it as a moral issue akin to stealing and just as inherently wrong as taking something that isn’t yours. But plagiarism isn’t necessarily just a legal or moral issue, it can also be seen as an educational problem. Just as you always heard in grade school, you really only hurt yourself when you cheat. You don’t learn anything if you don’t struggle to find the words and do the work yourself. You come to university to learn the rules of professionalism and codes of conduct in a given discipline and as mentioned above in America and most of the West we place a high value on originality and crediting sources. The basic idea is that this is the only way new ideas and inventions and ways of doing things can come about and this can never happen if people just take from what’s already been done without adding anything new to it.

Unintentional Plagiarism: This is not as bad as intentional plagiarism because you didn’t mean to do it. Nevertheless it is just as wrong, and after completing this learning unit you will no longer have the excuse that you didn’t know! This may also involve not knowing the conventions of the discipline within which you are working or writing, of when it is appropriate to cite and when you don’t need to. You will learn these conventions with time and familiarity. But again, if in doubt, cite it.