

## What Is Plagiarism?

You can use text, information, or ideas from another source in your writing so long as you make it clear that the information is borrowed, and give a full citation to show the source.

A citation must include (1) a reference to the original author in the text, and (2) complete information about the source in a list after the end of the writing. There are various styles of citations; in our school, the expected style is MLA.

The reference to the original author in the text can be a direct mention of the author's name (for example, "John Smith notes in his article...") or a note in parenthesis after the borrowed information, with the author's name or the source's title, in addition to the page number, if available.

**Plagiarism** is when you use information from an outside source, but you present it *without a full citation*, making it appear as if it were your own original writing.

Plagiarism includes:

- Copying exact text
- Paraphrasing text (using the same information but changing some or all of the words)
- Using someone else's specific idea, even if your wording is completely different
- Using information from a source which is not common knowledge
- Re-using your own work from a different class or assignment
- Handing in work that was prepared or written by someone else, even in small part

A "partial" citation is still plagiarism. For example, if you use quotation marks around quoted text but do not identify the source or give a full citation in the Works Cited list, that could be plagiarism. If you use a full citation in the Works Cited list, but you do not show in your essay what information was borrowed, that could be considered plagiarism.

It is **not** plagiarism if:

- It is widely-known common knowledge (e.g., the name of the president of Brazil)
- It is information that exists without anyone having "created" or "discovered" it
- It is an idea that is widely believed (e.g., that wealthy people should pay higher taxes)
- It is a quotation for which both the quote and the author are widely known (e.g., a famous quote by Albert Einstein, such as "God does not play dice with the universe.")
- It is a term or expression in general language, as opposed to a specific theory or idea

In order to avoid plagiarism, you must do **all** of the below:

- Use quotation marks around any text which is exactly the same as the source
- Indicate in your writing that the idea came from an outside source
- Make clear what information is borrowed and who the source is
- Give a complete and correct citation for all sources in your Works Cited list

If you use the exact same words as the source, you **must** use quotation marks around the words which are exactly the same. The only exception is the “three-word rule,” in which you do not need quotation marks if only one, two, or three words are copied exactly.

You can use up to three words which are exactly the same as quoted text IF:

- The words are not unusual or striking
- The words are not a unique name created by the source
- The information is otherwise cited properly (you mention the source in the text and in the Works Cited list)

You may not take a sentence or any part of text and only change a word here and a word there. Unless you create a **completely** different and original phrasing, you should use the original quote within quotation marks. Ask your instructor if they prefer that you give exact quotes or paraphrase.

### **Gray Areas**

It is not always certain whether something is plagiarism or not. There are “gray areas” in which judging originality is in question. For example, perhaps you are discussing your topic with friends and someone suggests an idea you had not considered. You take their idea, develop it, and include it in your essay. Does that require citation? Another uncertain area lies between specific knowledge and common knowledge; how “uncommon” does knowledge have to be in order to require citation?

There are two safe ways to deal with gray areas, when you are uncertain whether something is plagiarism or not:

- Ask the instructor of the class in which you will submit the work; or
- If you are for some reason unable to ask the instructor, then give a citation even though you are uncertain if one is needed (you are not likely to be punished if you cite something just to be safe)

*Never* be shy or reluctant to ask the instructor.

### **Sources**

If you can find the same information from multiple sources, always choose:

- The original source (not the source which cites or repeats); or
- The most reliable / trustworthy source

If you learn about information from one source (for example, Wikipedia), and later you find the original source of the information from a different source, you do not have to cite the first source, but only the source that you eventually decide to use.

If you heard information from a source but you cannot identify the source of that information, then you should simply not use it. For example, if you watched a TV show in the past and learned some information from it, but you cannot give an exact citation for the TV show, then your source is not acceptable and you should not use that as a source. Search for the information elsewhere; if you cannot find it anywhere, then do not use it at all. If you can find it elsewhere, then cite the source you have found.

## Defense of Plagiarism

There are no acceptable excuses for plagiarism:

- “Unknowing” plagiarism is not acceptable: you are expected to know what plagiarism is; if you are unsure, you must ask (**never** be shy about asking!)
- “Mistaken” plagiarism is not acceptable: it is your responsibility to not make mistakes
- “Unintended” plagiarism is not acceptable: your intention is not relevant
- Incomplete citation is not acceptable: if borrowed information is only partially cited, it is assumed that you are not being honest about the source, and are trying to take credit for it

Your professor is the judge of whether something is plagiarism or not. If you feel the teacher is mistaken, you may appeal to the school administration. However, teachers do not tend to make accusations of plagiarism without good cause.

When your text is identical to another source, it is considered proof of plagiarism, unless the identical text is (1) short and/or (2) common phraseology.

It is possible that you just *happened* to come up with an idea or theory that is *exactly* the same as someone else, but you had no idea this other person or their writing existed. However, do not depend on your instructor believing that without a convincing argument.

A good way to show that an idea is not plagiarized is to explain how you came up with the idea and developed it on your own.

## Penalties

Check your student handbook for the penalties your school requires for plagiarism. Some schools have a “zero-tolerance” policy, meaning you will be expelled for even one offense. Often the minimum penalty is to receive a “0” grade for the assignment with no opportunity to repeat the assignment for credit. Standard policies also require all incidents of plagiarism to be reported to the school administration, where the incident will be added to your official record, and possibly you will receive a warning letter which could lead to suspension.

## Strategies

Many students plagiarize because they cannot complete the assignment on their own in the given time. However, it is better to hand in incomplete work, or even nothing at all, than it is to hand in plagiarized work. Even poor or incomplete work will get a better grade.

Do not assume that the teacher will not discover the plagiarism:

- Undiscovered plagiarism is still wrong
- Your teacher will probably give stronger punishment if they feel that special effort was made to hide the plagiarism
- Writing teachers are usually very skilled at finding plagiarism; it is a poor gamble to think otherwise