

# Understanding and Avoiding Plagiarism

## What is plagiarism?

According to the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA, 2003), plagiarism occurs when a writer “deliberately uses someone else’s language, ideas, or other original (not common knowledge) material without acknowledging its source” (p. 1). Plagiarism is a serious, intentional act and should not be confused with carelessly or inadequately incorporating or documenting sources. Academic consequences for plagiarism include a failing grade for the assignment or the course, expulsion from school, or even revocation of a degree.

## What is patchwriting?

Jamieson & Howard (2011), define *patchwriting* as “restating a phrase, clause, or one or more sentences while staying close to the language or syntax of the source.” Often the process of patchwriting involves copying a source’s phrasing into your own document and then moving or changing some of the words. Students sometimes learn to *patchwrite* as a way to paraphrase source material or emulate academic prose. Occasionally students will even tell you they have been taught to do it. Since patchwriting does not qualify as original work, however, it should be replaced with effective, ethical summary of the source material.

## How can I steer clear of plagiarism?

The short answer: ***read the source, understand the source, close the source, and write your own words.*** That sounds simple enough. But ethical treatment of sources requires time and practice. Writers sometimes justify committing plagiarism if they 1) have limited experience writing with sources, 2) have not effectively managed their time, 3) misunderstand the assignment, or 4) come from a culture in which plagiarism is not recognized as unethical. In the long run, though, whatever their reasons are for taking shortcuts, writers need to understand that the lasting benefits of genuine learning far outweigh the short-term ease of *playing* school. The following choices (adapted from lists provided in Price, 2002, and WPA, 2003) will facilitate genuine learning:

1. Understand research and writing assignments as learning processes and opportunities for genuine inquiry and growth.
2. Learn to find, understand, and analyze relevant sources.
3. Make it clear when and how you use others’ words and ideas in your writing.
4. Learn how writers in your discipline use and cite sources and how they define common knowledge.
5. Ask your instructor when you are unsure whether or how to cite a source.
6. Choose a topic early, and one that will sustain your interest.
7. Start your research soon, take notes as you read, and pay attention to the words you see authors using in the text around their sources.

It is especially important that you take responsibility for your learning. Ask questions so that you understand your assignment, your audience, and your purpose as the writer. Take advantage of your instructor’s office hours. And use the Writing Center. See the reverse for questions to consider about authorship and ownership.

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## What questions do you ask about writing with sources?

Sometimes it's just hard to know what questions will get you the answers you need. Try the following list (adapted from Price, 2002) to get you started. Keep in mind that some questions will have different answers depending on the context or academic discipline.

- What if I think of something and it turns out someone else already thought of it first?
- What if I find the same idea in two books?
- What if it's something I heard somewhere, but I don't remember where?
- Can a writer ever compose "original" material, free of anyone else's influence?
- What counts as "common knowledge" in this subject?
- Why do all of my source articles use different format and citation rules?
- How many of a source's words can I use in a row without putting them in quotation marks?
- Isn't it all right to use a source's words as long as you mix in your own?
- How much of my own ideas can I put in my paper?

## References

- Jamieson, S. & Howard, R.M. (2011). What is plagiarism?. In *The citation project*. Retrieved from [http://site.citationproject.net/?page\\_id=32](http://site.citationproject.net/?page_id=32)
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- WPA (Council of Writing Program Administrators) (2003). Defining and avoiding plagiarism: The WPA statement on best practices. In *Council of writing program administrators*. Retrieved from <http://wpacouncil.org/files/wpa-plagiarism-statement.pdf>

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