What is Plagiarism

Many people think of plagiarism as copying another's work, or borrowing someone else's original ideas. But terms like "copying" and "borrowing" can disguise the seriousness of the offense:

According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, to "plagiarize" means
1. to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own
2. to use (another's production) without crediting the source
3. to commit literary theft
4. to present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source.

In other words, plagiarism is an act of fraud. It involves both stealing someone else's work and lying about it afterward.

But can words and ideas really be stolen?

According to U.S. law, the answer is yes. The expression of original ideas is considered intellectual property, and is protected by copyright laws, just like original inventions. Almost all forms of expression fall under copyright protection as long as they are recorded in some way (such as a book or a computer file).

All of the following are considered plagiarism:
- turning in someone else's work as your own
- copying words or ideas from someone else without giving credit
- failing to put a quotation in quotation marks
- giving incorrect information about the source of a quotation
- changing words but copying the sentence structure of a source without giving credit
- copying so many words or ideas from a source that it makes up the majority of your work, whether you give credit or not (see our section on "fair use" rules)

Most cases of plagiarism can be avoided, however, by citing sources. Simply acknowledging that certain material has been borrowed, and providing your audience with the information necessary to find that source, is usually enough to prevent plagiarism. See our section on citation for more information on how to cite sources properly.
Plagiarism FAQs

Plagiarism in the information age is not always a cut and dry issue. Read on to find answers for frequently asked questions about plagiarism and its consequences.

What is plagiarism?
Simply put, plagiarism is the use of another's original words or ideas as though they were your own. Any time you borrow from an original source and do not give proper credit, you have committed plagiarism and violated U.S. copyright laws. (See our What is Plagiarism? page for more detailed information on plagiarism.)

What are copyright laws?
Copyright laws exist to protect our intellectual property. They make it illegal to reproduce someone else’s expression of ideas or information without permission. This can include music, images, written words, video, and a variety of other media.

At one time, a work was only protected by copyright if it included a copyright trademark (the © symbol). According to laws established in 1989, however, works are now copyright protected with or without the inclusion of this symbol.

Anyone who reproduces copyrighted material improperly can be prosecuted in a court of law. It does not matter if the form or content of the original has been altered -- as long as any material can be shown to be substantially similar to the original, it may be considered a violation of the Copyright Act.

For information on how long a copyright lasts, see the section below on the public domain.

Are all published works copyrighted?
Actually, no. The Copyright Act only protects works that express original ideas or information. For example, you could borrow liberally from the following without fear of plagiarism:

- Compilations of readily available information, such as the phone book
- Works published by the U.S. government
- Facts that are not the result of original research (such as the fact that there are fifty U.S. states, or that carrots contain Vitamin A)
- Works in the public domain (provided you cite properly)

Can facts be copyrighted?
Yes, in some situations. Any "facts" that have been published as the result of individual research are considered the intellectual property of the author.

Do I have to cite sources for every fact I use?
No. You do not have to cite sources for facts that are not the result of unique individual research. Facts that are readily available from numerous sources and generally known to the public are considered "common knowledge," and are not protected by copyright laws. You can use these facts liberally in your paper without citing authors. If you are unsure whether or not a fact is common knowledge, you should probably cite your source just to be safe. Please visit Purdue's guide, "Deciding if Something is Common Knowledge."
Does it matter how much was copied?

Not in determining whether or not plagiarism is a crime. If even a small part of a work is found to have been plagiarized, it is still considered a copyright violation. However, the amount that was copied probably will have a bearing on the severity of the punishment. A work that is almost entirely plagiarized will almost certainly incur greater penalties than a work that only includes a small amount of plagiarized material.

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If I change the words, do I still have to cite the source?

Changing only the words of an original source is NOT sufficient to prevent plagiarism. You must cite a source whenever you borrow ideas as well as words.

If I cite the source, can I still be accused of plagiarism?

You are allowed to borrow ideas or phrases from other sources provided you cite them properly and your usage is consistent with the guidelines set by fair use laws. As a rule, however, you should be careful about borrowing too liberally -- if the case can be made that your work consists predominantly of someone else's words or ideas, you may still be susceptible to charges of plagiarism. Also, if you follow the words of a source too closely, and do not use quotation marks, it can be considered plagiarism even if you cite the source.

If I write something somebody else already wrote, but I didn't know they wrote it, is that still plagiarism?

While it is possible that you might write on the same topic as someone else, odds are that you will not have exactly the same ideas or express them in exactly the same way. It is highly unlikely that you would be accused of plagiarizing a source you have never read. Be careful, however, of "accidentally" plagiarizing from sources you have read and forgotten -- if your ideas turn out to have been influenced by a source that you read but failed to cite for any reason, you could be guilty of plagiarism.

What are the punishments for plagiarism?

As with any wrongdoing, the degree of intent (see below) and the nature of the offense determine its status. When plagiarism takes place in an academic setting, it is most often handled by the individual instructors and the academic institution involved. If, however, the plagiarism involves money, prizes, or job placement, it constitutes a crime punishable in court.

Academic Punishments

Most colleges and universities have zero tolerance for plagiarists. In fact, academic standards of intellectual honesty are often more demanding than governmental copyright laws. If you have plagiarized a paper whose copyright has run out, for example, you are no less likely to be disciplined than if you had plagiarized copyrighted material.

A plagiarized paper almost always results in failure for the assignment, frequently in failure for the course, and sometimes in expulsion.

Legal Punishments

Most cases of plagiarism are considered misdemeanors, punishable by fines of anywhere between $100 and $50,000 -- and up to one year in jail.

Plagiarism can also be considered a felony under certain state and federal laws. For example, if a plagiarist copies and earns more than $2,500 from copyrighted material, he or she may face up to $250,000 in fines and up to ten years in jail.

Institutional Punishments
Most corporations and institutions will not tolerate any form of plagiarism. There have been a significant number of cases around the world where people have lost their jobs or been denied positions as a result of plagiarism.

Does intention matter?

Ignorance of the law is never an excuse. So even if you did not realize you were plagiarizing, you may still be found guilty. However, there are different punishments for willful infringement, or deliberate plagiarism, and innocent infringement, or accidental plagiarism. To distinguish between these, courts recognize what is called the good faith defense. If you can demonstrate, based on the amount you borrowed and the way you have incorporated it in your own work, that reasonably believed what you did was fair use, chances are that your sentence will be lessened substantially.

What is "fair use," anyway?

The United States government has established rough guidelines for determining the nature and amount of work that may be "borrowed" without explicit written consent. These are called "fair use" laws, because they try to establish whether certain uses of original material are reasonable. The laws themselves are vague and complicated. Below we have condensed them into some rubrics you can apply to help determine the fairness of any given usage.

**The nature of your use.**
If you have merely copied something, it is unlikely to be considered fair use. But if the material has been transformed in an original way through interpretation, analysis, etc., it is more likely to be considered "fair use."

**The amount you've used.**
The more you've "borrowed," the less likely it is to be considered fair use. What percentage of your work is "borrowed" material? What percentage of the original did you use? The lower the better.

**The effect of your use on the original**
If you are creating a work that competes with the original in its own market, and may do the original author economic harm, any substantial borrowing is unlikely to be considered fair use. The more the content of your work or its target audience differs from that of the original, the better.

We recommend the following sites for more information on "fair use" and Copyright laws:

**University of Maryland - Copyright Laws**

**Fair Use Guidelines**

What is the "public domain?"

Works that are no longer protected by copyright, or never have been, are considered "public domain." This means that you may freely borrow material from these works without fear of plagiarism, provided you make proper attributions.

How do I know if something is public domain or not?
The terms and conditions under which works enter the public domain are a bit complicated. In general, anything published more than 75 years ago is now in the public domain. Works published after 1978 are protected for the lifetime of the author plus 70 years. The laws governing works published fewer than 75 years ago but before 1978 are more complicated, although generally copyright protection extended 28 years after publication plus 47 more years if the copyright was renewed, totaling 75 years from the publication date. If you are uncertain about whether or not a work is in the public domain, it is probably best to contact a lawyer or act under the assumption that it is still protected by copyright laws.
How to Paraphrase Properly

The following is an excerpt from a 1949 essay by Richard Hofstadter entitled "The Thesis Disputed."

American historical writing in the past century has produced two major theories or models of understanding, the economic interpretation of politics associated with Charles A. Beard, and the frontier interpretation of American development associated with Frederick Jackson Turner. Both views have had a pervasive influence upon American thinking, but Beard himself felt that Turner's original essay on the frontier had "a more profound influence on thought about American history than any other essay or volume ever written on the subject." ...

[But] it became plain, as new thought and research was brought to bear upon the problem, that the frontier theory, as an analytic device, was a blunt instrument.

Let's say you want to communicate ALL of the information above by paraphrasing. You might start by taking out some of the unnecessary words and changing others. For instance, do you need to say "theories or models," or is just "theories" enough for your purposes? Can you rephrase the last sentence to make it fit better with your style of writing? Asking questions like this is a good way to start paraphrasing, but it is only the beginning.

You want to make sure that you are not just changing the appearance of the source while still copying its essential structure. That is, you need to translate the passage into your own voice. Otherwise, you are plagiarizing Richard Hofstadter's expression, even if you acknowledge that the ideas came from him. For example, the following would be an example of plagiarism, not paraphrasing:

In the past century, American writing on history has produced two major theories, Charles A. Beard's economic interpretation of American development, and the frontier interpretation of American development associated with Frederick Jackson Turner. Each view has exerted a pervasive influence on American thinking, but even Charles A. Beard had to admit that Turner's essay on the frontier had "a more profound influence on thought about American history than any other essay or volume ever written on the subject." Yet in time it became plain, as new research was brought to bear upon the problem, that the frontier theory, as a means of analyzing history, was not nearly precise enough.

(Hofstadter, 1949)

This would be considered plagiarism because the sentence structure is too close to the original passage. All of the ideas are expressed in basically the same tone, with only a few changes in grammar and phrasing. In this case, it would have been more honest to retain all of the original words and put the entire passage in quotes -- acknowledging an indebtedness to Hofstadter for the expression of his ideas and not just those ideas themselves.

One way to avoid this is to jot down the main ideas of the original passage in your own words, creating a list like this:

- two main theories of American History
  - Turner = frontier thesis
  - Beard = economic interpretation of politics
- Turner was considered more influential -- even Beard admitted the fact
- recent research has undermined Turner's work

Then try writing a paragraph without looking at the original. In this case, it might turn out to be something like this:

In his 1949 essay "The Thesis disputed," Richard Hofstadter explains that there were two major currents of thought in historical writing about American development. He suggests that one of these, the "frontier thesis" associated with Frederick Jackson Turner, has been thought more
This paragraph more successfully translates Hofstadter's work into an original form of expression. Instead of just changing some words, this paragraph comes up with its own way of organizing and communicating the information. It also avoids plagiarism by clearly giving Hofstadter credit for his ideas. With just a little bit of work, then, you can turn a case of potential plagiarism into a perfect paraphrase!

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