

Avoiding plagiarism

This study guide aims to help you to understand what plagiarism is in the context of academic work and offers guidance on how to avoid it. Other useful guides are: [Referencing and bibliographies](#); [Effective note-making](#); and the series of [online tutorials](#) on this topic on the Student Learning Development website.

What is plagiarism?

In all aspects of academic study and research, thoughts and ideas inevitably build on those of other writers or researchers; this is a legitimate and essential part of the academic process. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines plagiarism as *the taking and using as one's own ... the thoughts, writings, or inventions of another*. In an academic context, plagiarism implies a deliberate act on the part of the writer or researcher to use the work, ideas or expressions of others as if they were his or her own.

Deliberate plagiarism, therefore, is academic cheating, and the University has a very firm view on this: anyone found to have deliberately copied or plagiarised the work of others is severely penalised. The University regulations concerning academic dishonesty can be found [here](#); departmental handbooks should also include a statement of the University's policy in respect of academic dishonesty.

Deliberate plagiarism with a clear intention to cheat is, however, far less common than plagiarism committed through misunderstanding or even carelessness. These latter types of plagiarism may occur if:

- you fail to acknowledge fully the sources of knowledge and ideas that you use in your work;
- you incorporate the words of others into your writing as if they were your own;
- you 'string together' ideas or facts taken from others without presenting your own viewpoint.

Many students, particularly those at the beginning of their courses, are unclear about how to use the work of others in a way that does not constitute plagiarism. This resource has been written to give guidance on how to avoid plagiarism and at the same time produce work of better quality.

Fully reference and acknowledge the work of others

Understanding how to use and appropriately acknowledge your debt to the work of others is an essential step in learning how to avoid plagiarism.

Make sure that when you are reading or researching for any written work or presentation, you include in your notes, or on any photocopies, the full reference details (see our study guide: [Referencing and bibliographies](#)) of each source that you use. This will ensure that you have all the information you need to acknowledge your sources fully when you come to use this material in your own work.

When you write down the precise words of a writer, make sure that you mark clearly in your notes that you have included an

exact quotation, and add the relevant page number to the other reference details. This will ensure that when you go back to your notes at a later date you will be able distinguish your own words from those of your sources. An appropriate sentence or phrase quoted from an expert in the field can be used with great effect within an essay or dissertation, but it needs to be fully referenced and clearly distinguished from your own words.

The paragraph below is taken word for word, from an article by Peter Scott in a book on the future of higher education and is used here as a source for a hypothetical essay on the topic of Higher Education in the 1990s.

Widening access to higher education is no longer conceived... as a crusade to help the educationally and socially deprived, to reach out into the depths of Britain's democracy (and, incidentally, to save departments and institutions from threatened closure!). Instead it is seen in much less heroic terms, as the careful management of burgeoning demand mainly, but not exclusively, from standard school leavers and other conventional sources (Scott, 1991 p.57).

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Scott, P. (1991) 'Access: an overview', in Schuller, T. (ed.) *The Future of Higher Education*. Buckingham: SRHE & Open University Press, pp. 55-60.

The paragraph below, from the essay returned by student A, has clearly been plagiarised. Although the wording has been changed slightly, the words are essentially those of Scott and not of the student writer, and there is no reference to the original source.

A.

The driving force behind Britain's move towards a mass higher education system is no longer conceived as a crusade to help the educationally and socially deprived. It has become a way of meeting the demand from standard level student leavers and other conventional sources.

Student A's plagiarism may not have been deliberate but the result of poor note taking which did not distinguish between the student's own words and ideas and those of other writers. Such plagiarism would nonetheless be taken very seriously.

The paragraph below from student B's essay is not plagiarised.

B.

The early 1990s saw considerable changes in the organisation of Higher Education in Britain, as it moved from an elite to a mass education system. At this time, the Editor of the *Times Higher Education Supplement* was Peter Scott, whose job placed him in a unique position to take a broad, and well informed, overview of these changes. He viewed the move to mass education as 'the careful management of burgeoning demand mainly, but not exclusively, from standard school leavers and other conventional sources' and not, as others might have seen it ' as a crusade to help the educationally and socially deprived, and to reach out into the depths of British democracy' (Scott, 1991 p.57)

Student B chose to include quotations to make a particular point, but these have been fully referenced. The quotations are included within a paragraph, which clearly shows the personal contribution of the student writer. This is seen in, for example, the comment on the background to Scott's viewpoint (as editor of the *Times Higher*) and the suggestion that his view is not universally held ('and not as others might have characterised it').

Student B might then go on to discuss, and give his opinion of, these other views, making sure that appropriate references were included.

Use your own words and develop your own writing style

Many students, particularly when they first start writing, find it difficult to develop their own writing style. When you are reading and researching for a piece of written work, you may want to copy down some exact quotes, in which case you will

need to use quotation marks, and record the page number. However, try to use your own words in your notes to *summarise* your reading, and to record your own ideas and comments on each text that you read. As you practise and establish your writing style, you will become more confident about expressing your thoughts and ideas in your own way.

If your first language is not English, and you are not yet completely fluent, it can be very tempting to borrow a well-expressed sentence or even a paragraph from another writer. However, this is plagiarism, and lecturers would much prefer to receive a piece of work in your own style, rather than to read chunks of text in perfect English that are clearly taken from another writer.

Organise and structure your work in your own way

Taking notes that paraphrase the views and opinions of the authors that you read is often the first stage of the research undertaken for any piece of written work. However, if your own writing consists largely of a string of paraphrases from a number of different writers, or an almost exact copy of the sequence of another writer's ideas and the logic of his/her argument, you may be seen to be plagiarising, even if you acknowledge the sources of your information. This type of plagiarism is probably the most common that is found in undergraduate work.

Two paragraphs from hypothetical essays illustrate this point. The essay is about the value of different types of assessment procedures. Student C has read a number of books on his topic, and in the paragraph below he has quoted some of them in his discussion of examinations. In these examples the sources quoted have been invented for illustrative purposes, so reference details are not provided.

C.

An experiment carried out by Smith (1997) showed that students do better in exams that contribute to their final grade than in those that are merely 'pass and proceed'; this showed that motivation is an important factor in improving students' examination performance. Patel (1995) believes that students should be given past papers to increase their confidence, but Jones (1998) thinks that this can lead to students revising only those topics that come up regularly. Essay-type questions are better than short-answer questions because they test creative thinking and not just memory (McPherson, 1997).

Student C's writing is essentially a string of findings and ideas from others and there is very little evidence of his own contribution to the topic. He seems only to be passing on the views of others, without any critical analysis of the arguments or evidence presented by his sources. Although he has referenced his sources, he has effectively plagiarised their ideas. This type of plagiarism, though not at all desirable, is not deliberate academic cheating, as there is no attempt here to claim the ideas as his own. However, Student C would not get a very good grade for his essay.

Now consider this paragraph from Student D's essay.

D.

Recent published research on the effectiveness of examinations as an assessment technique has highlighted the importance of motivation as a driving force (Patel, 1995; Smith, 1997; Jones 1998). Patel and Jones disagree about whether or not past papers can be useful in helping students, but I would agree with Patel that, without some clear examples of at least the types of questions that are likely to be asked, students are not able to plan an effective revision strategy. What is important, though, is not just the context in which examinations are used, but the format of the examinations themselves. McPherson (1997) argued against short-answer questions, which he saw as only capable of testing memory and not creative thinking. In his criticism of this type of examination, he has failed to acknowledge the importance of providing opportunities for students to develop a wider range of written communication skills than those developed by essay writing. The ability to write briefly and effectively is a very valuable skill for future employment; discursive essays are a form of writing that is very rarely used in the world of work.

Student D used the same sources, but has provided a much more sophisticated analysis. She has built on the work of her sources, and has taken the ideas and discussion forward. Her own contribution to the topic is very clear in this piece. Student D will gain a much higher grade for her work than Student C.

Don't be afraid to express your own views

Students may hesitate to express their own opinion, particularly if it contradicts that of 'experts'. Work published in books and journals, however, is not necessarily always right nor the last word on a topic. Do not be afraid to have your own views. What is important is that your views should be informed, clearly expressed, and based on careful consideration and knowledge of the relevant facts, and the views of those who are acknowledged to have expertise on the topic.

It is difficult for science students to make original contributions to their subject in the early stages of their undergraduate work. What you can show in your writing, however, is that you are aware of all the relevant information, and that you have a full understanding of the scientific principles that underpin the experiments that you write up, and the reports that you complete.

A method you use is unlikely to be your own, and you may need to acknowledge the source of the particular methodology you employ. However, the results that you obtain when you carry out the experiment are your own, and in their analysis and interpretation you can make your own contribution.

Other forms of plagiarism

Plagiarism can also occur in your use of illustrations, maps, and tables. Your captions need to acknowledge any material or ideas taken from a source that is not your own. Remember that you also need to avoid plagiarism in an oral presentation. You need to make appropriate acknowledgements of the authors you quote, both in your talk and in the slides that you use.

Further information

If you are still unclear about what is and isn't plagiarism, you can talk to your lecturer or personal tutor, or *make an appointment* with a Learning Adviser from Student Learning Development. Your departmental student handbook may also give you further guidance.

This study guide is one of a series produced by Student Learning Development at the University of Leicester. As part of our services we provide a range of resources for students wishing to develop their academic and transferable skills.

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