

Plagiarism: "Why Didn't Anyone Tell Me . . . ?"

Dr. Stephen B. O'Brien

Professor of Aeronautical Science

Dr. James T. Schultz

Assistant Professor of Aviation Business Administration

both from

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

Abstract

Plagiarism, the use of the work of another author without proper credit is prevalent throughout society. In some instances a double standard exists: in academia students and educators alike are severely censured if there is the slightest indication of plagiarism. But in other areas of society, the use of compensated ghostwriters is the accepted norm. How educators must explore this dichotomy with their students, and help them to internalize their own value system, is a topic of discussion in this paper. Along with the issue of intentional plagiarism, unintentional plagiarism, due primarily to the author's lack of knowledge on how to document properly, is also covered by way of documentation guidelines. As educators, it is our responsibility to ensure that our students are provided with sufficient knowledge on the concept of plagiarism, and its correlation, proper documentation. By failing to provide this information we expose our students to possible lawsuits and embarrassment, as well as the possibility of the loss of a job or promotion.

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Plagiarism: "Why Didn't Anyone Tell Me . . . ?"

Plagiarism is the appropriation or imitation of the language, ideas and thoughts of another author, and representation of them as one's original work.

If this paper were to continue without referencing with the use of quotation marks and proper citation, stating that the above definition had been taken verbatim from the Unabridged edition of the Random House College Dictionary, 1980 (revised edition), page 1014, the author would be guilty of plagiarism. If a paraphrased version of the definition was used, and the proper credit was not subsequently referenced to the source, it would also be considered plagiarism. However, if the identical concept, and even some of the same words found in the definition were used, but this information is readily available in many other sources without citation, or if it is considered a known fact, or if the author actually knew the information in his/her own right, then this 'common body of knowledge', as it is frequently known, would not necessitate citation. Unfortunately, for us as faculty members, these concepts are not fully comprehended by many of our students.

While the term itself sends chills down the spine of educators, professionals and researchers alike, plagiarism is more commonplace than most professionals realize. Frequently, the use of others' work without proper credit may be unintentional, formally endorsed, or even due to one's ignorance regarding the specific rules of documentation. Familiar justification and rationalization attempts often include: 'everyone does it'; I didn't know it was plagiarism; I just borrowed a small portion of the article; financial compensation was provided; no one important will ever see the paper; the professors never read the papers anyway; it will not be discovered so no one gets hurt; substantial time deadlines led me to plagiarize; even though it may sound like the original work--the words were arranged or paraphrased so it is not exactly copying the original source; or but why didn't anyone tell me! This paper reviews the issue of plagiarism and how educators can assist students and educators on how to avoid its pitfalls. Considering the actions of some of our national political, business, and even academic leaders, it is clear how rationalizing may ensue.

Society, in part, must shoulder some blame for the prevalence of plagiarism. In some professional circles 'borrowing', enhancing', developing' or 'building' on the work of others is encouraged. The existence of a staff of writers or leg-work people particularly in political and corporate sectors suggest that paid positions are created for the express purpose of developing creative ideas which, in turn, are stamped with approval and utilized by someone else with little or no credit given to the actual author or authors. However, the presence of more lenient standards in other segments of society need not be reason for accepting those standards as our

own. Perhaps a question to form our approach to this issue is what guidance does our university offer concerning plagiarism to assist our faculty in guiding the professional careers of our students. Let's begin by identifying plagiarism and discussing how it has been defined by various groups representative of our society.

Plagiarism, in plain and simple terms, is using someone else's work, words, concepts or ideas without acknowledging that one is doing so. Any form of deception, where an individual assumes the authorship or ownership of the efforts of another, is plagiarism, regardless if there is an exchange of money. The question is not monetary compensation, but rather giving credit where credit is due. Working with another author is acceptable, just as is the incorporation of someone's work, but in both circumstances one must grant credit to the authors involved. Citing the work of others is not difficult or cumbersome, unless of course the mainstay of the paper was written by someone other than the writer. One can use the writings of another in diversified ways, including lending support to ideas and to help substantiate a specific point, but it always must be cited.

Whether in politics, the academia, the media or the business sector, plagiarism has been both popularized and justified time and again. Whether it is journalists incorporating the works of others into their articles, politicians relying on compensated ghostwriters for their speeches, or students utilizing ideas and statements from various authors and sources, all are incidents of plagiarism.

Chaney and Duncan (1985) conducted surveys of journalism schools/ departments and news media organizations soliciting their plagiarism policies. Their study found vast disagreement between educators and editors as to whether the borrowing of ideas, and/or graphics should be identified as plagiary. Opposing views were held when questioned on the issue of editorials which were "not written by management". While reported disciplinary actions ran the full gamut from mild warnings to excommunication, the major discrepancy was the inability to reach a consensus on what constituted plagiarism. As faculty within a multi-campused university, we must insure that our organization reaches a clear consensus on what constitutes plagiarism. Backed by a stated consensus, the faculty will be better able to teach our students not only what plagiarism is and how to avoid it, but why it is to their benefit to do so.

An astounding list of political reliance on the works of others, although 'financially compensated', is described in Posner's (1988) article, *The Culture of Plagiarism*. Many surprising yet common examples of plagiarism, also known as ghostwriting, are found to emanate from Washington, D. C., the power center of our nation. In a location where our leaders make the vital decisions which impact not only our society, but the future of mankind as well, plagiarism appears to be sanctioned as an accepted norm. Surprised? Probably not! Posner (1988) highlights some interesting examples of plagiarism including Martin Luther King Jr.'s, *Why We Can't Wait* (written by Al Duckett), George Washington's Farewell Address (written by Thomas Jefferson) and Kennedy's Profiles in Courage (authored by Theodore Sorenson). Additionally, the article references two letters which were printed in *The San Diego*

Union newspaper. Both were in defense of former U.S. Attorney General Ed Meese, who had experienced a significant amount of criticism during his tenure in the Reagan administration. One letter was signed by the Assistant to the President, and the other signed by the Assistant Attorney General were identical, word for word! It could be almost laughable, except that this kind of behavior by political role models conveys a distinct message--it's OK to claim someone else's work as your own (as long as you don't get caught and embarrassed). In the case of the Meese letter, it is highly probable that neither of these individuals wrote the letter.

The corporate sector also has its share of ghostwriters and plagiarism. Chrysler's "Director for Executive Communication" coordinated the drafts, prior to their final approval, for Iacocca's column in the Los Angeles Times; John Sherman authored much of the work of James D. Robinson, Chairman of American Express; Carl Rowan's diversity of activities is accomplished through his staff's 'leg work'; Evans and Novak's also rely heavily on their staff; and Richard Cohen et al's work for Dan Rather.

Similar situations exist in the scientific community. According to Posner (1988), if the actual research is transacted at another's geographical location, or under the guise of another's grant program, then allowances are made for all to be associated with the research, regardless of the amount of actual contact. The judicial system also has its own system of plagiarism. Many judicial opinions credited to various judges are, in reality, drafted or even totally written by their legal clerks. There are definite mixed signals bombarding the students that are being educated in today's classrooms. The existence of differing norms in different sections of our society needs to be noted. Perhaps more important to our students, the norms for their academic and professional writing need to be clearly stated in university publications and covered in detail by their faculty during their coursework.

In the academic community, the surprising revelation of Martin Luther King Jr's apparent plagiarism in his doctoral dissertation has led to questions regarding his beliefs, image, and the value placed on his impact on society. An article on Martin Luther King Jr's plagiarism (Raymond, 1991) which surfaced in the Chronicle of Higher Education, highlights the problems and a nearly three year delay which arose while King's writings were being compiled for publication. Raymond (1991) further wrote that Boston University, after appointing a committee to review the works found itself in a predicament as to how to handle their findings. There were even suggestions of revoking King's degree and substituting it with an honorary degree. There were subsequent charges that delays in presenting the findings were in direct response to expressed concerns about tarnishing King's image. The article further cites a researcher's suggestion that a positive value should be derived from the realization that we can learn a great deal from the very fact that Martin Luther King Jr. was less than perfect, and yet accomplished so much. Undoubtedly, the visible role models in society are also subject to misconduct or unethical mistakes. However, whether the use of someone else's words and/or ideas is intentional, or due to ethical misjudgment on the writers part, it is still identified as plagiarism.

Dr. King's actions as a doctoral student would have seriously affected his present-day

activities had he lived. A somewhat similar example occurred at Harvard University. It affected the career of a faculty member who had a long period of distinguished service. A Faculty Conduct Committee concluded that a renowned psychiatrist and head of Harvard's teaching hospitals had plagiarized portions of papers he had published some twenty years earlier. That faculty member was asked to resign, an action which raised rather intense emotions along with a number of questions also raised about Dr. King's plagiarism. Harvard officials replied that "Although the institution's Faculty Conduct Committee had never before reviewed a case of plagiarism by a faculty member, Dr. Frazier's resignation was consistent with the university's policy toward students who are required to withdraw if found guilty of plagiarism" (Noted Harvard Psychiatrist, 1988, Pg A-6). In spite of the well publicized severe reactions to Dr. King's and Dr. Frazier's cases of academic plagiarism, and other popularized instances in the political and corporate arenas, students entering degree programs bring with them both incomplete knowledge of what constitutes plagiarism and developing value systems which have yet to place relative importance on proper use of another's ideas.

Beginning a dialogue with students concerning plagiarism early in any degree seeking program is very important. One English instructor in a California high school reported on involving his students in an exploration of plagiarism. The exercise began with defining plagiarism and extended through studies of recent popularized cases, and discussions of plagiarism within their classes. The exploration of this subject incited much more interest and took much more time than the instructor had expected. Two outcomes important to those of us who teach at the college level were reported. There were, first, the development of various simple and practical tests for students to tell if their writing approach was appropriate and, second, self-authored reports of the students coming to grips with previously misunderstood or deliberately avoided concepts regarding plagiarism. One particularly revealing student input was, "It was painful for me, but I understand now what I've been doing and how to avoid it, and I'm just glad we did this before I got to college. Why didn't anybody tell me this earlier?" (Sterling, 1992, Pg. 66)

Clear definitive guidance concerning an organization's definition of plagiarism, along with guidance for faculty in establishing explicit direction for students on this issue is relatively rare and is certainly needed. When the subject of plagiarism is introduced by an instructor along with knowledge of proper ways to give credit to the contributions of others, values are being introduced. The ability to assist the student in internalizing ethical standards by demonstrating that the value of ownership is in itself the higher reward is no easy task.

A behavioral training method which is found to be helpful incorporates the "RAID" concept. RAID is an acronym that stands for Rating, Ability, Identity and Documentation. (1) Rating refers to an evaluation rating in which students learn to distinguish between the separate categories of the practitioner, versus the idealistic realm of academia. There can be no doubt that the "borrowing" which is so prevalent is the easier route, but by no means is it a credit to the individual who travels that road. The student must be able to distinguish between what, by definition is really acceptable, versus what is acceptable as normal behavior only because society tends to ignore the facts. (2) Ability refers to the enhancement of the student's confidence level

in their own ability to write quality material. The educator should assist the student to override the dependence factor while moving toward assertive creativity. (3) Identity refers to the educator's role in instructing the student in the skill of recognizing the parameters of plagiarism. The student should establish standards of personal performance. (4) Documentation refers to the hands-on skills necessary for the students in the process of citation and documentation. Brownhill (1987) pointed out that the greater difficulty for faculty is to convey to the student a need for "precision and accuracy" in the bigger picture.

Educators today are competing with many subliminal messages, prevalent in our society which imply that: "It's not so wrong to act illegally or unethically, just don't get caught." The further implication is that if you do get caught, the penalty will be shortlived and minimal. Within this suggested value system the threat of punishment becomes an ineffective deterrent to plagiarism. Today's educator must help the student rethink their values and recognize the incorrect assessment of values that has apparently gone unchallenged. The internalization of higher standards of performance is the foundation on which faculty must continue to shape the students' personal goals.

To assist faculty in dealing with the issue of plagiarism, standards need to be clearly outlined in university documents easily available to both faculty and students. Our faculty through its constituent bodies must have a clear consensus on what constitutes plagiarism within our institution. Then they will be more able to teach their students not only what plagiarism is and how to avoid it, but why it is more important to the student to develop their own writing ability than improperly borrowing the ideas of others.

While this paper has to this point addressed mostly intentional and premeditated plagiarism, there are numerous instances when a student's plagiarism is unintentional and occurs only because of a lack of knowledge on how to document correctly. The following guide offers suggestions on how to avoid plagiarism and when to document.

Criteria for Proper Documentation

When the decision to use the exact terminology of the original author is made, then full attention must be paid to the detail of the statement so as to maintain the original source's words as well as its punctuation (Teetotaler, 1989). "The only time you can use a source without formal acknowledgement is when you refer to a specific phrase, statement or passage that you have used and acknowledged earlier in the same paper." (Heft and Lincoln, 1982, p. 458)

As suggested in *A Practical Guide for Writing* (Hacker & Reins, 1982), a common body of information exists which does not necessarily require citations with its use. When you are unsure which category your information may fall into, then document. Hacker & Renowned (1982) further suggest that if the concept or idea appears in other written words without citation, or if you are sure that you already know the information, it is most likely common information which does not require footnotes. However, if there is any uncertainty or doubt - **DOCUMENT!**

The different means of incorporating materials from other sources include direct quotations, paraphrasing and any combination thereof.

Direct Quotations

When to use:

When you cannot improve upon the authors phraseology without altering its meaning. There are definite circumstances when the verbatim comments are vital for the sake of meaning or preservation of the original author's flair. Excessive quoting regardless of proper documentation renders the piece ineffective. It conveys a message that the writer lacks sufficient knowledge to convey his/her own thoughts on the particular subject. Outside sources are for support, not intended to be the mainstay of a paper. When direct quoting, everything must be preserved, that is, capitalization, grammar, punctuation and spelling. Any omission from within a direct quote should be replaced by *Eliot* (APACE Manual, 1983) (three periods--spaces between) also known as *Eliot*. Four spaced periods would be used in instances where a sentence has ended within a quote in line with the removed portion of the quote. Any additional corrections or points of clarification for the quote should be put in brackets rather than parentheses. The word [sic] may be used judiciously following acknowledgements of the original author's mistake. Any point of emphasis to be made by the writer regarding the original author within a quote should be followed by brackets containing the words [*italics mine*].

Be sure to review the rules regarding punctuation placement, surrounding quotes i.e., periods and commas within quotation marks, semicolons and question marks which are contingent upon the situation.

Example:

"To gain knowledge of self, one must have the courage to seek it and the humility to accept what one may find" (Jersild, 1955, p. 83). The statement could also be presented in the manuscript in the following manner: Jersild stated, "To gain knowledge of self, one must have the courage to seek it and the humility to accept what one may find" (1955, p. 83). Obviously, this statement conveys stronger more concise meaning if used as a quote. However, if paraphrasing were to be the mechanism chosen, then the author would need to be as brief as possible and still provide documentation as to its source.

Paraphrasing

When to use:

When the word-for-word accounting of the author's words is not vital to its meaning, then the author may restate the concept in his/her own words. The paraphrase should be used as long as the meaning of the original source is not changed. If the original author's exact words, in part or in total, cannot be restated or paraphrased without compromising the meaning, then quotes should be selected over paraphrasing. Avoid repetition of the sentence by simply replacing key words with synonyms.

Quote:

In the school there are countless opportunities for helping the child in his search to find himself. He can be helped to discover his aptitudes and abilities, to face some of his inner difficulties, and to realize his limits. What the teacher does strongly affects. . . Everything in the relation between a teacher and a student has or might have a significant effect on what a child thinks and feels about himself.
(Jersild, 1955, p. 82)

Paraphrased example:

The classroom teacher is in a key position to impact the students life, to help him to overcome obstacles and appreciate himself as a person (Jersild, 1955).

Quote:

"To gain knowledge of self, one must have the courage to seek it and the humility to accept what one may find" (Jersild, 1955, p. 83).

Paraphrased example:

Jersild's (1955) comments suggest that if you sincerely want to learn as much as possible about yourself then be sure you can take what you find out.

Utilizing the writer's own terminology to present someone else's ideas and concepts still requires that credit, through the use of a reference citation, be given to the original source. The writer should make an effort to limit the number of direct quotes placed within the text of the paper. Keep in mind that the underlying purpose for using other sources is to solicit support for your paper and your ideas. Generally, outside sources lend support to the direction or focus of the paper. The following are guidelines pertaining to documentation:

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1. Document as a direct quotation when the exact terminology of the original author is utilized.
2. Verbatim comments should maintain the same grammar, punctuation and spelling (even if it is incorrect).
3. Indications of emphasis or needed corrections to quotes are indicated through the use of [italics mine] or [sic], respectively.
4. Document the paraphrasing of the work of others with the use of a reference citation.
5. Documentation is not required if the passage or statement was previously used and cited earlier in the same paper.
6. Documentation is not required for a common body of knowledge.
7. Documentation is not required if words or ideas appear in other sources without being documented.
8. Documentation is not required if the author already possesses the information without having to go to an outside source.
9. Excessive use of direct quotes is discouraged.
10. Direct quotes of more than 40 words should be indented, blocked, and set off from the text without the use of quotation marks.
11. When the writer is unsure of whether a citation is needed, then CITE!

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