

Plagiarism: hazardous to your academic success

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plagiarism "... take and use (the thoughts, writings, inventions, etc. of another person) as one's own ..." Barber, K., editor. 1998. *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.

The strangest case of plagiarism, which I have ever encountered, occurred when I was instructing a field workshop in ecology. Students had to properly collect, preserve, identify and describe certain kinds of organisms (e.g. producers, herbivores, carnivores). One student presented a damselfly, which was dried and mounted on an insect pin – a specimen that I had collected years previously from another location. The student had removed my identification labels and added his own. To him, all insects looked the same and he didn't think that I could remember and identify individual specimens from hundreds on display.

Other plagiarism cases that I have encountered were more mundane (e.g. copying from assigned textbooks, copying from related textbooks, using encyclopedias and Internet sources) but equally disturbing because of the persons involved. Examples include:

- a third-year biology student from the University of Calgary,
- a third-year education student from University of Alberta,
- a fourth-year biology student from Carleton University,
- a schoolteacher who had been teaching for more than 15 years.

Why do students plagiarize?

The kinds of excuses that I have come across are summarized below.

Ignorance: *I didn't know that copying was wrong. ... I don't know how to reference things properly. ... I have always copied; I started in elementary school and just didn't stop. ... I am a recent immigrant to Canada and do not know about plagiarism.*

Bad time management: *I didn't have time to summarize the stuff. ... I was too busy with other work and family commitments. ... I need high marks to get a scholarship.*

Poor writing skills: *I cannot write well. ... English is not my mother tongue.*

Relative importance: *This course is not in my major; it's just an elective. ... I only did it once. (And a bank robber does not break the law 99% of the time.)*

If such students were honest, their answers might include: *I do not understand the work. ... I am incapable of thinking on my own. ... I was too lazy to do the work. ... I didn't think I'd get caught.*

Consequences

Plagiarism is a form of theft and one of the worst offences that a student can commit. In any educational institution, students who plagiarize or commit other forms of academic misconduct are subject to severe consequences. If a student plagiarizes even a very small fraction of a written assignment, university professors usually assign a grade of zero for the entire assignment. If the case involves a senior student or several assignments, often a zero is assigned for the entire course. For major infractions, a student may be expelled.

How not to plagiarize

My best advice is "Use your own words". If you understand the material, you should be able to define terms and discuss concepts in your own words. In this way, you should be able to explain most topics to an elementary school child, one of your relatives, or your instructor. If you do not understand the material, you will be limited to memorizing and "regurgitating" – a good way to commit plagiarism.

If you quote someone, then you must use quotation marks around the other person's words. My rule of thumb is any more than three words in a row from a source should be quoted. Any quote should be immediately followed by a reference to that source. If you use a source more than once, it needs to be referred to each time you use it. In other words, just because you properly reference a source at the beginning of assignment, it does not mean that you can forget about referring to it when you use it again. In science, we usually use the surname of the author and the year in the text and a list of references cited at the end. In other disciplines, footnotes are the norm.

For many university courses, there are only one or two textbooks. In most short-answer assignments for such courses, you are expected to summarize or paraphrase the material that you have learned and, in most cases, you will not be expected to formally reference the texts. It is usually assumed where you have gotten the information. Also, for information that is common knowledge (e.g. "plant leaves are usually green" or "water is wet"), referencing is not required. However, if you use an outside source (e.g. a non-course textbook or an Internet source), you should acknowledge the source in a manner appropriate to the field of study. For essay questions, formal referencing is usually required.

The exact form of referencing varies from discipline to discipline. However, in all cases, the author(s), the year of publication, the title of the article or

book, the publisher, and the pagination are required. For Internet sources, one should also indicate the authors (even if "Anonymous"), date written or at least accessed, the title, and the URL (<http://www>, etc.). For Athabasca University, such specifics are usually given in the student manuals. If they are not, you should follow what is done in the course textbook(s). The number of students who plagiarize

During my 25 years as a professor and eight years as a part-time laboratory demonstrator, I have evaluated tens of thousands of assignments and exams. The frequency of proven dishonest conduct by students was less than one percent. (Such acts included: plagiarism, cheating on examinations, using the same work for more than one course, having others write assignments and exams, and modifying lab specimens so other students would get the exam questions incorrect.) However, because my colleagues and I could not detect or prove every case of dishonest conduct, the actual percentage was considerably higher. Over the last few years, the number of instances of dishonest conduct that I have come across has increased dramatically. My record is three cases in one week! In conversations with my colleagues at Athabasca University and other institutions, I have found that I am not alone in concluding that the general frequency of academic misconduct has increased. In some studies done in the United States, the numbers of undergraduate cheaters was considerably more than 10%. Clearly we all need to do more to stop this trend.

Why bother about plagiarism?

Basically, academic progress is built upon other people's ideas and discoveries. It is only right that we acknowledge their contributions with quotations and proper referencing. In a broader context, our society works because we trust one another to be honest in our transactions. Would you entrust your money with a financial expert who cheated his way through school? Would you like to receive treatment from a medical practitioner who fraudulently obtained her credentials? Would you like to obtain your degree from an institution that allowed students who repeatedly plagiarized to graduate? I think not.

Condoning plagiarism undermines honest students' work and generally degrades the degree of honesty in society. I will do what I can to counteract plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty. I trust you will do your part.