

Understanding plagiarism

What is plagiarism?

In this video, we're going to look at two things: what plagiarism is, and how to avoid it.

Plagiarism is a big deal at university because the whole point of your university education is for you to learn something. You need to have your own thoughts and ideas about your course material.

Of course, your thinking is helped by the work that other people have already done. But it's important to give them credit for their ideas and distinguish them from your own. Scholarship happens like a conversation, with different voices contributing different ideas and changes evolving over time through discussion. You're expected to show when you're adding your own voice to the conversation, and when you're repeating or using others'. Giving credit to others is the foundation of academic integrity.

Plagiarism is a form of academic dishonesty, or cheating. It's taking someone else's work or ideas and stealing them by passing them off as your own.

Consequences can range from an F on your assignment, failing the course, or in severe cases being suspended or expelled from university.

Types of Plagiarism

Let's look at some types of plagiarism and how to avoid them.

1. Using others' work

The first involves submitting someone's work as your own. The most obvious example is buying a paper from an online site and submitting it with your name on it. But this also includes handing in a friend's work, with or without their consent.

This is the most serious type of academic dishonesty. You need to do your own work.

2. Reusing

Another form of plagiarism called reusing is less obvious. It involves reusing work you've done for one assignment or class for another, which is academically dishonest. You're saying you've done this work in this course and this assignment, even though you haven't.

To avoid it, don't be lazy. You can do work in different classes on the same topic, but you need to do original work for each assignment.

3. Sharing

Another form of plagiarism is sharing work.

Some sharing is ok. Working closely with other people on assigned group work is fine, since in group work each person is expected to contribute a piece of the final result.

On individual assignments though, you are being graded on your own thought and work so working with others is problematic. Sharing work on individual assignments qualifies as plagiarism.

Online course aggregate sites can also be a problem. These sites contain material that students have uploaded. Using them as a study aid is generally ok. Basing assignments or quiz answers though on what you find in these sites isn't. You are expected to go through the course readings and materials on your own and come up with your own original thoughts and work. Basing work on material from course sites instead is not acceptable.

Whether working with others or using course sites, share carefully. Your work should be your thought, not others'.

4. Cut and paste

A common type of plagiarism involves cutting and pasting. This involves cutting and pasting something word for word without giving credit to the source you got it from. When you do this, you're claiming that those are your words when they aren't.

To avoid this, you need to quote. When you cut and paste something, you need quotation marks and a citation to show where you got it from.

This also applies to taking other people's ideas without credit. For example, if you take an idea from a Wikipedia article and use that in your paper without citing it, it's plagiarism. Even if you put the idea in your own words, you still need to cite the source you got it from.

This also applies to any other types of sources you use. For example, if you use an image downloaded from the web you need to cite it. Or, if you use words or ideas you get from an AI tool like ChatGPT, you need to cite the AI tool as a source. If you don't, you're implying that you created the image, the idea or the words, which is plagiarism.

5. Changing a few words

A related type of plagiarism is cutting and pasting, then changing only a few words. Just changing a few words isn't good enough. For example, I can't take a source that says 'good video games confront players...' and change it to 'video games that are good challenge players.' That's still basically using someone else's words, and claiming them as my own.

To avoid this, you can just quote the passage word for word instead. Or, you can make sure you summarize or paraphrase the idea in your own words.

If you're putting it in your own words, how much change is enough? It needs to be almost entirely in your own words. For example, if the original passage reads: "Good video games confront players in the initial game levels to allow players to form generalizations about what will work well later" (Gee, 2003, p. 233), an acceptable paraphrase would be something like Many video games teach players basic concepts through early challenges to help them as they progress (Gee, 2003).

If you're in doubt, quote the passage instead. Remember, you need to credit the source for the idea even if it's in your own words.

6. Mashup

Another common type of plagiarism is the mashup. This happens when the whole paper is a string of quotes and paraphrases, with almost none of your own original thought. Without that, it's just a bunch of pieces jumbled together with no real form. Your argument or thought is what gives shape and structure to your work, and connects all the pieces you take from others together so they make sense.

To avoid this, don't just repeat the ideas you find, synthesize them to come up with your own thoughts. Read all your sources then decide what themes they have in common. Your original contribution comes from these decisions about what the sources are telling you.

One helpful strategy is to use a quote sandwich when you write. First state the point you're trying to make, then give the quote or paraphrase in the middle, then explain how it contributes to your point. This helps emphasize your own thinking about the source.

7. Bad references

The last type of plagiarism we'll look at is providing bad citations. This could mean making up fake citations that don't exist, or giving citations that don't match the sources you use. One common cause of unintentional plagiarism is not keeping track of sources, so you get confused about what came from where when you start to write. It's not ok to guess or be sloppy. Your instructors do check, and will notice if your citations are wrong.

The answer is to use a system to keep track of your sources as you do your research, reading and note-taking. When you cut and paste or take notes, keep track of where it came from and write down all the information you'll need to cite it.

Questions & Feedback

That's a summary of some of the different kinds of plagiarism and how to avoid them.

If you have any questions, ask us at library.wlu.ca/help/askus.

Let us know whether or not this video was helpful. Go to library.wlu.ca/videofeedback to give us feedback and help us improve.