

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 issue because the whole point of your university education is for you to learn. 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. It's taking someone else's work or ideas and 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. One obvious example is buying a paper from an online site and submitting it with your name on it.

Another example is using text generated by AI without any indication that it comes from an AI. This means you are claiming it as your own work. Unless you have your instructor's knowledge and permission, you need to cite any use of AI as a source or it is considered plagiarism.

Finally, this type of plagiarism 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

Reusing is another form of academic dishonesty. It involves reusing work you've done for one assignment or class for another. By doing that you are claiming you've done the work in this course and this assignment, even though you haven't.

Don't reuse. You can do work in different classes or assignments on the same topic, but you need to do original work each time.

3. Sharing

Another form of plagiarism is sharing work.

Some sharing is ok. Working 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. Discussing your ideas with others can be helpful. Sharing work on individual assignments though 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 on what you find in these sites instead of doing the work yourself is not acceptable.

Your work should be your thought, not others'.

4. Cut and paste

The fourth type of plagiarism involves cutting and pasting something 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. Use quotation marks and give 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 applies to all the 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, you need to cite it. If you don't, you're implying that you created it yourself, which is plagiarism. If in doubt, always cite your source.

5. Changing a few words

The fifth type of plagiarism is cutting and pasting, then changing only a few words. Just changing a few words isn't good enough. That's still basically claiming someone else's words as your own.

To avoid plagiarism, quote instead. Or, 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. If you're in doubt, quote instead.

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 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, come up with and emphasize your own thoughts about what you read. 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. Every time you use a source, 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, 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 get it wrong. Your citations need to be accurate to properly credit the sources you used.

Make sure you use a system to keep track of your sources as you research. When you read 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.