

Understanding Plagiarism

Plagiarism causes a lot of confusion and anxiety for college students. This handout seeks to alleviate some of that confusion and anxiety by explaining what plagiarism is and offering suggestions for how to avoid it.

What Is Plagiarism?

The most basic definition of plagiarism is using someone else's work or ideas without giving them credit and claiming, implicitly or explicitly, that the work and ideas are your own. While this is a good working definition, reviewing the specific forms plagiarism can take helps us to avoid it:

- Turning in work for a grade that does not give credit to any/all outside sources used.
 - **Example 1:** You use information from a source but do not put direct quotes in quotation marks or indicate where you paraphrased their ideas.
 - **Example 2:** You use information from a source but do not provide proper citations for sources you used.
 - **Example 3:** You use an idea or major term throughout your paper from a source that you read without giving credit.
 - **Example 4:** You write a paper in which all of the major arguments come from a source that you do not credit or build on.
- Turning in work for a grade on an individual assignment when all or part of it was created by someone else.
 - **Example 1:** You find an essay in the library or on the internet that answers all the questions on your assignment, and you turn it in as if it were your own.
 - **Example 2:** Your friend or classmate already wrote a paper like the one you are assigned. You turn in their paper as your own.
 - **Example 3:** You work together with a friend/classmate on a paper that you were supposed to do on your own.
- **Patchwriting:** Turning in work for a grade that gives credit to all sources but does not contain any of your own ideas or explanations.
- **Self-Plagiarism.** Turning in work for a grade that you have already submitted in whole or in part to another class.
 - **Example 1:** You wrote a paper for your history class and received a grade on it. Your English professor assigns a similar paper. Instead of writing a new essay, you turn in the history paper.

Remember, if you do not mention the author of a source anywhere in your paper, your reader will assume you created it.

Why Do Students Plagiarize?

Students may plagiarize for many different reasons.

- They don't understand what plagiarism is.
- They don't know how to cite sources correctly.
- They don't think that they are any good at the subject.
- They don't think they have any good ideas.
- They wait too long to begin an assignment.
- They are overwhelmed by the amount of work they have to do.
- They think it will help them get a higher grade.
- It's really easy to find essays online.
- They are busy and/or don't care about the class.
- It was allowed or even encouraged in their home country.

Some of these lead to willful plagiarism—plagiarism that is done on purpose—and some of these lead to accidental plagiarism—plagiarism that was unintentional. Accidental plagiarism usually happens when a student does not have enough knowledge about plagiarism or how to give credit to sources. It can also occur if a student has read a lot about

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their topic and begins to incorporate the ideas into their own thinking. Accidental plagiarism is still plagiarism and can lead to disciplinary action.

Why Don't Professors Want Students to Plagiarize?

- Professors want students to practice the skills they were taught in class and to improve those skills.
- Professors want students to explore their own ideas and ways of thinking.
- Professors don't want students to get in trouble for cheating.
- Professors want students to learn how to join scholarly conversations, which involve building off of the ideas of others and acknowledging the sources of different ideas.

How Do Professors Check for Plagiarism?

- **Use TurnItIn or other paper checking programs:** These computer program check student essays against material on the internet and against student papers that have been submitted by other professors.
- **Check for anomalies:** Professors learn to recognize their students' writing styles. If they see sections of a paper that do not fit with the grammar or vocabulary that a student has used in previous work or even earlier in the same paper, they will check those sections. Most professors also have a general idea about what information is "common knowledge" at the college level and will check sections that push outside of that knowledge.
- **Read a lot:** Professors know their area of study and have done a lot of research in their area. If they see something they recognize, they will check it.

How Can Students Avoid Plagiarism?

- **Don't wait:** Start working on your assignments as early as possible, so you don't feel pressured.
- **Seek help:** Bring drafts of your work to your professor's office hours or take them to the Writing Center. Specifically ask them to review your citations and point out possible plagiarism.
- **Pre-write for all assignments:** Prewriting allows you to consider your own ideas about a topic first, creating the bulk of your paper. The sources you find later should act as support for your ideas. *For more information, see **The Writing Process** handout and video on the Writing Center website.*
- **Limit use of sources:** Choose only a few important/strong sentences or phrases from your sources and expand on them in your own words and with your own ideas.
- **Take careful notes:** In the thick of research, it can be easy to forget where information came from. Mark any information that comes from sources in your notes.
- **Give credit:** Any time you use a source, indicate in the paper where the information came from. The amount of information used from a source does not matter. Most students know to give credit when quoting a source, using the exact words of the author, but some do not realize that you also have to give credit when paraphrasing or summarizing. While the words may be yours, the ideas still come from the source.
- **Learn the citation style used in the course:** There are many different citation styles (MLA, APA, CSE, etc.). You do not have to memorize them all; however, you do need to know how to find and use a citation guide. *Handouts on **MLA**, **APA**, and **CSE** can be found on the Writing Center website.*

What Are the Consequences of Plagiarism?

Plagiarism is taken very seriously at the college level. At North Carolina Wesleyan University, there is a clear progression of penalties:

- **First Offense:** The student will not receive credit for the work involved.
- **Second Offense:** The student will receive a grade of F in the course where the violation occurred.
- **Third Offense:** The student will be suspended for one semester and receive an F in all current courses.
- **Fourth Offense:** The student will be expelled from the college and receive an F in all current courses.