

Plagiarism and How to Avoid It!*

Plagiarism can be a serious problem in many schools. Many students make the mistake of plagiarizing and deprive themselves of the opportunity to demonstrate that they are capable of writing their own original work. Plagiarism is not a difficult concept to understand. Plagiarism is using another person's work or ideas without giving the original author his or her due credit. When caught plagiarizing, students run the risk of doing serious damage to their grades.

Plagiarism is cheating. If you are caught plagiarizing an assignment, you will receive a grade of zero. It's just that simple. Even "unintentional" plagiarism or "forgetting" to use citations or a work cited page is still plagiarism. The three most common forms of plagiarism are described below:

- **Copying text material word for word without using both quotation marks and the appropriate citation.** In scientific writing it is best to avoid direct quotes altogether. However, if the situation requires that you use a quote, you must put the material in quotation marks, cite the quote using the appropriate format, and include the source in your work cited page. Minor changes in wording do not relieve you of this obligation to cite a quote. Don't make the mistake of thinking you can change a few words in a paragraph and then present it as your own original work. It is also unacceptable to copy answers to homework questions from your textbook or to copy from the homework, essays, and lab reports of another student.
- **Paraphrasing the work of another without giving credit to the original author.** Anytime you use material that represents the ideas of another author you must cite that material and include your sources in the work cited page. The general rule of thumb in this case is the concept of "common knowledge." If you are discussing material that a reasonable high school educated person would know as common knowledge, then you don't have to cite the work. However, if the material is not common knowledge, then you must include a citation. For example, if you write that great white sharks have been responsible for occasional attacks on humans, that is common knowledge and does not require a citation. If, on the other hand, you write that a common food of great white sharks are seals and recent research suggests that attacks on humans are the result of sharks mistaking their victims for seals, that is not common knowledge and you must include a citation (Martin, 2004. Biology of Sharks and Rays. www.elasmo-research.org).
- **Using graphs, statistics, music, videos, and pictures without a citation.** You must treat this type of material the same as you would text material. Any graphical or audio material including charts, diagrams, photographs, or drawings that you did not create yourself or statistical information that you did not collect and calculate yourself must be accompanied by a citation and the source included in the work cited page. Again use the rule of "common knowledge." If you write that elephants are the world's largest land mammal; that is common knowledge. If you write that elephants are the world's largest land mammal with adults reaching weights of 5.5 to 7 tons, then you need to provide a citation letting your readers know where those numbers came from (Oakland Zoo, 2004. Conservation and Education. www.oaklandzoo.org).

Some students worry that if they follow these guidelines, their paper will be full of citations. That's ok. It is far better to have too many citations in your paper than to have too few. You will not lose points for excessive citations. You will fail if you have too few!

With all of the different print and electronic sources available to students, knowing what format to use for your citations can be confusing. That's why you have a writer's handbook. Use it!

The internet can be a wonderful research tool, but be careful how you use it. Evaluate the web sites you find to be sure they are providing you with credible and reliable information. I highly suggest that you **do not use** editable sources such as Wikipedia for information. These can be inaccurate or contain plagiarisms. Also, keep in mind that while it is very easy to plagiarize material from the internet, it is just as easy for your teacher to discover what you have done.

*(This document was based on and contains information from a similar document used by Mr. Birch.)