



The MGA English Department's Definition of Plagiarism

Integrating the words and ideas of others into your own work is an important feature of academic expression. But plagiarism occurs whenever we incorporate the intellectual property of others into our own work without proper acknowledgment of whose words, ideas, or other original material we are bringing into our work, either with quotation marks and direct mention of the source or through other means of clear and precise acknowledgment.

Plagiarism can of course be a purely intentional attempt at deceit, but whether or not there is conscious intent to deceive, plagiarism occurs *any* time you do not give proper acknowledgment of others' contributions to your work. Ignorance of the responsibility of acknowledging sources is not a legitimate defense against a charge of plagiarism, any more than not knowing the speed limit on a given road makes a person stopped for speeding less at fault. Since the consequences of being charged with plagiarism are serious, the English Department provides the following definition of plagiarism to ensure your more precise understanding of what constitutes plagiarism, intentional or unintentional.

1. It is plagiarism to copy another's words directly and present them as your own without quotation marks and direct indication of whose words you are copying. All significant phrases, clauses, and passages copied from another source require quotation marks and proper acknowledgment, down to the page number(s) of printed texts.*

Source material from the “Notice” to Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: “Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.”

Plagiarized: Surely it is an exaggeration to say that *persons attempting to find a moral in Huckleberry Finn will be banished* and *persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot*.

Proper acknowledgment of source: Perhaps the author is exaggerating when he says that “persons attempting to find a moral” in his novel “will be banished” and “persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot” (Twain 3).

Note that even brief clauses and phrases copied from source material require quotation marks. Also note that acknowledging the source without putting the quoted words in quotation marks is still plagiarism: put *all* quoted words in quotation marks.

2. It is plagiarism to paraphrase another writer’s work by altering some words but communicating the same essential point(s) made by the original author without proper acknowledgment. Though quotation marks are not needed with paraphrasing, you must still acknowledge the original source directly.

Source material from *Adolph Hitler*, by John Tolland: “Ignored by the West, the Soviet Union once more looked to Germany. Early in 1939 it accepted a Hitler overture to discuss a new trade treaty by inviting one of Ribbentrop’s aides to Moscow; and a few days later Stalin gave credence to a sensational story in the London *News Chronicle* that he was signing a non-aggression pact with the Nazis” (721).

Plagiarized: When Western nations continued to shun the Soviet Union, the Russians drew closer to Germany, meeting with a senior Nazi official in Moscow to arrange a trade agreement in early 1939. Shortly after, Stalin admitted his intent to sign a pact of non-aggression with Germany.

Proper acknowledgment of source: In *Adolph Hitler*, John Tolland notes that when Western nations continued to shun the Soviet Union, the Russians drew closer to Germany, meeting with a senior Nazi official in Moscow to arrange a trade agreement in early 1939. Shortly after, Stalin admitted his intent to sign a pact of non-aggression with Germany (721).

3. Plagiarism includes presenting someone else's ideas or factual discoveries as your own. If you follow another person's general outline or approach to a topic, presenting another's original thinking or specific conclusions as your own, you must cite the source even if your work is in your own words entirely. When you present another's statistics, definitions, or statements of fact in your own work, you must also cite the source.

Example 1: Say that you read Paul Goodman's "A Proposal to Abolish Grading," in which he claims that an emphasis on grades results in students' caring more about grades than learning subject matter, causing them to have a bad attitude when their grades are low and sometimes even leading them to cheating. In order to make these same essential points in your own work without plagiarizing—even if your development of these ideas differs markedly from Goodman's in examples and order of presentation—you must still acknowledge Goodman as the basis for your approach to the topic.

Plagiarized: Abolishing grades at the college level would allow students to focus on subject matter instead of grades, it would prevent students from getting a bad attitude towards a class when they receive low grades, and it would virtually eliminate the temptation to cheat or plagiarize.

Proper acknowledgment of source: As Paul Goodman argues in "A Proposal to Abolish Grading," doing away with grades would allow students to focus on subject matter instead of grades, it would prevent students from getting a bad attitude towards a class when they receive low grades, and it would virtually eliminate the temptation to cheat or plagiarize.

Example 2: If you found a source indicating that Americans consume more beer on Friday than on any other day of the week, to make this claim in your work you must cite the source to avoid plagiarism. If the source indicated that American beer-drinking on Fridays accounts for 21% of the whole week's total consumption, mentioning this statistic, or even approximating it, requires acknowledgment of the source.

Plagiarized: Americans consume more beer on Fridays than on any other day of the week.

Proper acknowledgment of source: Americans consume more beer on Fridays than on any other day of the week (Cox 31).

Plagiarized: Beer consumption on Fridays accounts for more than 20% of total U.S. consumption throughout the week.

Proper acknowledgment of source: Beer consumption on Fridays accounts for more than 20% of total U.S. consumption throughout the week (Cox 31).

4. Plagiarism includes allowing someone else to prepare work that you present as your own.

Allowing a friend, parent, tutor, or anyone else to compose any portion of work you present as your own is plagiarism. Note that plagiarism includes copying, downloading, or purchasing an essay or any other material in part or in whole via the Internet. Note also that plagiarism includes using online "translator programs" in foreign language classes.

5. Plagiarism applies in other media besides traditional written texts, including, but not limited to, oral presentations, graphs, charts, diagrams, artwork, video and audio compositions, and other electronic media such as web pages, PowerPoint presentations, and postings to online discussions.

Conclusion:

- If you are uncertain about any portion or aspect of this definition of plagiarism, ask your instructor to clarify or explain immediately. If at any point later in the semester you have questions about potential plagiarism issues, talk to your instructor about them before submitting the work in question.
- Students who plagiarize often feel pressured into submitting plagiarized work because they have either struggled with the assignment or waited until the last minute to get the work under way. You will always be better served discussing your situation with your instructor, however grim it seems, rather than submitting any work that is not entirely your own.

*The examples of proper acknowledgment of sources above follow the MLA (Modern Language Association) conventions for in-text parenthetical citation used in English classes and many other courses in the humanities. The parenthetical references point the reader to a list of "Works Cited" at the end of an essay. Other courses and disciplines may follow different conventions, such as footnotes, endnotes, or a variety of other methods of documentation (APA, Chicago Style, etc.).