

# Avoiding Plagiarism: Tips for Living by Wofford's Honor Code

## ***What is Plagiarism?***

Plagiarism is stealing. It is also dishonest. In a day and age in which we burn CDs, download MP3s from the internet, listen to music full of samples taken from different songs, and tape favorite movies or television programs with a VCR (and soon, using DVD burners), it is easy to lose sight of the fact that much information is the product of a creative mind which someone out there has certain rights over.<sup>1</sup> Just as if most of us would protest if someone broke into our house and stole something we had spent our time and energy creating, so artists, intellectuals, scientists, writers, and other creators of intellectual property have some right to control what they have

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<sup>1</sup> These thoughts were provoked by Thomas Mallon's "Plagiarism Expert Targets the Web," *The Key Reporter* 68 (Fall 2002). This article contains excerpts from his new edition of the rather well-known work on plagiarism *Stolen Words* (Harvest Books, 2001).

created, or at least get some acknowledgement for their gift of themselves to all of us.

Wofford's Honor Code defines plagiarism as:

- the verbatim repetition, without acknowledgement, of the writings of another author;
- borrowing or using information developed by another without acknowledging the source;
- paraphrasing the work or thought of another writer without acknowledgment; and, finally,
- allowing any other person or organization to prepare work which one then submits as his/her own.

The rest of this handout covers each aspect of this definition, giving some of the most common examples of plagiarism and also explaining what is wrong with committing each act.

## ***Verbatim Repetition without Acknowledgment***

The first point of the definition deals with the case that most students *think* they understand fairly well by the time they reach college. The idea is that if you borrow a number of words, phrases, or sentences from an author verbatim (that is, you replicate them exactly), you need to quote the author directly, and then cite the source. Usually this involves placing the borrowed phrase in quotations marks, but it also can

involve using an indented (or block) quote if the passage is long.

Students think they understand this, and yet professors are seeing an increasing number of students constructing papers by simply cutting and pasting materials gained from the web. This is certainly plagiarism, since it is replicating exactly the ideas and words of another author. It is acceptable (though risky, considering the accuracy of much material on the internet) to include some verbatim material from the web, but it needs to be quoted and cited correctly, and then, of course, integrated with your own thoughts and ideas. At this point, it becomes research, and not plagiarism.

Just in case someone out there is thinking that they can simply cut and paste material taken from the web, only with a few words or ideas changed, we need to say that this too is plagiarism. In many cases simply changing a word or two still retains enough identical words or phrases to be considered plagiarism. Even if a great deal of the material is changed, it still can be considered paraphrasing without acknowledgement, which we will cover below.

### ***Borrowing Information without Acknowledgment***

Information—scientific data, facts, figures, dates, etc.—also needs to be cited. This above all applies to scientists, since they often have to utilize information that other scientists have

developed to supplement their own data or to check the accuracy and dependability of their data. Students of English, history, the foreign languages, or other areas, however, need to be aware that they too are expected to cite information that they gained from internet sites, almanacs, encyclopedias, or other reference materials.

The main exception to this would be what is considered “common knowledge.” If, for example, you had to look up the date that the Nazis came to power in Germany or the year of the Russian Revolution just because you can’t remember it exactly, you wouldn’t have to cite where you found these dates. This is information that so many people know that it is no longer considered private intellectual property—it is common property, that everyone has access to. However, if you have to look up *why* the Nazis came to power, or *why* the Russian Revolution happened, this is material that you should certainly cite.

### ***Paraphrasing without Acknowledgment***

It’s not only words or information that can be stolen—ideas can be stolen too!

One of the most common examples of unintentional plagiarism is paraphrasing without acknowledgement. This is the most common, I think, because it is also the easiest to get away with. Many students unfortunately have gotten through high-school unintentionally plagiarizing one paper after another and were

never caught because the teachers were too overworked to check sources.

In confronting this kind of plagiarism, many professors have received a response from students that they just thought they were doing research. And perhaps they were...originally. There is absolutely nothing wrong with getting on the internet to find out something about a topic that you know little about, or to try to get some ideas for a paper that you are having a hard time approaching. The trouble happens when ideas are taken from websites or other sources (reference materials, books written by specialists, and—heaven forbid—a former student’s paper) without referencing them.

There are many problems here. First, you are taking ideas that have been created by someone else and taking credit for them. Second, you are probably misrepresenting your own level of knowledge. If you make a reference to a post-colonial or a postmodernist interpretation of a specific historical event that you found explained on a website, you need to ask yourself, Do I really understand what these terms mean? If not, then you should hesitate before using them, even with a proper reference and citation. Third, it’s also a disservice to readers who might want to find out more about this topic. But more about this later.

Two final points to consider here:

- First, admitting that you took an idea from someone else does not mean that you are an uncreative or unintelligent person yourself. None of us operate in an

intellectual vacuum, and we are all constantly absorbing, processing, and reworking the ideas of others, whether we realize it or not. If you look through any academic book, you will probably find pages and pages of endnotes and footnotes, and often a full bibliography. These were all works that somehow played a part in the creation of the author’s own individual thoughts. The point is that most people show their creativity and intelligence by how they rework the ideas of others, applying them to new situations or putting them together with other authors’ works. This is all legitimate, legal, and, in fact, praiseworthy! We just need to give credit where credit is due.

- Second, a good rule of thumb is that if you don’t feel you can cite it, then it probably isn’t a legitimate source. The fact that you would feel a little awkward putting in a citation, “My best friend’s paper, written two years ago for the same class” should be a sign that you are at some level being dishonest here. Furthermore, the fact that it would feel a little dumb citing the Cliff-Notes for your book also should be a sign. Referencing all your sources may be an opportunity for you to reevaluate where you are getting your ideas from.

## ***Allowing Others to Prepare Your Work***

The final element of the plagiarism definition deals with both the easiest and most treacherous cases.

### **The Simple Case: Turning in Someone Else's Work**

We will start with the simplest cases. Quite clearly, buying a paper from an on-line source and turning it in as your own is one of the highest forms of dishonesty. So would be grabbing a paper from the local fraternity/sorority test-file and turning it in as your own. And of course getting your boyfriend, girlfriend, or best friend to do the work for you would also be considered an egregious case.

### **The Problem Case: Proof-Reading by Friends and Family**

But what about the more difficult cases of collaboration? Everyone has had a friend, a colleague, perhaps a parent, or even a favorite ex-teacher read over material that they have written. And what about the writing lab? Does incorporating their suggestions count as “allowing any other person or organization to prepare work which one then submits as his/her own”?

Unfortunately, there is no easy answer to these questions. Quite clearly, having your parent, friend, or ex-teacher do the entire assignment, or even some sizeable portion of the assignment, would count as plagiarism. However, what about taking a friend's suggestion about a better way to phrase a

sentence, or a classmates' suggestion about a further idea that you may want to consider?

Before considering this, we should say that there are few writers or scholars who do not have their material looked over for publication. If you look in the forward, preface, or sometime introduction of a book, who will almost always find a long list of fellow writers, scholars, and friends that helped in the production of that book with proofreading, suggestions, or perhaps simply through conversations that helped to generate ideas. This brings up the point that we all—even the most brilliant of us—take credit for material that is in reality a social product, the creation of a community of minds.

So, admittedly, the line between collaboration and plagiarism is a fuzzy one. However, there are some general guidelines to help students feel secure and confident in what they take credit for:

- 1) **Check with your professor to find out what is allowed.** Most professors will have no problem with your enlisting a friend or classmate to proofread a paper. In fact, this exercise can be useful for everyone involved, since it allows you to notice common mistakes that you may not be aware of, while your proof-reader may become more aware of his or her own strengths and weaknesses. Some professors will have more of a problem with you sending it to a parent or ex-teacher. Others, however, feel that this can be a useful exercise as long as certain rules are followed. At any rate, you should check to find out what is allowed.

- 2) **Never worry about bringing your paper to the Writing Lab.** The students in the writing lab are trained to provide help with your writing without doing your writing for you. Furthermore, they usually ask you to stay with them as they work through your paper. This helps to turn the rewriting of your paper into a true collaborative exercise.
- 3) **Pay attention to the length and extent of the contribution.** Making and taking suggestions for sentence phrasing or proper grammatical construction is *always* legitimate in the case of occasional, isolated sentences. Doing so for two sentences in a row is usually alright, too. However, the closer you get to a full, continuous paragraph, the more danger you are in. At this point, you are coming close to crossing (or perhaps, have already crossed) the line from truly collaborating to simply allowing someone to write the paper for you (or writing the paper for someone else, as the case may be). Furthermore, the longer the passage, the more chance of an idea that is not your own working its way in.
- 4) **Watch out when you borrow ideas from people.** Many proofreaders, especially if they are classmates or they have taken the class before, may suggest ideas for your paper that would improve the content. If you they are asking you to expand on an idea that is already in the paper, or to consider some of the implications of a thought that is already there, then you don't have to worry. One or perhaps two ideas can probably be safely used, though you should take some care to acknowledge the source of the idea (see below). However, take care that the paper feel like yours—borrowing too many ideas means at some point you are no longer writing your own paper. There are no firm rules here, but a good rule of thumb is that the basic idea at the heart of the paper should be yours and no one else's.
- 5) **Try to ensure the physical presence of the collaborator.** Do as much editing as possible in the presence of your collaborator. Giving or sending the paper to someone else to look at tends to remove the collaborative process, and therefore increases the likelihood of plagiarism working into the paper. This is not to say that there is anything necessarily wrong, for example, with getting your parents via e-mail to look over your paper before you turn it in; however, you do need to ask yourself the hard question, How much of this is my work, and how much is the person's that you asked to help? Furthermore, you may want to ask yourself, Are there friends or classmates you could ask instead? In many case, these people could be even more useful, since they often have more familiarity with the material, as well as a better idea of the standards that your professors expect.
- 6) **Acknowledge Help.** If you have any doubts, include a footnote somewhere where you thank your friend, classmate, or family member for the help they have

given you in writing your paper. Be specific here if possible. If they have suggested specific ideas, note that. If they simply proofread for grammatical errors, write that. In professional papers, this is often done in a footnote right at the very beginning of the paper. If you generally haven't included foot- or endnotes in your paper, try just adding it to the last page as an acknowledgements section.

## Citations

### Why Do We Cite?

- **To be honest.** Above all, we want to be honest about what we present as our own ideas and achievement. Claiming others' work and ideas as our own fundamentally goes against the integrity that is at the heart of the "Wofford Way."
- **To give thanks.** The second main goal of citing other works or sources of help is to give thanks—for both direct aid given and for a more general intellectual contribution that has allowed you to work. Everyone who writes anything of any substantial length quickly realizes how little they could do without the work of other people providing the intellectual foundations upon which we build. We should thank them for enabling us to make our own contributions.
- **To protect ourselves.** Occasionally our sources make mistakes. Even though we all are ultimately responsible for *everything* we write, it does help sometimes to say that we drew the wrong conclusions because our sources were wrong, and not because our reasoning or logic was faulty.
- **To allow other scholars and students to do their own work.** Footnotes are not just those random words and numbers skewed across the bottom of a page that allows us to get through pages faster! Whether you realize it or not now, reading the foot- and endnotes is extremely important. Footnotes reveal to scholars and students a whole host of information: background, disclaimers, parenthetical remarks, the perspective the piece was written from, and finally ideas about how to find out more information on a particular topic. Without them, I dare say that most scholars would never be able to do their own work. As a matter of courtesy, please get in a habit of providing this information so that others may use it.
- **To show off.** There is one last reason to include proper citation: to show off one's knowledge, and to say, "Hey! Look at what I've read!" This is the probably the worst reason to cite, but it's a motivator for many professional scholars, so you might as well get in on the game yourself! Just don't get carried away.

## How Do We Cite?

There is no universal way to cite sources. Every teacher will have different ideas about how sources should be cited. Some will want full footnotes or bibliographies; others will be satisfied with parenthetical citations. Also, keep in mind that every discipline is different, as are the various journals, publishers, editors, etc. You just need to ask to find out how they want it done.

In general, though, we should provide enough information so that the reader could find the work cited. Everything else is just an arbitrary convention, but like a key on a map, these conventions are important because they help everyone else to find what you used.

## Some Common Questions

- *What about websites?*

The problem with websites is pretty obvious: they are extremely volatile, moving and changing form daily. This is one of the reasons that many scholars discourage the use of website sources; indeed, they may be impossible to find even a week later, or they may not be in exactly the same form that you saw them when you wrote your paper. In general, most scholars would agree that using a website as a source should be

an absolute last resort. Books, journal articles, and other hard-copy sources are much more reliably found.

If you must reference a website, include the full http address, as well as the title (and if possible, author) of the site. Again, though, the exact form will vary according to the standards.

- *Do I need to cite course lectures?*

You almost never need to cite lecture material in a paper written for that course. Most professors would agree that lecture material can be considered “common knowledge” for the context of the course. However, if you want to use lecture material elsewhere—say, in a paper for another class, or a piece that you write for an entirely different purpose—you should cite it properly. In this case, though, always try to paraphrase, since quoting a professor correctly is extremely difficult, and many professors will take great offense at being misquoted.

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