

Plagiarism – Frequently Asked Questions

When writing any paper for any course, the first imperative is to avoid plagiarism.

What is plagiarism?

Here is how the UR Honor Council defines plagiarism:

The use of words/facts/ideas that are not one's own without proper acknowledgement.

Example: Copy and pasting from an internet source without quoting or citing.

So you plagiarise when you

***use someone else's ideas**

or

***copy or paraphrase someone else's language**

without using quotation marks or acknowledging your source.

What if I plagiarize without meaning to do so?

It is still plagiarism. You must learn proper note-taking skills and proper methods of citation.

What do you mean by "proper note-taking skills"?

When you are using a book, an article, the Internet, or any other source, you must take careful notes. These notes should not be a close paraphrase of the original source. The best way to avoid paraphrasing too closely is to read the source (or part of the source) without taking notes, then put source away and summarize important information in your own words. You can then return to the source and copy helpful quotations—though you must find some way to clearly identify this language as direct quotation. Remember to note page numbers for later reference.

If you do take notes as you read, take extra care not to paraphrase; if your language is too close to the original source, you can inadvertently plagiarize when you later use your notes. It is always a good idea to re-examine the original source once you are through with your paper to be sure you have used your own language. And remember, using your own language does not negate the need for proper citation. The very fact that you are looking at a source that you're not directly quoting means that you have used it and need to cite it.

I've heard that I don't need to cite information that represents "general knowledge," but how do I know what that is?

General knowledge usually involves specific facts, like the date a war began or when and where an author was born; if you can find the same information in many

different sources, you can consider it to be general knowledge. If you are in doubt, however, you can always cite the information.

I'm confused about the different kinds of plagiarism. Can you go into more detail?

Here are the main varieties:

1. Directly copying language: You plagiarize when you take a phrase, a sentence, or a paragraph (or more) from someone else's work and present it as your own. This kind of plagiarism includes taking language from an Internet site, copying phrases from an article, or passing in all or part of a paper you found in a fraternity or sorority file, though that list is certainly not exhaustive. Here is an example:

Original Source: "In Shakespeare's play, however, rightly or wrongly, the question of why Hamlet delays, or even *whether* Hamlet delays, has seemed central to many critics" (Barnet lxxvii).

Direct plagiarism: In *Hamlet*, whether rightly or wrongly the question of why Hamlet delays, or even whether he delays, has seemed central to many critics.

2. Paraphrasing someone else's language: While more ambiguous than direct copying, paraphrasing a source can also constitute plagiarism. You cannot simply change a few words in a source and present the sentence as your own. It is possible to plagiarize sentence structure as well as words:

Plagiarism as paraphrasing: In *Hamlet*, whether we find this right or wrong, the issue of why Hamlet keeps waiting, or even whether he really is waiting, has become a critical point of discussion for many critics (Barnet lxxvii).

Here, the author has merely substituted words rather than rephrasing them. The citation helps—certainly the plagiarism would be more egregious without it—but the language is simply too close to the original. Remember to summarize your sources in your own words (see proper note-taking skills above).

Indicate to your reader where your summary begins by using attribution:

According to Barnet, many critics have considered the issue of Hamlet's so-called procrastination to be central to the play (lxxvii).

3. Stealing someone else's ideas: Even if you don't copy or paraphrase language, you plagiarize if you take ideas from another person.

Imagine, for example, you are reading a sonnet by Shakespeare, and you have no idea what the sonnet is about. You look at a web page and discover many insightful details about the poem. The author has discovered things you never would have seen, lovely details about the way different parts of the poem function. You copy down these ideas, and you use them in your paper. You don't want your professor to know that you have been looking at SparkNotes, so you leave this embarrassing evidence out of your paper. Alas, you have just plagiarized.

Again, this can be an area of ambiguity. What if you already had that idea first, and then you found it somewhere else? What if you are fairly certain you would have recognized that idea eventually, and the SparkNotes just clarified your thinking? It does not matter. Once you have looked at a source, if you use an idea from that source, you need to cite that idea. Avoid reading Internet sites or the like with half-closed eyes, thinking you'll just get a "feel" for the poem before coming up with your own ideas. Struggle through the poem. Be confused. Don't take the easy way out. It's harder this way, but in the end it is much more rewarding and exciting, not to mention more honest, to struggle and find the answer yourself. But...if you have used outside sources, it's not the end of the world; confess and cite them properly.

Of course, in a research paper, you must use outside sources. Outside sources can, after all, be an invaluable way to expand your thinking. The same rules apply, however. Be sure to summarize (not paraphrase) when you use someone else's ideas, and be sure to cite your source. Also, you should keep in mind that the most interesting research papers will always be ones that advance your own interpretations, not ones that simply summarize the existing literature, however properly cited.

What are the consequences of plagiarism at the University of Richmond?

Plagiarism cases go before the Honor Council. If a student is found guilty, he or she may fail the paper or the class, or the student may be suspended from the University.

Punishment, however, is not the best reason to refrain from plagiarism, although it is certainly a sufficient one. Education involves thinking your own thoughts, writing your own papers, and finding your own voice. While learning new things sometimes creates anxiety, stress, and confusion, it also offers rich rewards.

What if I cite a source but I cite it incorrectly—is this plagiarism?

It can be. If you copy exact language from a source (usually more than three words) and fail to use quotation marks, this IS plagiarism, even if you add the citation. If you use someone else's ideas throughout your paper, and you simply list that person as a source at the end of your paper, this IS plagiarism. If you only list the line numbers for a Shakespeare quotation, and not the act and the scene, that is sloppy, but it isn't plagiarism.

I'm afraid that I may plagiarize without knowing it. What should I do?

First, most students who are scared of plagiarizing don't ever do it. Try not to think of your professors as thought police, lying in wait to catch the slightest mistake. They don't want you to plagiarize—in fact, it can be devastating to discover a plagiarism case—and they'll assume you won't unless you give them a reason to assume otherwise.

Take notes carefully. Review the rules for citation. Be diligent about attributing thoughts to their owners. Stay on top of your work. Students who would usually never think of plagiarizing can be strongly tempted when it's 4 a.m. and a paper is due the next morning.

Remember to ask for help or clarification if you are uncertain about how to cite a source.

Spotting Plagiarism: Practice Sheet

Compare the original sources with their variations. Which variations constitute plagiarism and/or violate the standards for citation?

1. Original Source: “Even more remarkable is the stunning variety and sheer comic excess that Shakespeare has built into [Falstaff]: he is a liar, glutton, knave, coward, thief, lecher, drunkard, wit, skilled rhetorician, master of the arts of language, the very embodiment of carnivalesque misrule” (Abrams 824).

a. It is stunning to consider the sheer variety and comic extravagance that Shakespeare uses to present his character Falstaff: he is a liar, glutton, master of the arts of language, a wit, drunkard, a skilled talker, a liar, and a glutton.

b. It is stunning to consider the sheer variety and comic extravagance that Shakespeare uses to present his character Falstaff: he is a liar, glutton, master of the arts of language, a wit, drunkard, a skilled talker, a liar, and a glutton (Abrams 824).

c. Falstaff unites a dizzying array of traits in one character. He is by turns “a liar, glutton, master of language, and a glutton” (Abrams 824).

d. Falstaff unites a dizzying array of traits in one character. He is by turns a “liar, glutton, knave, coward, thief, lecher, [and] drunkard” (Abrams, found on page 824).

2. Original Source: “*I Henry IV* is centrally concerned with political power—its sources, uses, manifestations, theatrical displays, ambiguities, and subversions. Recent criticism has focused attention on several political issues: how far does this play (and the tetralogy) serve to reinforce the “Tudor myth” of providential kingship? And to what extent does it undermine that myth by exposing the basis of kingship as Machiavellian force and fraud? How far does Prince Hal’s prodigal son transformation make him into an ideal monarch who assumes and fulfills his filial and regal responsibilities?” (Abrams 824).

a. *I Henry IV* ask the critical question: What makes a good king? Are kings designated by God? Does Prince Hal’s prodigal son transformation make him into an ideal monarch who assumes and fulfills his filial and regal responsibilities?

b. As Abrams points out, ideas of political power permeate *I Henry IV*. Critics have considered whether the play supports an idea of providential kingship, or whether, by the extraordinary Machiavellian nature of Henry’s actions, Shakespeare actually contradicts this myth (Abrams 824).

c. *I Henry IV* is centrally concerned with political power—its sources, uses, manifestations, theatrical displays, ambiguities, and subversions. Recent criticism has focused attention on several political issues: how far does this play (and the tetralogy) serve to reinforce the “Tudor myth” of providential kingship? And to what extent does it

undermine that myth by exposing the basis of kingship as Machiavellian force and fraud? How far does Prince Hal's prodigal son transformation make him into an ideal monarch who assumes and fulfills his filial and regal responsibilities? (Abrams 824).

Works Cited

Abrams, M. H., et al. Introduction to *I Henry IV*. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*.

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Barnet, Sylvan. Introduction. *Hamlet*. By William Shakespeare. New York: Signet Classics, 1998. lxiii-lxxv.

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