

THE LITTLE BOOK OF PLAGIARISM: What it is and how to avoid it

This short booklet is designed to help students to understand more fully what plagiarism is and equally important *how to avoid it*

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What is Plagiarism?

Everyone knows that plagiarism is something to be avoided, but not everyone is sure precisely what it is. This short booklet is designed to help students to understand more fully what plagiarism is, and equally important, how to avoid it.

Plagiarism is a specific *form* of cheating which is almost wholly found in respect of course assignments completed by students independently.

The University has a definition of plagiarism:

The substantial, unacknowledged incorporation into a student's work of material derived from the work (published or unpublished) of another. "Work" includes internet sources.

Examples of plagiarism include:

- the inclusion in a student's work of extracts from another person's work without the use of quotation marks and/or acknowledgement of the source(s);
- the summarising of another person's work without acknowledgement;
- the substantial and unauthorised use of the ideas of another person without acknowledgement;
- copying or printing the work of another student with or without that student's knowledge or agreement.
- *University Academic Regulations, C9. 2.8*

Chambers Dictionary defines a plagiarist as a kind of thief – "one who steals the thoughts or writings of others and gives them out as his [sic] own". When this is also used for gain – in the University to gain credits for a module or modules – then an additional dimension of dishonesty is added.

As the examples above show, plagiarism can take many forms. There are grey areas e.g. when is discussion with fellow students good practice and when does it become collusion? There are also degrees of plagiarism, from, for example, copying the whole of the assignment, to copying only part of it; or paraphrasing much of a source rather than copying the actual words used.

The key element of a submitted assignment is that (unless it is assessed as a group project) *it should be your own work entirely*. How can you tell? Try testing yourself against this declaration signed by students when they submit their assignments.

"I certify that this is my own work. The work has not, in whole or in part, been presented elsewhere for assessment. Where material has been used from other sources it has been properly acknowledged. If this statement is untrue I acknowledge that I will have committed an assessment offence.

I also certify that I have retained a copy of this assignment, which I will keep until after the Board of Examiners has published results, and which I will make available on request".

The rest of this short booklet gives you more information on plagiarism and how to avoid it.

Why Shouldn't I plagiarise?

There are many reasons why students plagiarise, for example:

- not being fully aware of what plagiarism is
- short-term panic response when an assignment is due and time is short
- feeling a desperate need not to be seen as a failure and so copying to try to ensure "success"
- different academic traditions.

Sometimes, of course, plagiarism is a determined and deliberate attempt to gain the credits for the module without doing the work.

Whatever the reason, though, plagiarism is nevertheless cheating. It is not only cheating the University but, probably more importantly for your fellow students, *it is cheating them*. But there are more reasons than the negative ones (cheating others, unfairness, and possibly discovery and disciplinary action) for not plagiarising. Essentially, plagiarism is also *cheating yourself and letting yourself down*.

The Students Union at Leeds Met is whole-heartedly against the practice of plagiarism. It is well aware of the injustice of some students sitting up all night, possibly after working during the day, to complete an assignment; while others decide simply to try to download the answers from the internet. One makes a massive effort, the other makes no effort at all.

Positive Reasons for Not Plagiarising

Pride in Your Work

Students should be able to take pride in their work and in the achievements they have attained. There is considerable satisfaction in knowing that the work you have submitted is your own, and the marks obtained reflect your own effort. There can be little real satisfaction in knowing that your mark (however good) was because you were a good cheat, rather than a good student.

Real Level of Attainment

It is possible that someone might plagiarise widely and not be discovered throughout their University career. But they will not really have learned anything. The discovery that their apparent attainment does not match their real abilities will then become apparent when they find a job. In the end this could lead to dismissal and the termination of a career.

UK Academic Traditions

It is important to recognise that plagiarism as described here is what is understood in UK Academic Institutions. Rules which may apply anywhere else are simply not relevant here. So, it is not valid to offer as a reason for plagiarism traditions which may operate elsewhere. Check the details of the next section to ensure that you are fully aware of what constitutes plagiarism in the UK so that you don't end up unwittingly being found to have plagiarised and therefore unable to be awarded any credits for your module or modules. *If in doubt – ask your tutor before you submit the assignment!*

Plagiarism in Practice – what is it?

Plagiarism takes many forms. Some of the more common are identified here.

1. Copying from a single source

This is where the student uses one of the following as the basis for the whole or a substantial part of the assignment

- a published book
- a published article
- the internet
- an essay from an essay bank
- a piece of work previously submitted by another student for the same or a similar assignment
- copying from a text which is about to be submitted for the same assignment (see also Collusion below)

Note that this list is comprised of both *published and unpublished* sources. The first three are published, the second three are not. Plagiarism therefore is not copying from *published sources only*. It can also arise from the copying of unpublished sources like essays.

Where substantial copying takes place the words, arrangement of material and ideas are those of the source, not the student, and the work rarely answers the questions set. Where plagiarism is of this nature and extent *it is very difficult to see how it could have been accidental*, (especially if the text were derived from an essay bank or previous submission) and therefore it is viewed very seriously indeed. This kind of plagiarism is also increasingly detectable with modern software.

Unacceptable Excuses

- A. “The book/article was cited in the bibliography”. No – a bibliography is a list of sources *consulted* not copied from.
- B. “The book was written by the lecturer and he/she would expect to find their work repeated in the assignment.” No – lecturers would expect several sources to be read and used, and would not be flattered to find their own work simply copied out.

2. Copying from several sources

This is similar to the above, except that more than one source is used. A student obtains (say) 4 sources of information, and copies a sentence or group of sentences from A, then one from B, one from C and one from D and so on.

This is an example of plagiarism where a student might genuinely have thought that they were not doing anything wrong. The sources used might well have been cited in the bibliography, the essay might answer the question set, the organisation of the material may well be the student’s own. *However, this is still plagiarism.*

Why? The reason is that although the structure and composition is the student’s own work, the words are not. Rules of academic presentation require that whenever a direct quote from a source is used, this should be cited.

In this type of plagiarism no quotations are given in the text and thus the work is being dishonest about who actually wrote what. Further, the student's only contribution is cutting and pasting, which is not what the assignment was designed to assess, and there is no demonstration *by the student concerned* of the required skills of analysis, interpretation, judgement or opinion.

Unacceptable Excuses

- A. "The sources in question put it better than I could." No – you are expected to *use* the sources constructively and demonstrate that you have understood them and been able to use them effectively in the assignment.
- B. "I did use several sources and cited them." No – you did not *use* several sources, you copied from them, and did not use inverted commas to show that it was their words and not yours.

3. Paraphrasing

This is putting someone else's views into your own words, and this is one of the grey areas in plagiarism. To a certain extent any essay or assignment which relies on reading a series of texts as the basis of assignments will contain a significant amount of paraphrasing. There are two key things to remember in this case to ensure that it cannot be thought to be plagiarism:

- Do not use only one source
- Acknowledge all sources used
- Take care when taking notes.

Unacceptable Excuses

- A. "I used my own words". You may have – but if all you have done is summarised someone else's *ideas* then you have still copied because you have made it appear as if the ideas, arrangement of material etc. were your own.
- B. "I cited all the sources in the bibliography". Again, you may have, but the issue is how you have *used* the works cited, and simply to summarise the work of others whether or not the works are in the bibliography is still trying to pass someone else's work off as your own.

4. Collusion

This can occur when students work together, and it is very important to distinguish when this is required, and when it has to end.

Some assignments require students to work together as part of a group project. *Where the group as a whole gets the mark* then it is joint work throughout and the group co-operation is part of what is being assessed.

Some group projects, though, require students to work together at the planning stage, but then to submit individual assignments. Here the co-operation has to end at the point where you begin to compile your own individual submission, which must be your own work from this stage onwards.

A grey area is when students discuss their work together. A line needs to be drawn between legitimate discussion of the current assignment with student colleagues, especially where you share a house, and collusion. Where students share a house they

often also share the same resources – for example a common pool of books borrowed from the library.

The important thing to remember is that (*except on group projects where the group as a whole gets the mark*) whilst general discussion of the issues involved, or approaches to be taken, is acceptable, the final submission *must be your own individual effort*. Discussion *before* the assignment is undertaken is one thing, discussion, correction and improvement during it is quite another and might lead to the suspicion of copying.

Also, remember that if you allow a fellow student to copy your work you will be considered as guilty of collusion as the actual copyist, and will be subject to the same penalties under the University Regulations.

Unacceptable Excuses

- A. “The essays are very similar but I don’t know how this could have happened”. In this case you could expect to be very closely questioned on the sources used and why you used the material in the specific form shown in the assignment. If you are the person who actually wrote the piece you will be able to answer, but the copyist will not.
- B. “We must have just thought along the same lines.” Again you could expect to be closely questioned on the language used – thoughts may arguably go along similar lines, but it is stretching probability to assume that the *words used and the sequence of material* will do the same.

Plagiarism – how do I avoid it?

The following good practice guidelines will help you to avoid plagiarism.

1. Use of Quotations

Remember that if you use the exact words in your source these should appear in quotation marks and be referenced by the book or article and the page on which the quote appears. *Never* use direct quotation from any source unless quotation marks are used and full references are given.

Try to use quotations sparingly. Use them only when the author has expressed something so well and so succinctly that you feel that the words cannot be bettered. If you do this you will probably reduce the number of your quotations and be aware of when you are quoting.

2. Making Notes

During note taking it is possible subconsciously to use the language of your source. Try to be aware of this when you are making notes. To avoid it, try not to make notes as you read, but read first, consider what the author has said, and *then* make notes. If you do this you will copy less of the text.

3. Paraphrasing

Remember here to attribute the broad ideas or content to the author in question. You will probably carry over some of their language, but as long as you are making it clear which sources you are using, and not attempting to pass it off as your own work then this should not arouse suspicion of plagiarism.

The more sources you look at, the less likely it is that you will seem to be repeating without acknowledgement the content of one of them. And if you take care when you are taking notes (see above) you will also reduce the chance of unacknowledged paraphrasing.

4. Cite all sources used

You should cite *all* the sources you have used. Always cite any web sources used. If they have contributed to the completion of your assignment they are required to be listed just as much as printed books or articles.

If you only cite some, and the lecturer recognises an extract from another source which has not been included in the bibliography, then you can expect that he or she will look very closely at the assignment in question.

Absence of source citation can very easily be seen as an attempt to prevent the lecturer possibly comparing your assignment text with that of the actual text used to check for the degree of similarity. If there is considerable similarity (either direct copying or paraphrasing) and you have not cited the work in question, then you might have some difficulty in convincing your lecturer that this was not done to try to conceal the plagiarism which has been identified.

Also, it is not good practice to pad out a bibliography with lots of titles which you have not read. Try to keep to those which you have actually consulted. A short list of well-used sources is much better than a long list of sources which you have never looked at.

5. How do I know when to include a reference in my work?

When you are writing an essay or completing a similar kind of assignment it is not always necessary to include a reference to everything you say. If that were so, your work would be more references than substance. When you give a reference is partly a matter of judgement, and conventions will vary from one discipline to another.

This example from an English history assignment gives a good indication of when you would and would not give a source reference. The sentence "The Battle of Hastings was fought in the south of England in 1066" would not need references to where you obtained the information, because it is very well known and is not contentious.

However, if you then wish to discuss the various opinions of historians on the conduct and outcome of that battle, then you should reference the source e.g. 'Spring considers that the Norman tactics were misguided but ultimately successful (Spring, 1998) while Summer has long argued that it was only the exhaustion of the Anglo-Saxon forces which permitted the Norman victory (Summer, 1992).' You might then continue; 'A more modern view has recently been expressed by Winter (2002) which regards both these

views as too simplistic *and I want to consider her ideas in more detail here*'. Note here, the way that you have moved from simply stating what scholars might think about this battle, to how *you* are going to consider and deal with their views. In this part of the essay it will then be clear to what extent you have relied on the information and views in this particular source, and which views are your own.

6. Your Lecturer's Views

It is a common assumption that your lecturer wants you to repeat his or her views in your assignment, especially if these have been published in a book or article. Try to remember that this is not the case. All lecturers want you to use the sources suggested in the reading list (including their own if relevant), but they want you to use them *constructively* to answer the question, or complete the assignment. They do not want you simply to repeat the views contained in their own works.

7. The Textbook

If a lecturer recommends a textbook, then obviously he or she wants you to read it. But, as above, they do not want you to copy it out when completing an assignment. Once again, the idea is to use the information constructively. You want to show that you have understood the issues and concepts involved, but in order to show that *you* have understood them, there has to be clear input from you. This cannot be there if you simply copy out the text of the textbook, however good this is.

If it helps you to avoid doing this – remember that your lecturer will have read the textbook and will therefore be very likely to spot direct copying.

8. Collusion

To avoid suspicion of collusion you are advised to do the following:

- have any discussions and sharing of ideas *before* you start completing the assignment
- do not ask to look at anyone else's assignment and do not show yours to anyone else if they ask to see it
- remember that if sequence, style and content are very similar between two pieces of work it will lead the lecturer to wonder whether there has been collusion;
- remember that there are now electronic devices available to test for linguistic similarity between two pieces of work.

9. Copying from the Web or purchasing essays

There is only one simple piece of advice here – **do not do this**. You may know some fellow student who has done so and “got away with it”. However, remember, that such a student may not have similar “success” next time, and that even if he or she has been successful in passing off work which is not their own, it does not mean that you will be. Students who have been found to have downloaded or purchased work will not only automatically fail that module or modules, but will also seriously risk their career in the University being terminated by being required to withdraw from their course.

Conclusions

Plagiarism – identification

In this booklet we have tried to identify how students may plagiarise without being fully aware that they are doing so. In doing so we have also given you some indications of how lecturers might recognise that the work is not your own.

Electronic Detection.

There are now various and increasingly sophisticated electronic aids to assist lecturers who may be in doubt about the originality of work submitted. These include programmes which look at linguistic similarities and others which can identify when essays have been bought from websites.

Essentially however clever web-packages or essay purchase schemes may be, there will be software which is able to detect it – and in such a case it is hard to imagine any acceptable explanation.

Various detection programmes will be in use in the University from 2003, and on some modules *all* assignments will be automatically checked against one or more of these programmes.

Penalties

Regrettably, however, plagiarism does occur. The University does have penalties for students who plagiarise and it will use them. The relevant regulations and procedures will be used to investigate the suspicion of plagiarism and if plagiarism is held to have taken place, various penalties can be imposed, up to requiring a student to withdraw from the University.

We hope that this short booklet has assisted you both to identify what you should not do and helped you towards good practice which would avert the risk of plagiarism.

The Best Approach

The best approach is to ensure that you have not plagiarised in the first place. The advice contained in this booklet will help you to do this.

If you feel in doubt, look again at the declaration at the start of the booklet. If you think you have not quite met the requirements of this kind of declaration – look at your work again before you submit it, and make sure that it is wholly your own work. If you still feel in doubt – *ask your tutor before you submit the assignment.*

If you follow this advice should be able to avoid any risk of the work being thought of as plagiarised and you will be able to take pride in achievements which have been produced by your effort alone.

Other Sources of Help

Skills For Learning

Skills for Learning is the University's aid to many aspects of the Learning process. To find the site, go to the University Home Page, click Leeds Met Students, and then click Skills for Learning.

Plagiarism

Skills for Learning has a section on plagiarism (go to the index under P). This includes a survey of plagiarism and also a self-test which you can take to find out whether you might be plagiarising.

Referencing

If you are unsure about how to reference Skills for Learning also has a section on Referencing (go to the index under R). This is *Quote, Unquote*, the Learning Centre's guide to the Harvard Style of Referencing Published Material, including electronic information. This can also be purchased in paper form. *Quote, Unquote* gives full advice on references; citations, including web-site citations; bibliographies etc.

Glossary

Here are some key terms, which are explained in *Quote, Unquote* .

- Citing* Formally recognising in your text the source or sources from which you obtained the information. An example has already been given in this booklet on p. 7: 'Spring considers that the Norman tactics were misguided but ultimately successful (Spring, 1998) while Summer has long argued that it was only the exhaustion of the Anglo-Saxon forces which permitted the Norman victory (Summer, 1992).'
- Citation* This is the act of quoting. It means the passage or words which you have directly taken from a source and reproduced in your text. The source of the quote should *always* be given with it.
- Bibliography* This is literally a list of books, but it now means a list of *all* the sources which you have used in completing the assignment, including electronic sources. *Quote, Unquote* gives examples of how you would list all major sources.
- Reference* This is the detailed description of the item from which you have obtained a specific piece of information. So, in the fictitious example above, you would place in your bibliography the details of the work as Spring, A.B. (1998) *The Norman Conquest: new approaches*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.