

## Avoiding plagiarism: an introduction

### 1. Avoiding plagiarism

Plagiarism is passing off someone else's work as your own without acknowledging the source.

This short audio podcast, lasting just over 3 minutes, explains how you can avoid plagiarism by developing your skills.

#### Podcast transcript

In this short podcast I am going to introduce the subject of plagiarism: what it is, the forms it can take, and how you can avoid it.

Part of the process of becoming a student is about developing academic integrity. This is about ethical behaviour, and ensuring that your desire to meet a deadline or achieve a result does not cause you to cut corners in your study practices. For example, if you are short of time you may not have time to read and digest material properly. If you are not confident in your writing you might be tempted to copy and paste someone else's words without changing them or clearly naming the author. If you are not used to managing information you might forget to keep track of sources you have used, and not have to hand the details you need to acknowledge these sources in your work.

The OU defines plagiarism as 'using the work of other people to gain some form of benefit without formally acknowledging that the work came from someone else'. This definition could equally apply in the workplace.

Most plagiarism is not intentional, but occurs for the kind of reasons I have just outlined. Occasionally though, someone sets out to cheat deliberately, and the penalties for this kind of academic misconduct can be severe. However, if you develop your skills, avoiding plagiarism is straightforward. There are several key ways to do this.

Learn to write in your own words. This is about finding your academic 'voice' and it's a sign that you have really understood a topic. In the long run this will be more useful to you and also more satisfying.

Working with others can be very helpful in shedding light on a topic. However, be careful to ensure that any assessed work is your own, unless collaborative working is being assessed.

Likewise, when referring to online forum discussions, acknowledge who said what. It's always best to avoid copying word-for-word.

Learn how to organise information so you can find it when you need it, and have all the details to hand to enable you to produce accurate and complete references.

Finally, citing your references clearly and accurately shows that you have read around the subject and based your arguments on evidence from others' research. It enables whoever reads your work to see where you have got your ideas from and to follow up any sources they are interested in.

Your module materials are your first port of call for referencing advice. Some modules offer live online training sessions on referencing, to help students preparing to write assignments. Helpful guidance is also provided by OU Library Services, via the Library web pages, for example:

- the OU Harvard guide to citing references sets out how to reference different kinds of materials
- help and support is available on managing information
- there are various online tools that offer a handy way of keeping track of material you've consulted. The Being digital activity on 'Selecting a reference management tool' gives you some useful tips on how to go about choosing the right one for you. You may also find it useful to attend the 'Introduction to reference management tools' live online training session.

And of course Library Helpdesk staff will be happy to help you if you get stuck.

## 2. Summary

### Summary

This podcast has given you an opportunity to think about what plagiarism is, and the steps you can take to avoid it.

### Next steps

The following links will help you develop skills in this area.

- [OU Harvard guide to citing references](#)
- [Cite them right](#)

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# Recognising plagiarism

## 1. Introduction

If you are new to academic study, you may have heard of plagiarism but not be sure what it is. This activity helps you to recognise some of the forms plagiarism can take, so you can avoid it in your work.

### Learning outcomes

By the end of this activity you should be able to explain what is meant by plagiarism.

## 2. What is plagiarism?

The Oxford Dictionary of English (3d ed.) defines plagiarism as "the practice of taking someone else's work or ideas and passing them off as one's own".

Within the world of study, plagiarism is described as a form of cheating; in other words, of trying to gain better marks by using the ideas or words of another person without giving that person proper acknowledgement.

There are other forms of plagiarism that exist beyond academia. Read three different examples of plagiarism below.

Then answer the quiz questions to test your understanding.

### Music: sampling or plagiarism?

There are many well publicised cases of intellectual property theft within pop music; famous cases that were overturned in 2020 involved US singer songwriter Katy Perry and 1970s rock band Led Zeppelin.

With high tech sampling involved in the creation of so many modern hits, artists are becoming ever more concerned about the misuse of their original work.

You can read more about how difficult it is to distinguish between inspiration and misuse in this March 2020 Guardian article, ["A hit, a writ: why music is the food of plagiarism lawsuits"](#)

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## Industrial espionage

Sometimes called corporate espionage or competitive intelligence, industrial espionage can take many forms, but often involves the theft of ideas from a competitor for economic advantage.

Samuel Slater provides an historical example. He emigrated to America having memorised much of the design detail of James Arkwright's water mill.

Called "Slater the Traitor" by the British, his knowledge was vital in helping set up rival cotton mills in the US.

You can read more about Slater's story on his [Wikipedia Biography](#).

Do you think he plagiarised Arkwright's designs?

## Journalism: originality is essential

The UK's National Union of Journalists has twelve principles in its code of conduct, the twelfth is "Avoids plagiarism".

In a profession where writers earn their living by the sale of their original work, using the work of a fellow journalist without due credit is tantamount to theft.

You can read more about the nature of Internet journalism; how its ever increasing demand for new content puts writers under pressure, but also, paradoxically, makes it easy for writers to credit their sources in Anthony Zurcher's 2014 BBC News website article "[Much ado about BuzzFeed's plagiarism](#)".

## 3. Plagiarism quiz

Test your knowledge of plagiarism by answering the multiple choice quiz questions.

### Question 1

Which one of the four following statements about plagiarism is correct? Choose one and then check our feedback to see if you're right.

1. Plagiarism is the name of software used by some universities to teach correct referencing.

2. Plagiarism is referring to a work which is copyrighted.
3. Plagiarism is using someone else's work without identifying where it came from
4. Plagiarism is a type of false memory syndrome.

### Question 1 feedback

1. No, this is not plagiarism. Universities may use plagiarism detection software such as Turnitin or Copycatch to identify where students have used material without acknowledging the source.
2. No, this is not plagiarism. All material used for study or work purposes should be clearly and accurately referenced so others can find it if need be.
3. Yes, this is known as plagiarism. Good academic practice is about acknowledging others' work in your own writing.
4. No, this is not plagiarism - although forgetting what sources you have used in your work can lead to inadvertent plagiarism.

### Question 2

Read the statements below and select all those you think are examples of plagiarism:

1. Putting a paragraph together by cutting and pasting a few choice phrases from a number of different sources, and adding in some words of your own.
2. Cutting and pasting a paragraph by placing it in "quotes" and citing the original source.
3. Copying a paragraph, but making small changes, such as replacing a few verbs or adjectives with words that mean the same thing
4. Copying a paragraph word-for-word from a book, journal, web page or other printed or electronic source without any acknowledgement.

## Question 2 feedback

1. Yes, this is plagiarism, because it involves using other people's work without acknowledging who did it.
2. This is probably acceptable academic practice, and therefore not plagiarism. It shows that points being made are supported by other people, and the source has been acknowledged. However, lengthy quotes - for example, copying whole paragraphs - are to be avoided. This only shows you can read and write.
3. Yes, this is plagiarism, because it involves paraphrasing. Even if some of the words are your own, you must still acknowledge where you got the ideas from.
4. Not recognising the intellectual input someone else has made to your work, and passing off their work as your own, is clearly plagiarism and is unacceptable. If you have not written in your own words, it is also likely that you have not understood the point you are making and this may cause you problems in your later studies, for example, when revising for exams.

## Plagiarism quiz reflections

In the first question on what plagiarism is, you may have easily spotted the right answer. However, the next question shows that not all instances of plagiarism are clear-cut, and it is possible to be caught out inadvertently.

Even when you have referenced sources correctly, it is important to be sure that you have integrated them into your work in a way which demonstrates your learning.

## 4. Summary

### Summary

Using other people's work without acknowledging it is plagiarism, even where you have made small changes. The Open University defines plagiarism as "using the work of other people to gain some form of benefit without formally acknowledging that the work came from someone else".

Plagiarism does not just occur in academic assignments. It may happen when you relay content in online forums or other social networking sites without acknowledgement. In a workplace situation, if you do not acknowledge evidence and statistics you have used to inform reports or presentations, for example, you will be

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committing plagiarism. You may be aware of some high-profile public figures who have lost their jobs when it was discovered they were guilty of plagiarism.

To sum up, plagiarism can involve:

- **Copying** a portion of text without giving credit to the resource, for example, copying and pasting some text from a website into your assignment.
- **Paraphrasing** text without crediting the source, for example, changing a few words from an article and including it in your work
- **Incorrectly citing** a source, misleading the reader as to what is yours and what is from the source.

## Reference

'Plagiarism' in Stevenson, A (ed.) *Oxford Dictionary of English*, Oxford University Press. 2010. Available at [https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m\\_en\\_gb0637200](https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m_en_gb0637200) (Accessed: 3 Jul 2020).

# What plagiarism feels like

## 1. Introduction

In this activity we are going to consider some of the consequences of plagiarism. Cases of deliberate plagiarism may be relatively rare, but whether it is intentional or not, the impact on those concerned can be far-reaching.

### Learning outcome

By the end of this activity you should be aware of how plagiarism can affect those involved.

## 2. Consequences of plagiarism

Reproducing someone else's work without acknowledging it is committing plagiarism. Plagiarism can take many forms, and can be both intentional and unintentional.

Linked below are two news articles about individuals, one of whom was plagiarised and the other who was guilty of plagiarism.

Read the articles and consider:

- how the person who was plagiarised felt
- the consequences for the person caught plagiarising

[BBC accused of 'plagiarising' Slay in Your Lane slogan](#) (BBC News, 2019)

[Hungary President Schmitt quits in plagiarism scandal](#) (BBC News, 2012)

Make a note of your observations if you wish, and then read our feedback below.

### Feedback

In the case of the authors who were plagiarised, they felt angry and cheated. They felt their efforts and use of their trademarked name was not acknowledged, and that BBC Sport had benefited from their work. Consequently, BBC Sport received



negative media attention. In many cases, this could also result in damaged reputation.

In the case of the Hungarian president, he was stripped of his doctorate, had to resign from his job, and lost credibility both academically and as a leader.

### 3. Plagiarism in academic work

In the two scenarios in the previous section, you looked at how plagiarism can affect people in their working lives.

But what about plagiarism in a University context?

Regardless of whether it was accidental or deliberate, plagiarism is a form of academic misconduct and taken very seriously. You can read more about how the Open University deals with this in their [Plagiarism Policy](#).

Now read below about how plagiarism feels for three of the key people involved.

(This scenario is loosely based on 'When does poor academic practice become a major problem?' from the Open University's Developing Good Academic Practice guidance. All characters are fictional).

#### The victim

"I have always found collaborative work with others really helpful. I was shocked when I discovered another student had copied word-for-word the comments I posted in an online forum and used them in the end-of-module assignment without acknowledging that the ideas and words were mine. I was gutted, and felt really let down, especially as it was someone I had trusted."

#### The plagiarist

"I was up against a deadline and didn't have time to research the topic thoroughly for myself. I knew from the module forum that another student had a really good grasp of the subject and thought it would be OK to use their knowledge. After all, it wasn't an academic source was it, and who would know? I was devastated when my tutor picked it up and reported me. I feel such an idiot for putting my degree at risk."

#### The tutor

"I had been monitoring the forum discussions closely and had been pleased by the level of debate and good collaborative working. Unfortunately, when I came to mark

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the final assignments, it was clear that one student had directly copied the words of another student without naming the source - not just once, but numerous times. I had no choice but to refer this matter on to the relevant university authorities for further action."

## 4. Summary

### Summary

In this activity you have had the opportunity to think about the effect of plagiarism on people's lives, for those both on the giving and receiving end, as well as from the point of view of those who have to deal with it when it occurs.

Developing your academic skills will enable you to avoid any of these scenarios. Aiming for a high standard of academic integrity will also be good preparation for professional working life.

### Next Steps

For support with referencing, visit the Open University Library's page on [Referencing and Plagiarism](#).

### References

BBC News (2012) *Hungary President Schmitt quits in plagiarism scandal*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17586128> (Accessed: 27 April 2020)

BBC News (2019) *BBC accused of 'plagiarising' Slay in Your Lane slogan*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-48435772> (Accessed: 27 April 2020)