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# WHITE PAPER

## Plagiarism in a Digital World: Defining Plagiarism

This is Part 1 in the “Plagiarism in a Digital World” series. This five-part series investigates the definition, frequency, causes, consequences, and institutional response to incidents of plagiarism.

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# INTRODUCTION

The English root of the word “plagiarism” is the Latin, “plagiarius,” defined as “kidnapper.”<sup>1</sup> In light of its Latinate origins then, to characterise “plagiarism” as the “borrowing” or “copying” of another’s words or writing is to lessen the severity of the act itself. According to Oxford Dictionaries online, “plagiarism” constitutes “the practice of taking someone else’s work or ideas and passing them off as one’s own.”<sup>2</sup> More than “kidnapping” the words of another then, plagiarism is also an act of fraud, involving both the theft of another’s work and deception.

## Can Words be Stolen?

The expression of original ideas is considered intellectual property and generally falls under the protection of copyright laws, thusly words can be stolen. For example, the Berne Convention—administered by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and ratified as a treaty by more than 160 countries—sets a standard for the protection of copyright around the world.<sup>3</sup> Almost all forms of expression fall under copyright protection so long as they are recorded in some way (electronic file, web page, book, media recording, etc). Importantly, this holds true whether the expression is published and made available for public view or not.

## How Serious is the Issue of Plagiarism?

In an academic context, institutions, schools, and educational systems generally put different standards and policies into place for dealing with plagiarism. That said, plagiarism is nonetheless considered a serious violation of academic standards. Depending on the institutional standards, students who plagiarise face the threat of failing grades, possible expulsion, and even the potential loss of a degree. Beyond just the academic context, there is real value (cultural and monetary) placed on original ideas and intellectual property. Plagiarism in a professional or commercial context can have legal ramifications, result in monetary penalties, and even lead to career or job loss.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see: <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/plagiarism>

<sup>2</sup> Again, for more information see: [http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american\\_english/plagiarism?q=plagiarism](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/plagiarism?q=plagiarism)

<sup>3</sup> More details and background information on the Berne Convention can be found at: <http://www.wipo.int/treaties/en/ip/berne>

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# COMMON EXAMPLES OF PLAGIARISM

## Academic Context

In an academic context, instances of plagiarism occur when students:

### **Submit another's work as one's own to fulfil an assignment.**

Whether a student has acquired a paper from a classmate or purchased it from a paper mill or custom essay writing service, the act of submitting that work to fulfil an assignment represents the most blatant expression of the fraudulent aspect of plagiarism. As a result, most - if not all - academic institutions treat this form of plagiarism most seriously.

### **Copy the words or ideas of another without giving proper credit.**

Many instances of plagiarism take form when students either intentionally or carelessly use another's words or ideas in their own work without proper citation. To be fair, the proper use of citation is an academic practice that needs to be taught. But in the face of an increasing competitiveness and the accessibility of information online, students are consciously turning to "copy and paste" strategies for completing their assignments.

### **Copy so many words or ideas from a source that it comprises a majority of one's work, whether proper credit is provided or not.**

Even when proper citations are provided, a paper whose substance is comprised largely of another's words or ideas can be found at fault for plagiarism. While certain assignment types - such as annotated bibliographies - are necessarily replete with outside sources, most course and class assignments ask students to contribute original work that consists of their own original analysis and ideas, with source material used only in support of those ideas.

### **Submit previously-written work from an earlier course to fulfil an assignment in a new course.**

Faculty expect that students in their courses submit original work in fulfilment of assignment and course requirements. Reusing earlier written work, also known as "self plagiarism", undermines that expectation, even if the previously-written work was produced by the same student. In short, faculty expect students to earn the mark or grade in their course, based on work completed for that particular course.

### **Fail to use direct quotation marks when quoting source material.**

Learning to cite sources properly is a skill that students need to learn. Whether unintentional or not, the failure to include appropriate quotation marks when needed is a misrepresentation of the origin of those words or ideas. Were those words and accompanying ideas written by the student, or did they come from somewhere else?

### **Give incorrect information about the source of a quotation.**

Akin to not providing appropriate quotation marks, the failure to include source information for quotations - or worse, falsifying source information - hides the origins of a source and misrepresents the effort that the student has undertaken in writing the paper and completing the assignment.

**Change the words but copy the sentence structure of a source without giving appropriate credit.**

Learning to properly paraphrase another's words is a key academic skill that students do need to acquire. However, properly paraphrasing does not include changing the words, but copying the structure of a source. To paraphrase appropriately involves taking another's words and ideas and presenting them in one's own words - without copying the original author's words or sentence structure.

**Use or reference another's ideas without proper attribution.**

Simply put, the failure to identify the origin or sources for ideas used in a paper is an act of misrepresentation and fraud.<sup>4</sup>

## Research Context

Within a research or publication context, in addition to the above examples there are other, more specific ways in which plagiarism can take form.

In a research context, acts of plagiarism additionally include:

- Claiming authorship on a paper or research that is not one's own.
- Citing sources that were not actually referenced or used.
- Reusing previous research or papers without proper attribution.
- Paraphrasing another's work and presenting it as one's own.
- Repeating data or text from a similar study with similar methodology without proper attribution.
- Submitting a research paper to multiple publications.
- Failing to cite or acknowledge the collaborative nature of a paper or study.<sup>5</sup>

## Degrees of Plagiarism

Acts of plagiarism can range from unintentional to egregious. Plagiarism can arise unintentionally, as is often the case in academic contexts, when students are first learning to use source material and to cite appropriately. As students advance in their academic careers, especially in a graduate programme context, there is less of an acceptance of plagiarism (given the expectation that students should already be well versed in using source material properly).

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<sup>4</sup> Additional information can be found at: <http://www.plagiarism.org/plagiarism-101/what-is-plagiarism>

<sup>5</sup> Additional information and survey findings available at: <http://www.ithenticate.com/resources/reports/decoding-plagiarism-and-attribution?>

## Preventing Plagiarism?

Based on input from educators and institutions, here are a few noteworthy suggestions for preventing plagiarism:

- From an instructional standpoint, educators are well positioned to help students understand how to use source material appropriately. Resources like “The Plagiarism Spectrum” can be used to demonstrate to students how plagiarism can take form.<sup>6</sup>
- Adopt academic integrity standards that clearly define what will be considered acts of plagiarism and outline the consequences for those who plagiarise. The key to the process of adopting these integrity standards is input and involvement by faculty and students in the policy adoption discussions. For more guidance, please refer to the International Center for Academic Integrity.<sup>7</sup>
- Regarding the consequences that befall those who are caught plagiarising, institutions should consider intent when meting out punishment. Instances of plagiarism that result from students’ lack of understanding are more effectively treated as teaching moments and should be treated as such. Outright instances of plagiarism, particularly plagiarism as fraud - as when a student purchases a paper to submit as his or her own - should be treated more severely.
- All faculty should consider spending time raising student awareness of what constitutes plagiarism, whether in the context of their courses or at their institutions. This is best accomplished through class discussion as well as inclusion of explicit information about plagiarism in course syllabi.
- Faculty should also consider plagiarism when creating assignments. For example, having students pull together annotated bibliographies for the source material that they intend to use for a research paper can help to foster not only an understanding of how to source material appropriately, but also how to conduct better research.
- Use plagiarism detection software as a formative tool. Providing students with access to their own plagiarism detection reports encourages them to learn and practice the appropriate use of source material.

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<sup>6</sup> Access to “The Plagiarism Spectrum” is available at: <http://www.plagiarism.org/plagiarism-101/types-of-plagiarism>

<sup>7</sup> See: <http://www.academicintegrity.org/ica/home.php>

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## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION & RESOURCES

For more information about plagiarism, its consequences, and approaches for addressing integrity issues institution-wide, please see the other papers following in this series.

Also, visit [turnitin.com](https://turnitin.com) for additional information on plagiarism prevention and to learn more about Turnitin's tools for helping schools and institutions identify and deter plagiarism. For research institutions, [ithenticate.com](https://ithenticate.com) has tools to help identify and deter plagiarism in academic research.

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