



**University of Brighton**

# **“All My Own Work?” Plagiarism and how to avoid it**

**Student notes**



## **University of Brighton**

**Welcome to the University of Brighton.** We hope that your experience of higher education will be enjoyable and inspiring.

All members of the academic community around the world, whatever our subject disciplines, are committed to the creation and discovery of knowledge and the free exchange of ideas. This ideal relies on a common understanding of the notion of academic honesty which, at its simplest, means never falsifying the results of research and always giving full credit for any other people's contributions to our own achievements.

Because it is so important to safeguard academic integrity, conventions have evolved which you will need to observe in all your academic work from now on. Some of these may already be familiar to you and in most cases the reasons are obvious, but some rules and procedures may seem pointless or confusing. Nevertheless, you will need to understand and respect them, to avoid unintentionally committing a serious academic offence for which the penalty may be failure of your course and a requirement to leave the University.

Necessarily some of the issues relating to plagiarism are complex; if you have any concerns or questions about any of the points discussed in this document then do raise them with your personal tutor, course tutor or year tutor. If you read the student notes, ensure that you understand it and follow its guidance, then I am confident you will be able to complete your course at the University of Brighton successfully.

# All My Own Work?

## Plagiarism and how to avoid it.

### Activity 1 - Why does it matter?

Take some time to think about the implications of each of these situations. Make brief notes of your responses and then discuss them with other students:

1. A medical researcher falsifies the results of a new anti-cancer drug to make his discovery seem more important.
2. A writer submits an idea for a series to a television company, who turn it down. A few months later, they broadcast an almost identical programme. She never receives any acknowledgment or payment.
3. A historian publishes a book claiming that the Holocaust never took place. He makes lots of detailed assertions backed up by anonymous quotations but does not give any sources for this information.
4. A minority of students at a particular university are acquiring essays via the Internet, and the university authorities have failed to stop the practice. This has led to a decline in the University's reputation and all their graduates (even genuinely first-class students) are now finding it hard to get a job.
5. A design student loses the portfolio containing all her sketches for her final project, and has to start again from scratch. At the final degree show, she finds that many of her original ideas have been used in another student's work.

**Clearly some of these situations have more immediately serious consequences than others, but they all threaten people's lives or livelihoods and distort perceptions of the truth.**

**In the long term, this affects us all.**

## What is plagiarism?

Plagiarism is the word given to a particular kind of academic dishonesty - passing off someone else's work, ideas or words as your own. It can sometimes be unintentional, especially where students' previous educational experiences have actively encouraged the compiling of material from outside sources as an approach to writing essays.

The growth of the internet means that borrowing is not confined to printed works, and cutting and pasting material from web-pages may have been acceptable for some school projects. However, in higher education this would be regarded as plagiarism, unless the web-pages were properly acknowledged and the content was accompanied by a critical commentary.

Here is one definition:

*Plagiarism may take the form of repeating another's [words] as your own.... or even presenting someone else's line of thinking ... as though it were your own. In short, to plagiarise is to give the impression that you have written or thought something that you have in fact borrowed from another. Although a writer may use other people's words and thoughts, they must be acknowledged as such. (MLA 1977, p.5)*

In that case, is it acceptable to copy lengthy passages of text so long as you use quotation marks, give accurate references and join them up with a few sentences of your own? This is not technically plagiarism, but it would be considered poor academic practice. At University, you are expected to develop your own voice and to use relevant quotations and references to help construct your own argument - building on other people's research rather than sheltering behind it.

An American college professor wrote the following advice for his students:

*Only use someone else's writing when you want to quote precisely what they wrote. If this is not your goal, USE YOUR OWN WORDS. [...] Understanding and learning is more than just replaying something you have heard. Writing is a valuable exercise that tests your ability to explain a topic. I often think I understand something, until I try to write it out. This is an important part of learning. (Van Bramer, 1995)*

## Activity 2

The examples below are based on an exercise in Swales and Feale (1993), cited by Jude Carroll (2001).

**Here are six ways to use sources. Example number one is plagiarism; example six is not. Where do you cross the line?**

1. Copying a paragraph word for word from a source without acknowledgement.
2. Copying a paragraph and making small changes - e.g. replacing a few verbs, replacing an adjective with a synonym; acknowledgement in the bibliography.
3. Cutting and pasting a paragraph by using sentences of the original but omitting one or two and putting one or two in a different order, no quotation marks; with an in-text acknowledgement plus bibliography.
4. Composing a paragraph by taking short phrases from a number of sources and putting them together using words of your own to make a coherent whole with an in-text acknowledgement plus bibliography.
5. Paraphrasing a paragraph by rewriting with substantial changes in language and organisation; the new version will also have changes in the amount of detail used and the examples cited; citing in bibliography.
6. Quoting a paragraph by placing it in block format with the source cited in text and bibliography.

Whether or not you are quoting directly, or summarising or questioning ideas and information that have contributed to the development of your ideas, it is still important for you to give full details of your sources.

This has two purposes:

- to acknowledge other writers' contributions to your ideas
- to enable your course tutors to help you. If weaknesses in your work come from using poor quality texts, they need to know what these are so they can advise you on more interesting, reliable or up to date materials.

Some instances of academic 'borrowing' may involve other kinds of source material, and are potentially more serious.

### Activity 3

Look at the following examples. Do they amount to plagiarism? Which do you think is the most serious? Why?

1. Mary pays £100 for an outline for an essay from a commercial supplier and uses it as the basis of her own coursework.
2. Nazeem and Daniel work together on a piece of coursework and submit very similar answers, claiming in each case that it is their own work.
3. Su, a first year student, finds a discarded copy in the print room of an answer done by a student who appears to be studying a similar course. The ideas are so good that she uses them for her work – they clearly cannot be improved upon. She does not know whose they are.

Plagiarism, whatever the source of the material or the intended outcome, is unacceptable. It is important to understand that *intention* does not have a role to play in the definition of plagiarism.

### What are the penalties?

The main reason to avoid plagiarism is for your own sake - you will be wasting your time at University unless you learn to develop your own ideas. But there are additional University sanctions which may include outright failure of your degree.

### Activity 4

1. How do you think each of the examples in Activities 2 and 3 would be dealt with by the University?
2. Now look at the attached section on academic misconduct from the University's *General Examination and Assessment Regulations for taught courses* (GEAR) - students are responsible for familiarising themselves with these regulations in full.

Which of the examples above do you think would be considered 'poor academic practice' or 'academic misconduct' offences?

- 3 What would happen a) for a first offence and b) for a subsequent offence?
- 4 What other kinds of behaviour are included in 'academic misconduct'?

It is also important to realise that a record of the investigation will go on file and may have to be referred to if a request for a reference is made by a prospective employer. Similarly, if an allegation of collusion or plagiarism is upheld where a student is enrolled for an award which would have carried eligibility for recognition by a professional association, the professional association may, at the discretion of the Examination Board, be informed of the facts and of the University's actions.

This doesn't go away. In July 2002 the Vice-Chancellor of one of the world's top Universities was forced to hand in his resignation after it was discovered that he had plagiarised by copying from other authors without attribution in books published in 1979 and 1983. You may be able to think of some more recent examples which have been reported in the news.

### Finally, some reassurance....

All the talk of sanctions and rules can be alarming, but if you remember what was said in the introduction about how Universities and academics work - creating new knowledge by exchanging and building on each other's ideas, while acknowledging their sources - then the rest just requires common sense and some time to get used to the referencing conventions used in your subject – which will be explained in your course handbooks.

As Hugh Pyper (2000) wrote:

*.. if you are clear, careful and honest there should be no problem. Don't let the fear of plagiarism keep you from using to the full the amazing resources in other people's writings.*

*Learning how to make proper and responsible use of other people's work in developing your own understanding of a subject is the heart of academic life. Reading good scholarly work should also give you useful examples and models of good practice and you should actively look out for ways in which these may help you improve your own writing. **If in doubt, ASK!***

### Further guidance and help

This booklet is intended just to give basic general information about the nature of plagiarism and why it is taken seriously. Further advice is also available in your course handbooks, library and on the internet.

Take some time to read through the guidance in your course handbook and in the online **ASK Academic Study Kit**, available at <https://student.brighton.ac.uk/ask/> which you will find on your homepage in Studentcentral. This contains advice on all aspects of studying, including [avoiding plagiarism](#).

**However, the most important guidance comes from your course handbook and course lecturers, who will advise you on what is expected and the referencing conventions used in your discipline.**

**If you are unsure about anything, do ask them.**

## Using Turnitin at the University

The University uses Turnitin to help with [eSubmission](#), marking and feedback of students' assessment. The University reserves the right to use the Turnitin originality checker, and students' work submitted for assessment purposes may be submitted for checking. This use complies with UK Data Protection Law and Copyright Law.

## References

*In this article, a fairly standard form of Harvard referencing has been used, with in-text citations in brackets showing the author, date and (where appropriate) page number. Fuller publication details are then given in a list of references at the end, arranged alphabetically by author.*

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