

Plagiarism and How to Avoid It

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What is plagiarism and why is it such a big deal?

Plagiarism is using someone else's words or ideas without acknowledgment. Perhaps this doesn't sound like a great sin, but consider it this way: within the academic community (that is, you, me and everyone who is part of the educational enterprise, scholars who write books, reviewers who read them, scientists who publish the results of experiments, teachers and students who use the work of scholars in the classroom or outside of it, etc.) ideas are our stock in trade. They are our wealth. When you use someone's ideas or someone's words without citing the source, you are committing an act of intellectual theft. The examples below deal primarily with plagiarism as it occurs in the humanities and social sciences, but plagiarism is every bit as serious a problem in the natural sciences.

People plagiarize for a lot of reasons; sometimes they are under stress or have mismanaged their time badly, sometimes they are insecure about their own ideas. Sometimes, sad to say, they are simply lazy or careless. Legally and ethically, there is no difference between "accidental" plagiarism and deliberate plagiarism.

Think of it this way. If you sneaked a 20 dollar bill out of your roommate's wallet and used it to go to the movies, you'd know you were stealing. If your roommate left a 20 on the kitchen counter and you borrowed it, intending to explain later and also pay him back, but then decided not to mention it until he did, you'd still be stealing even though you hadn't set out to do so. How can you **properly** take the money, which you really may need, and which you may feel reasonably sure your roommate will be glad to lend you? The answer is simple, isn't it? **Leave a note!** If you do, you have acknowledged your action. If you do not, you never really can make things fully right later, if your roommate realizes that the 20 is missing before you have a chance to say something. Instead, there always will be that little doubt -- Would I have gotten my money back if I hadn't brought the matter up? Thus, the note is the equivalent of the citation.

It was an accident...

"I didn't mean to represent those words as my own; I just forgot to add a citation. I really meant to." It really doesn't matter; it's still plagiarism. Think back to the analogy of the 20 dollar bill; you may have intended to return it, but if you don't, your friend is still out of pocket and you are probably feeling just a tad guilty (as well you should be). The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

I thought I only had to cite it once...

Citing a work once is not enough if you have used it more than once. Remember that a paraphrase which is uncited is plagiarism. It is also plagiarism if just a few words or phrases from the original source find their way into your paraphrase.

Examples of plagiarism:

Here is an excerpt from a book which a hypothetical student writing a paper on medieval women has been reading:

The kind of meditation taught to women was visual and creative, not intellectual or abstract: the devout woman was to imagine herself as an observer and a participant in the life of Mary and of Christ. Most of the visual imagery for these mental pilgrimages was available to everyone in the pictorial cycles in parish churches and convents. The conditions of women's lives led to visions, and visions gave an individual woman a voice, a belief in herself, as chosen to speak. They also gave her the experience of inner transformation, which she felt compelled to communicate to others. Perhaps the only voice women heard that told them to do something was God's voice in visions. But God's voice was the only one that was really necessary, for with divine permission and guidance, anything was possible.

Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) p. 8.

Now, here are three examples of imaginary student papers using this source:

Because the kind of meditation taught to women was visual and creative, not intellectual or abstract and women were encouraged to meditate on pictorial images of Mary and Christ from parish churches and convents, they often had visions. These visions gave an individual woman a voice, a belief in herself, as chosen to speak, and also the experience of inner transformation, which she felt compelled to communicate to others God's voice inspired women to do something, to be active. When God's voice spoke, nothing was impossible.

Clearly plagiarized; not only is no source given, for material which is not common knowledge, but phrases from the original are mixed in with the writer's paraphrase.

The woman who had been encouraged to "imagine herself as an observer and participant in the life of Mary and of Christ" (Petroff, p. 8) were quite likely to have visions. Visions inspired by representations in churches or convents, or by a sort of mental pilgrimage, gave women a voice and a sense of self-confidence, of being chosen to speak, as well as an experience of spiritual transformation. Hearing the voice of God was necessary, because with His permission, "anything was possible" (Petroff, p. 8).

Also plagiarized. In this case, although Petroff is cited correctly twice, other phrases ("mental pilgrimage", "chosen to speak") have been lifted word for word without acknowledgment.

Because women were denied access to the priesthood by the Church but were encouraged to involve themselves in emotional forms of piety, as I argued above, their religious impulses sometimes expressed themselves through visions. Visions provided a special kind of authority. Hildegard of Bingen says in the *Scivias* that the voice of God literally told her to write (Hildegard, p.9). Petroff suggests that God's voice was "the only one that was really necessary" for such women (Petroff, p. 8). Needless to say, Church authorities were not always pleased with visionary women, especially those who listened to God rather than the local churchmen, and some visionaries were persecuted as heretics.

Not plagiarism; the author is making a general point about women's exclusion from the Church which is different from Petroff's and using Petroff responsibly to support that point.

The author's list of works cited will also, of course, include a reference to her primary text, as follows:

Hildegard of Bingen, *Secrets of God*, trans. Sabina Flanagan (Boston: Shambhala 1996).

Another reason to avoid plagiarism (beyond the fact that it is morally and ethically indefensible):

Not only is it dishonest, and a violation of the Honor Code, but plagiarism is generally very easy to spot. Most professors are able to distinguish between the prose of their students and the prose of an expert in the field without much difficulty. Do not assume that you will get away with it; you probably won't. Your professor will realize what you have done, and your peers on the Honor Council are generally fair but severe in considering cases of plagiarism. Students do fail courses because of plagiarism, and in extreme cases are separated, sometimes permanently.

I would like to acknowledge the influence of the section on plagiarism in Frederick Crews, *The Random House Handbook*, Fifth Edition (New York: Random House, 1987) pp. 502-504. I have also consulted Gordon Harvey, *Writing with Sources: A Guide for Students* (Cambridge MA: Hackett, 1998).

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