

What is Plagiarism* ?

Introduction

Plagiarism has become an increasingly serious problem in the University. It is aggravated by the easy access to and the ease of cutting and pasting from a wide range of materials available on the internet. Plagiarism is regarded as a very serious offence in the academic world. It constitutes academic theft - the offender has 'stolen' the work of others and presented the stolen work as if it were his or her own. It goes to the integrity and honesty of a person. It stifles creativity and originality, and defeats the purpose of education.

In this University, plagiarism is a disciplinary offence. Any student who commits the offence is liable to disciplinary action. It is disappointing to witness an increase of plagiarism in the University at both undergraduate and graduate levels in recent years. Time and again students who appeared before the University Disciplinary Committee alleged that they did not know what constituted plagiarism. This booklet attempts to give you some guidance on what constitutes plagiarism, why it is wrong, and how to avoid it.

What constitutes plagiarism?

Regulation 5 of the University's Regulations Governing Conduct at Examination provides:

"A candidate shall not engage in plagiarism nor employ nor seek to employ any other unfair means at an examination or in any other form of work submitted for assessment as part of a University examination. Plagiarism is defined as the unacknowledged use, as one's own, of work of another person, whether or not such work has been published."

Put it simply, plagiarism is copying the work of another person without proper acknowledgement. There are two parts in the definition: **copying** and the **absence of proper acknowledgement**. As a result, it gives an impression to an ordinary reader that the work is the original work of the author when in fact it was copied from some others' work. The idea underlying plagiarism is very simple: if you appropriate the work of another person, you should give proper recognition to that person.

Plagiarism covers "any other form of work submitted for assessment as part of a University examination". It covers theses, dissertations, take-home examinations, assignments, projects, and other forms of coursework. It applies to both undergraduate and graduate students.

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Copying does not necessarily mean copying word for word. Closely paraphrasing or substantial copying with minor modifications (such as changing grammar, adding a few words or reversing active/passive voices) is still copying for this purpose. It is not so much the form of the copying that is important, but the substance of what is copied. It does not matter what the nature of the source is. It may be a book, an article, a dissertation, a Government report, a table from the internet, a memorandum, or simply an assignment of another student or even teaching material distributed to you. The source may also be graphics, computer programmes, photographs, video and audio recordings or other non-textual material. It does not matter whether the source has been published or not.

The most common form of plagiarism

The most common form of plagiarism is copying from the published works of writers or the essays of other students without any acknowledgement. The source may be published in traditional text or on the internet.

The following passages appeared in a dissertation submitted to the University for a Master degree in

2000:

Much of the work on child rearing and its affects has sought to identify characteristics whereby parents differ stably from one another. These characteristics have been related to relatively stable individual differences in children. Researchers and theorists dealing with parent-child relations have repeatedly made reference to two broad dimensions of interaction. (reviewed by Amato, 1990). The Table 2.2 is a summary of some approaches adopted by different researchers. [followed by a table]

1. The authoritarian-autocratic pattern

In the authoritarian pattern, parents' demands on their children are not balanced by their acceptance of demands from their children. Although it is understood that children have needs that parents are obligated to fulfill, power-assertive parents place strict limits on allowable expression of these needs by children. Children are expected to inhibit their begging and demanding, and in extreme cases they may not even speak before being spoken to. Parents' demands take the form of edicts. Rules are not discussed in advance or arrived at the consensus or bargaining process. Parents attach strong values to the maintenance of their authority, and suppress any efforts their children make to challenge it. When children deviate from parental requirements, fairly severe punishment (often physical) is likely to be employed.

These two passages, including the table that is not reproduced here, were taken almost word for word from a previous dissertation submitted in 1995. There was no reference to the previous dissertation. Any ordinary reader who reads the above passages will think that these passages are the work of the author of the dissertation. In fact, they are the work of another student 5 years ago. The offending student has made some minor changes to the original version, but the alteration does not change the overall impression that these passages are presented as if they are the own work and ideas of the offending student. This constitutes a clear case of plagiarism. *The test of plagiarism is whether the work will give an ordinary reader a reasonable impression that the work is the original work of the author when it is in fact a copy of the work of someone else.*

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What is proper acknowledgement?

Plagiarism does not mean that you cannot quote from others' work. After all, academic work has to be built on existing knowledge. You are free to quote the work of others to strengthen your arguments provided that the quote is properly identified and the source is acknowledged. Thus, copying by itself is not plagiarism if the copied passages are identified and properly acknowledged. However, a rider should be added that the purpose of a research paper, project or an examination will be defeated if the work submitted is nothing more than a piece of cut and paste work. The aim of University education is to foster your originality, your independent thinking and analysis, and your power to express and convey your own ideas. A research paper will have little academic value if it does no more than copy passages upon passages from other sources, even when the sources are properly acknowledged. Extensive copying from sources may also suggest that you do not really understand the copied passages.

Then what is proper acknowledgement?

It is not enough merely to acknowledge the source by listing the source in the bibliography or at the end of your paper. If you take a passage from

If you take a

another person's work, you must put the copied passage in quotation (ie, "xxx") or identify it by using proper indentation, to show to the readers that it is the work of another person, and provide the source. There are two requirements. **First, the copied passages must be identified.** In one disciplinary case the student copied 5 long passages (over 3 pages) from a source without using proper indentation or putting the passages in quotation marks. At the end of the last copied passage he provided the source. This is insufficient and will still constitute plagiarism. Providing the source does not mean that you can copy passages upon passages. Without identifying the copied passages, you mislead the readers to think that they are your own work or that you have rephrased and summarized a source in your own words when this is not the case.

passage from others' work, you must put the copied passage in quotation or identify it by using proper indentation, to show to the readers that it is the work of another person, and provide the source.

Secondly, the source must be clearly provided immediately after the copied passages. The source should include full details of the name of the author, the full details of the source, the date of publication and the page reference. There are different ways of citing the source, and the form and style of citation may vary from discipline to discipline. However, the most important thing is that the copied passages have to be identified and their sources adequately provided so that it would not give a misleading impression that the copied passages are your own work. It is insufficient to list the sources at the end of the work.

Example:

Competition Policy and Law

As the convergence phenomenon continues, cross-media acquisitions will increase, leading to both a growing level of horizontal integration amongst the bigger players and an intensified concentration in the market. In Hong Kong, the classic example of such cross-media acquisitions is provided by the takeover in August 2000 of Cable and Wireless (HKT) Limited, the largest player in the telecommunications sector, by Pacific Century Cyberworks Limited, a new internet company set up only one year earlier by Richard Li, the son of Hong Kong tycoon, Li Ka Shing.

This passage appeared at p 9 of a research paper submitted by an undergraduate student. There were 13 pages in the research paper. If you read the above passage, you may think that this is the original work of the student. In fact, they were copied almost word for word from Richard W S Wu and Grace L K Leung, 'Media Policy and Regulation in the Age of Convergence - the Hong Kong Experience' (2000) 30 Hong Kong Law Journal 545. That article was cited as the fourth item under the section of References at the end of the paper. Although the source article was cited in the References section, the above passage still constitutes plagiarism. The copied passages have not been identified, and the source has not been provided immediately. Plagiarism of this kind can easily be avoided by putting the above passage in quotation marks and by providing the source article at the end of the passage. The proper way to do it will be like this:

Competition Policy and Law

"As the convergence phenomenon continues, cross-media acquisitions will increase, leading to both a growing level of horizontal integration amongst the bigger players and an intensified concentration in the market. In Hong Kong, the classic example of such cross-media acquisitions is provided by the takeover in August 2000 of Cable and Wireless (HKT) Limited, the largest player in the telecommunications sector, by Pacific Century Cyberworks Limited, a new internet company set up only one year earlier by Richard Li, the son of Hong Kong tycoon, Li Ka Shing." (Richard Wu and Grace Leung, 2000, at pp 481-482).

Note the quotation marks that identify the copied text. The full citation should be provided at the References section. Alternatively, you may provide the full citation by way of a footnote or an endnote. You can then offer some comments of your own on the above passage.

Thus, you can see that plagiarism can be easily avoided. Identifying the copied passage and providing the source will not detract from the force of your argument (unless the whole paper is copied).

Paraphrasing or adopting an idea or an argument

Plagiarism is not confined to copying someone's words. If you are paraphrasing or adopting an idea or argument from a book or an article or any other source, you should also acknowledge the original author. The same rationale applies: you are borrowing other people's ideas, and the original author of the idea should be properly acknowledged. Some students think that changing the words or paraphrasing will avoid plagiarism. This is wrong. Even if you change all the words, failure to acknowledge the source of the idea will still constitute plagiarism.

Take this example. The following passage is taken from Lawrence W C Lai, *Town Planning in Hong Kong: A Critical Review* (City University of Hong Kong Press, 1997), at p 12.

Historically, the rise of planning as a profession has been heavily influenced by European pre-war economic thought and political experience. The planning profession has come to encompass the techniques, activities, procedures, and management of government intervention in spatial and socioeconomic affairs in terms of the issues of externalities and public goods. It is worth noting, for example, that Pigou's *The Economics of Welfare* (1920) provides justification for government intervention on the grounds of resource allocation efficiency.

Now consider this passage:

The town planning profession is heavily influenced by European pre-war economic thought and political experience. Not only has the planning profession adopted the techniques, activities and procedures prevalent in Europe, but it has also embraced political beliefs such as management of government intervention in spatial and socioeconomic affairs in terms of the issues of externalities and public goods. For example, Pigou's *The Economics of Welfare* (1920) provides strong justification for government intervention on the grounds of resource allocation efficiency.

Although this passage is not a direct copy of Lai's work, the idea is clearly taken from Lai. The language is similar, and the example is clearly that of Lai. The original author is entitled to be acknowledged. In the absence of acknowledgement, this passage constitutes plagiarism as it conveys to an ordinary reader a reasonable impression that this passage is the original work and idea of the student. An honest way to do it will be like this:

According to Lai (1997, at p 12), the town planning profession is "heavily influenced by European pre-war economic thought and political experience." Not only has the planning profession adopted the techniques, activities and procedures prevalent in Europe, but it has also embraced political beliefs such as management of government intervention in spatial and socioeconomic affairs in terms of the issues of externalities and public goods. Lai referred to Pigou's *The Economics of Welfare* (1920) as an example of arguing for government intervention on the grounds of "resource allocation efficiency". (at p 12)

How much plagiarism is plagiarism?

This question is similar to asking how much I steal would constitute theft! Strictly speaking, even lifting a sentence from another source without acknowledgement constitutes plagiarism. Sometimes students think that there is no plagiarism if their work includes only a small portion of plagiarized passages but a substantial part of their own work. This is wrong. Even a small portion of plagiarized passages is sufficient to taint the whole piece of work. In one case it was found that 20% of a student's assignment was plagiarized. She provided her own analysis and at the end of the paper, she gave a conclusion that was her own work. This is a clear case of plagiarism. In July 2002, the Vice-Chancellor of a leading University in Australia resigned because it was revealed that he lifted several passages from other academics without acknowledgement in his book. The extent of plagiarism is only relevant in determining the form and level of sanction.

What if the footnote is also copied?

Consider this passage:

Mo once declared, 'I hate the historical novel... There's an inherent bathos about the form of the historical novel - people put modern language into these characters' mouths.... I like the historical novel as written by someone like Peter Ackroyd because... he uses the old language.'¹

1. Parker, Blitz, July 1987, p 34.

This looks proper on the face of it, except that the passage, including the footnote, was lifted from Elaine Ho, Timothy Mo (Manchester University Press, 2000), p 70. Although the passage contains largely quotes from a source and the source has been identified, it does not alter the character of the passage being a copy of some other's work. The quote of Andrew Parker was chosen by Elaine Ho in her work to illustrate a point. If you wish to use this passage, the original author, Elaine Ho in this case, is entitled to be acknowledged. A simple way to acknowledge the author can be done like this.

Mo once stated, 'I hate the historical novel... There's an inherent bathos about the form of the historical novel - people put modern language into these characters' mouths.... I like the historical novel as written by someone like Peter Ackroyd because... he uses the old language.'¹

1. Parker, Blitz, July 1987, p 34, as quoted by Elaine Ho, Timothy Mo (Manchester University Press, 2000), at p 70.

This is also an acknowledgement that you have not read Parker, but you relied on Elaine Ho's work which you have read. **Do not cite sources that you have not read. If you rely on a secondary source, say it.** Contrary to what many students believe, reliance on a secondary source is not necessarily regarded as a sign of weakness, although it is also better to go to the primary source, in this case Parker, if it is available.

Does it matter that what is copied is factual information only?

Copying is copying. It does not matter whether you copied factual information, opinion or argument. In all cases you have to make proper acknowledgement. Remember again that the test of plagiarism is whether you give a reasonable impression to an ordinary reader that the work is your own. If so, it constitutes plagiarism, and it makes no difference that the copied passages are factual in nature. Indeed, there is no justification for copying factual information, as such information can be presented in many different ways.

Can I avoid plagiarism by making minor alterations or adding some remarks of my own?

The answer is 'no'. Plagiarism cannot be avoided by making minor alterations or stylistic changes. You must also remember that plagiarism covers not only word for word copying but also borrowing of ideas.

The following passage appeared in the thesis of a graduate student:

Dependence of fish on actinians is behavioural, not physiological, as evidenced by their ability to survive alone in captivity. In the absence of an actinian, captive fish will bathe among air bubbles or frondose vegetation, thereby appearing to obtain tactile stimulation from the anemone tentacles (Fautin, 1986 & 1991). Lubbock's (1980) claim that fish are healthier when kept with anemones suggests that they benefit in other ways, too.

This passage came from Fautin (1991), at p 38. The original reads like this:

Dependence of fish on actinians is behavioural, not physiological, as evidenced by their ability to survive alone in captivity (which is not to deny that fish might benefit by association with an anemone). In the absence of an actinian, captive fish will bathe among air bubbles or frondose vegetation, so appear to obtain tactile stimulation from anemone tentacles (Mariscal, 1970b, 1972; Fricke, 1974; Trivedi, 1977). The claim (Fishelson, 1965; Lubbock 1980a) that fish are healthier when kept with anemones suggests that they profit in other ways, too.

While some alteration to the original source has been made and the source has been cited, this still constitutes plagiarism. The examiner commented: "I was stunned to find entire sentences taken verbatim from the literature without appropriate attribution... I infer from his alteration of a few words that he has some sense of this issue. He clearly has not apprehended, however, how to acknowledge intellectual property."

I didn't intend to cheat....

It is unnecessary to show that you intended to cheat for the offence of plagiarism. It is an objective test: whether your work will convey to an ordinary reader a reasonable impression that it is your own work when it is in fact copied from other's work. This is done by comparing what you have done and the sources, and whether you have made appropriate acknowledgement in your work. **The only subjective element required is that you were aware that you were copying.** It will be difficult to convince any person that you were not aware of copying if passages upon passages of your work are copied from sources.

It is irrelevant, for the offence of plagiarism, to determine why you copy. It may be because you did not have enough time to do the research or reading (because you left it to the last minute). It may be because you think your English is not good enough and you fear you will be penalized for your poor English. It may be a matter of ignorance and inexperience. It may be that you have copied these passages in your notes and you have forgotten to include the sources so that when you wrote your essay, you thought these passages were paraphrases or even your own work. In short, it is a result of negligence rather than a deliberate intent to deceive. All these defences have been raised in the past and have failed. **A comparison between your work and the source will usually speak for itself. Why you decide to copy is a matter that goes to the form and level of sanction.** The sanction will of course be more severe if it is shown that you intended to deceive.

For the offence of plagiarism, it is unnecessary to show an intention to cheat. Whether you intend to cheat is a matter of motive, which will only be relevant in considering the appropriate sanction.

I don't know what plagiarism is. No one has told me about it before.

Ignorance of the law is no defence, for otherwise anyone can choose not to know the law and have a defence in committing an offence. The same applies to plagiarism. The offence is defined in the University regulations. Many departments have also provided further guidelines on what plagiarism is. After all, it is a simple concept of copying without proper acknowledgement. At the university level, if you do not know what plagiarism is, it is your duty to find it out, instead of just waiting to be told.

Having said that, the University has decided to be more proactive. This is the purpose of this booklet. This booklet will constitute notice of what plagiarism is. It may not cover every single situation, and you should consult teachers in your department in borderline situations. The golden rule is, whenever in doubt, identify the copied passages and provide the source. It is always better to err on the cautious side of acknowledging sources. The better approach is to avoid copying at all.

How to avoid plagiarism?

It is not difficult to avoid plagiarism. Some of the examples above have already shown how plagiarism can be avoided. **The best approach is of course not to copy at all.** Try to summarize, digest and then explain what you have read in your own words. Focus on the difference between different authors on the same topic, and try to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their arguments. Avoid doing your research and writing at the last minute. For a good piece of research work, the time for writing up (and re-writing) may be as long as, if not longer, than the time for research. Prepare an outline of your paper, and write from your outline without looking at the source material or even your notes. This will reduce the temptation to copy. **If you have to quote from other sources**, for example, in order to preserve the impact of the original wording or to illustrate a point, **make sure that you identify the quote and provide the source. In any event, the copied passages should not form a substantial portion of your work. Don't forget that proper acknowledgement is still required if you borrow an idea from others, even when you are not directly quoting from the source.**

Sanction

Plagiarism is a serious offence in the academic world. This University takes plagiarism seriously. Academically, it is almost certain that the plagiarized work will receive a fail grade (and most likely a zero mark). There may also be disciplinary action against the student who commits the offence of plagiarism. A warning letter will be issued in case of minor plagiarism. In the more serious cases, the students concerned will be referred to the Vice-Chancellor for referral to the University Disciplinary Committee for disciplinary action. The Disciplinary Committee, which comprises 3 members from the Senate and 2 student members, will investigate the complaint and may impose a wide range of penalties once a student is found guilty of a disciplinary offence. These penalties include a published reprimand, suspension of study for a period of time, and even expulsion from the University. Some students who are found guilty of plagiarism are suspended from their studies. If you are expelled, you will probably never be able to re-enroll in this or indeed any university. Disciplinary action may be taken even after graduation, particularly in the case of research students who commit plagiarism in their thesis or dissertation. If a student lends his work to another student for copying, both students will be punished.

A Matter of Integrity, Creativity and Originality

Plagiarism stifles originality and creativity. If you think you cannot express the idea better than the source article, copying is not the solution. The problem may lie in your language proficiency, or it may be that you do not really understand the source article. In either case, if you resort to copying, you will never improve your language or analytical ability, let alone originality and independent thinking. While the internet makes plagiarism easier, it also makes detection of plagiarism easier. There is now software available to detect plagiarism. It is not too difficult for an experienced teacher to detect plagiarism. Even if you go undiscovered, there is one person whom you would never be able

to deceive - you yourself. At the end of the day, plagiarism involves a matter of honesty and integrity. Stay away from it.

Further Information

There are many books on plagiarism and correct acknowledgement and citation in the Main Library, including a booklet entitled *Plagiarism and How to Avoid It*, published by the Graduate School and the English Centre in 1995, which provides illustrations of what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it. Many departments/schools also provide further guidelines on this topic and detailed instructions on the proper methods of citation. If you feel unsure about plagiarism, consult your teacher.