

A student's guide to plagiarism, collusion and poor academic practice

This is not a 'how to', but rather a 'how not to', guide to those most problematic of academic practices – plagiarism, collusion and poor academic practice – all of which, to one extent or another, result in someone passing another's work off as their own.

The University's Academic Misconduct Policy defines the forms of academic misconduct and the process by which breaches are addressed and the penalties imposed for those found guilty of an offence.

The Style Sheets provided by Programmes/Faculties provide advice on the effective and correct ways of citing academic (and other) sources (and thus avoiding poor academic practice and plagiarism in written work).

This guide is meant to help you understand plagiarism as a concept (and why you shouldn't engage in it).

Let's get the terminology straight first. The blanket term 'plagiarism' (which will be used as short-hand here for all forms of passing off the work of others as your own) is often used as an umbrella term for the following:

Plagiarism:

Copying or paraphrasing (ie putting in your own words) the work of another author without correctly citing them as the source of the text (or idea) transmitted. This includes unpublished material and so relates as easily to your own or another student's work (or an essay bought over the internet) as it does to a printed text.

Collusion:

Working with another (or others) to produce a 'composite' text which is the product of more than one author but which is subsequently presented as the work of an individual. Such work may indeed, be original (if only produced once) but is problematic in its 'group' approach to academic performance.

Poor academic practice:

This is often the result of hurried and badly prepared work and which has, for example, marked text as a quotation but given no (or the wrong) source, or which has used a 'quote within a quote' (ie a quotation from a text, which is, itself quoting another text) in a sloppy or misleading way.

All of the above are a bad idea regardless of whether you intended to cheat or not. Some are fraudulent in an overt and blatant way, others are indicative of poor practice – either in note taking or in making the transition from group activity to individual work. None of them are the kind of activity we want our students to be associated with (or the kind of activity which will stand you in good stead in the future – whatever kind of occupation you end up following). The very least penalty you can expect, if (and when) you are discovered as having engaged in such an activity, is to fail the essay and only be allowed to redeem it for the minimum pass mark. It is far more likely that you will fail the entire module and even possible that you will fail your degree in its entirety.

Even if it were not a disreputable practice, the potential effect on your degree if you are found to have plagiarised (or committed some other form of academic misconduct) makes it a really silly thing to do.

How can you avoid plagiarising?

Take careful and adequate notes:

A great deal of poor academic practice (and some plagiarism) comes from students who work to last-minute deadlines and do everything against the clock.

- Try to work in an ordered fashion and to make notes of quotes that you think will be important and useful to you clearly, always noting the author, title, page number and publication details (date and place of publication, publisher's name) of the text you are quoting. It is worth writing this information down first, before you even start to read the text in question.
- It is worth considering using a hard-bound notebook for note taking (as this way your pages will not get out of order and you will not mix up quotations).
- If you're photocopying sections of a text, spend the extra few pence and take a photocopy of the title page first.

It is amazing how much plagiarism is found to have come from the opening sections of texts – thus indicating that the 'offender' hasn't got very far in reading the text and is clutching at straws for material.

Avoid using the internet as your primary source of information:

There's a great deal of good stuff out there on the internet, but also a deal of rubbish. The internet is a fine source of plagiarised material (there being few editorial controls over the material published) and an even better source of poor academic practice.

Learn to be critical of your sources: you can quite happily trust some on-line journals, or sites which have an obvious academic provenance. Others, however, are more dubious. This doesn't mean that if you find something really interesting, you can't necessarily use it. Just use it critically (and acknowledge its potential problems in your critique) – you will gain a great deal of kudos from your tutor for demonstrating your awareness of such matters.

Don't just cut and paste material from a number of web sites into a 'cobbled together' whole: it's quite easy to spot (even when - and not all students do – you've normalised the font style, size and colour throughout). Academics have long practice of reading for the style of a text. Some are literary and linguistic critics by training and profession. Others undertake editorial work and therefore spend much time thinking about the ways others write. Everyone reads a great deal (both printed texts and the work of their students) and so are alive to the nuances of style and to its potential variation. It is such stylistic heteroglossia which most-often alerts an examiner to there being 'something rotten' in the work they are reading. And if they have any suspicions they will follow them up.

Answer the question set:

It is seldom that an essay which has been largely cobbled together from sections of other peoples' work really addresses the question that has been posed. One of the primary markers of a problematic essay (and therefore one which merits further investigation for poor academic practice) is a 'scatter gun' approach to knowledge – as if the writer has thought 'I'll just throw as much information as I can at this subject and hope that some of it sticks'. If you answer the question set (and if your examiner has posed a suitably focused question) then an individual response should be required. This will almost never be served by copying something that someone else has written.

Recognise the limits of group work:

Many modules will, at some point or other, require you to work in groups. This work may be focused on research or experimentation of some kind, or may be in preparation for some form of group activity – such as a performance or presentation. In almost all cases, however, there will be an element of assessment within the module concerned which allows the examiner to differentiate the performance of all students within the module on an individual basis. So, remember that you will have to write up your own thoughts

at some point, write careful and individual notes on whatever group activity you are engaged in and research around the topic in such a way that your individual response to the subject can come through in your writing.

Read around the topic:

As has been alluded to above, plagiarists often work under pressure and to last-minute deadlines. One manifestation of this is over-concentration on problematic internet material, another is concentration on (the opening pages of) a very limited range of source material. Those who 'read around' a topic seldom produce an answer which is entirely focused on one scholar's opinion (and are thus less likely to – even inadvertently - plagiarise). Also, reading academic texts is a very good way of getting to understand how they are written - matters of argument, quotation and citation – and is every bit as useful as reading guides to essay writing.

Use your style sheet:

Every programme (or in some cases faculty) will provide a style sheet indicating the way in which references to a wide range of material should be made within your written work. The two most common systems used within the University are the Chicago (or Latin) system (which makes full bibliographical reference to texts within footnotes or endnotes) and the Harvard system (which cross references a full bibliography with citations given in abbreviated form in brackets, within the main body of the text).

Remember that citation and referencing is an art, not a science, and that there are possible variations within each system. The best thing to do is to stick to the method recommended by your programme, but you can also find advice on the internet (type 'Harvard referencing' or 'Chicago referencing' into Google) or in such reference works as the MHRA Style Guide or the Chicago Manual of Style (both available in the library). At the end of the day, the guiding principles should be ones of clarity and consistency, and you are less likely to face penalties for poor academic practice if you have tried to use a referencing system and slightly misunderstood it, than if you have not tried at all.

If you wish to find other useful information regarding plagiarism, collusion, poor academic practice and other forms of cheating, then the following (academically credible) web sites are to be recommended:

Anti Plagiarism Strategies: <http://www.virtualsalt.com/antiplag.htm>

Avoiding Plagiarism: <http://sja.ucdavis.edu/files/plagiarism.pdf>

Cite Source: <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/plan/college-success/10314.html>