

13 “DOING RESEARCH IS FUN; CITING SOURCES IS NOT”: UNDERSTANDING THE FUZZY DEFINITION OF PLAGIARISM

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OVERVIEW

For many students, the word “plagiarism” invokes a sense of fear: a fear of being caught for doing something wrong and facing sometimes very harsh penalties such as receiving a failing grade on an assignment or being expelled from college.¹ You might be familiar with these feelings and associating plagiarism with stealing someone else’s words and ideas and claiming them as your own. But, as we hope you understand by the end of this chapter, plagiarism is much more complex, especially as some of you can probably remember a writing instructor at some point telling you to write a text “in your own words.” So, when does an idea or a word become your own? When does an idea or language that you read need to be cited and when is it “common knowledge”? In this chapter, we hope to dispel some of the fear you might have about plagiarism by sharing experiences of our own students, presenting some academic definitions of plagiarism, and then discussing an activity that we completed with Rachel’s students in a first year writing course at a 4-year university in the United Arab Emirates. We’ll end with some ways you can better identify plagiarism in your own writing, especially when writing a research paper so you’ll be able to focus on how to develop ownership of your own language and ideas rather than being concerned about the consequences of plagiarism.

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INTRODUCTION

After spending an entire unit researching a paper about the relationship between childhood trauma and serial killers, Mueller¹, a first-year engineering student, determined that “researching about a topic is interesting, citing the sources is not. Although, citing needs to be done to avoid plagiarism.” Many of you might agree with this sentiment. You get really excited when you learn about a new topic that interests you, but actually finding sources to incorporate into the paper without being accused of plagiarism can be stressful. You might even feel that you don’t understand what plagiarism actually is and how you’re supposed to avoid it. So what is plagiarism? Let’s look at a couple of definitions.

DEFINITIONS OF PLAGIARISM

Most of you will probably agree that buying an entire paper off a website or having someone else write your entire paper for you is a clear example of academic dishonesty. But many cases of plagiarism happen unintentionally because plagiarism is not always so easy to identify.

One often cited definition of plagiarism is when you present “words or ideas as [your] own” (Howard 799). Your college or university most likely has its own institutional policy on plagiarism. Many are found on your institution’s website or in your student handbook. Take a look at this policy on plagiarism (paying attention to the language used in the policy). Does your school’s policy use verbs such as “use” or harsher verbs such as “stealing” or “copying”? Do you think the policy offers clear guidelines that help when writing a paper?

Let’s compare your institution’s policy with the two examples from US universities below. You will notice similarities, but also that much of the language and what counts as plagiarism changes between policies.

1. At the University of Berkeley, plagiarism is defined as the “use of intellectual material produced by another person without acknowledging its source,” for example:
 - Wholesale copying of passages from works of others into your homework, essay, term paper, or dissertation without acknowledgment.
 - Use of the views, opinions, or insights of another without acknowledgment.

- Paraphrasing of another person’s characteristic or original phraseology, metaphor, or other literary device without acknowledgment. (“Academic Honesty”)
2. In Arizona State University’s (ASU) plagiarism policy, the school gives students some helpful advice about what doesn’t need to be cited in research papers:
- Your opinion
 - Common knowledge
 - Accepted factual information
 - Things you personally observe and record
 - Personal experiences (“Plagiarism”).

At Berkeley, it is plagiarism to use the “views, opinions and insights without acknowledgement.” At ASU, your own opinion does not need to be cited, however, your opinions and ideas are so often influenced by what we have read, especially in higher education classrooms where it’s expected that your opinions are formed by reading others’ works. In other words, at what point does your opinion, which has likely been influenced by another’s, need to be cited? If you have read some idea or opinion that you readily agree with, do you need to cite that person if you feel like you now own the sentiment? Determining when opinions need to be cited can be problematic because we often feel that we align ourselves with certain ideas and opinions, but these still often need to be cited.

WHAT IS BEING PLAGIARIZED?

In this section, we will present the results of an activity Rachel and Silvia designed for the first year writing course Rachel taught where students were put into groups and given examples of what might be considered plagiarism. Let’s now look at some specific examples and using the definitions above about plagiarism, determine what, if anything, is being plagiarized.

As you read through the following quotes from popular social media pages from four individuals, ask yourself if these are examples of plagiarism. If so, what do you think is being plagiarized?

1. “Reading is the inhale, writing is the exhale.” —Justine Musk
2. “Reading is inhaling. Writing is exhaling.”
—Armaja Bandyopadhyay.

3. “Reading is like inhaling. Writing is like exhaling.”
—Aditi Bharadwaj.
4. “Reading is like breathing in. Writing is like breathing out.”—
Pam Allyn.

Do you think the idea or the language is plagiarized? What else do you think you need to know to determine if this is plagiarism?

In our classroom, one group of students agreed that this is an example of plagiarism saying: “The meaning behind each picture [showing quotes about reading and writing] is the same for all four quotes. They are all structured in the same way where reading comes first then writing comes next. They all tried to use different words between the sentences however, their idea is the same” (Jade and Tea). Another group agreed saying: “we don’t know who is the original source of this quote and there are many quotes that give the same idea by changing the wording. The idea is being plagiarized because they all share the same thought about reading and writing, but they paraphrased the original quote” (Mishoo and Zamir). Most of the students in the class agreed the four quotes are an example of plagiarism, but one group also disagreed: “The idea seems to be more plagiarized than the language. Since there is no stark difference in the idea and language of the given example, we believe that this is an example of plagiarism. And since the use of different words can subtly alter the meaning of the phrase, some of us believe that this is not an example of plagiarism” (Sneha, Bilbo, and Talida).

These students notice some very interesting aspects of plagiarism including ideas of originality, structure, meaning, and the language. While discussing plagiarism, Diane Pecorari, a noted scholar of plagiarism, states, “While an idea can be the object of plagiarism even if it is expressed in an entirely new way, it is often the repetition of the wording of an earlier text which enables the plagiarism to be detected or which is persuasive in convincing gatekeepers that plagiarism has in fact occurred” (538). In other words, ideas can be plagiarized even if the language is different. Coming up with original ideas or fear of being accused of plagiarizing someone else’s ideas can be a very scary thought as you are still developing your opinions and ideas about new subjects. However, Edward White, a scholar in writing studies, tells students, “We get to own others’ ideas by understanding and thinking about them, by *making* them our own through reflection and integration into our own thinking processes” (207). Being able to articulate and defend why you think the way you do is part of this learning process.

Can you think of an idea that you read about in a book that has influenced the way you currently think? Would you cite the source? Or do you think the idea is now your opinion and doesn't need to be cited?

Let's look at another example. Politicians often use similar words, phrases, and ideas when giving speeches. So, when does this become plagiarism? In this example, we have two sections of speeches given by Michelle Obama in 2008 (“Transcript”) and Melania Trump in 2016 (Drabold, “Watch Melania Trump’s”). Look through the speeches and highlight words, phrases, or ideas that you think are plagiarized in these sections of the longer speeches.

Michelle Obama (2008 speech)	Melania Trump (2016 speech)
<p>“And Barack and I were raised with so many of the same values: that you work hard for what you want in life; that your word is your bond and you do what you say you’re going to do; that you treat people with dignity and respect, even if you don’t know them, and even if you don’t agree with them.</p> <p>...</p>	<p>“My parents impressed on me the values that you work hard for what you want in life; that your word is your bond and you do what you say and keep your promise; that you treat people with respect.”</p> <p>...</p>
<p>“And Barack Obama and I set out to build lives guided by these values, and pass them on to the next generations. Because we want our children, and all children in this nation, to know that the only limit to the height of your achievement is the reach of your dreams and your willingness to work for them.”</p>	<p>“[My parents] taught me to show the values and morals in my daily life. That is the lesson that I continue to pass along to our son.”</p> <p>...</p> <p>“And we need to pass those lessons on to the many generations to follow, because we want our children in this nation to know that the only limit to your achievements is the strength of your dreams and your willingness to work for them.”</p>

One group said of Trump’s speech: “The wording is exactly the same, the format (the outline of the ideas) are exactly the same, the order of those ideas are exactly the same. The language and tone are similar. And so is the context. No new ideas were added” (Maya, Malar, and Ruby).

Another group discussed the concept of owning ideas by saying “The idea isn’t being plagiarized as it’s a common idea shared by people around the world, and the language used was different but still served the same purpose” (Mishoo and Zamir). Agatha and Maddi extended this by saying that “Both the ideas and the language are being plagiarized. At times, the language is even copied word for word.”

Zamir and Ruby added to the issue of ideas and language by also taking into account the speaker’s position in society saying in our class discussion:

Ruby: Melania should have taken full of advantage of her higher position, her power and resources, yet, she didn’t make use of what she had; it’s annoying [what Melania did].

Zamir: I mean if the person doesn’t have that much power I can kind of understand.

Ruby: In the classroom, everyone has some importance or value; it is not about money or status; plagiarism would be the way you word it, the language you use, the tone, idea is the same, then yes, it’s plagiarism.

These ideas spurred an even lengthier conversation in our classroom about how plagiarism can be connected to language and ideas, but also positionality. Do you agree that a person’s position in society should be considered when discussing issues of plagiarism? Why or why not?

READING AND KEEPING TRACK OF YOUR SOURCES

Now it’s time to apply the ideas we’ve discussed above related to public figures and plagiarizing to the practicalities of completing your own research in your various classes. You can see that so many mistakes about plagiarism happen because of incorrect citation and not paraphrasing—not giving credit to the author who influenced the idea or language in your own writing—but also because of a misunderstanding of when an idea is common knowledge or original. There is pressure to come up with original ideas or put someone else’s ideas into your own words. Peter Elbow, another writing studies scholar, tells students, “In your natural way of producing words there is a sound, a texture, a rhythm, a voice which is the main source of power in your writing...This voice is the force that will make a reader listen to you, the energy that drives the meaning” (7). Writing any paper is a complicated process involving you reading ideas of others, discussing

ideas with others, discovering your own ideas, developing your own opinions, and combining these all in a way that makes you feel like you own the paper.

In the book *Bad Ideas about Writing*, Dustin Edwards and Enrique Pas dispel the myth that writers are solitary geniuses, sitting alone in the woods waiting for original ideas and inspiration to flow into their minds (64). They make the point that this is not how writing works for most writers. We are certainly included in this! We read others’ work, draft our own, talk about it with others, revise again, and again. We are often inspired and get ideas from those around us.

You might feel some pressure to come up with original ideas for your papers, but hopefully you can see that “originality” involves more than just ideas. As Maddi determined after reflecting on her final research paper for the course: “As I was writing this research, I realized that for a paper to be yours not every single word in the text must be original, but the way that you guide the reader throughout the text and the way that you portray the message is owned by you.”

So how do you keep track of all these concepts as you write your own research paper? Diane Pecorari, a scholar of students’ source use and plagiarism, suggests that skilled writers “articulate more consciously what they have learned from which sources” (68). In order to do this, Rachel had students in her class keep a research log that helped them better see how the sources they were reading influenced their understanding of their chosen research topic, but also gave them a clearer idea of how to cite the particular source in their final paper. Before beginning the research paper, it is helpful to first write down what you know about your chosen topic. Then you can more easily see how each of your sources is adding to or changing your current understanding. You can also see ways to incorporate the source into your final paper. For example, let’s look at one entry in Maddi’s Research Log:

<p>Article citation (APA)</p>	<p>Clark, P. A. (2006). Physician participation in executions: Care giver or executioner? <i>The Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics</i>, 34(1), 95–104. doi:10.1111/j.1748-720x.2006.00012.x</p>
<p>How did this article change or add to your understanding of the topic?</p>	<p>Other than being a reliable source, this article allowed me to understand the topic in terms of known ethical principles rather than in the terms of the physician’s personal ethical stance.</p>

Article summary	The author explores the role of physicians in executions and analyzes the ethical arguments for and against physician involvement in the process. It discusses the urgency in resolving the ethical conflicts. The text analyzes the situation in accordance to certain medical ethical principles such as respect for persons, beneficence, nonmaleficence and justice. Clark argues that physicians should abide by the Code of Medical Ethics regardless of their personal beliefs. Moreover, the author emphasizes that physician participation in the death sentence is unethical.
Quote that you might use in your paper	“This would be a very cruel way to die: awake, paralyzed, unable to move or breathe, while potassium chloride burned through your veins” (Clark, 2006, p. 100).
How much time did you spend reading and summarizing this article?	Reading and summarizing: 40 min; Research: 20 min

In the course, students were introduced to APA citation style guides, and then we could discuss in class how this source might be acknowledged in the paper in order to avoid plagiarism. You can see in column 4, Maddi has cited a direct quotation that she might want to use in her final paper. But she also knows that if she is going to use information that she wrote in her summary in column 3, she will also need to cite it, although she won't use quotation marks because she is paraphrasing the author's ideas.

Using a log like this might seem time consuming but remember that writing a research paper is a process that takes some time. You won't complete it all in one sitting, so it is especially helpful to have your notes in a log like this. If you do have any questions about whether or not you need to cite something, it would be helpful if you have some specific examples you can talk about with your writing instructor, writing center tutor, or peers.

Above all, we want you to ask your instructor when you have questions! So many students are scared to ask about plagiarism because of the stigma associated with this word. We hope that you can see after reading this short chapter, that plagiarism is a really complex issue that involves concepts related to originality, language, ideas, structure, phrases, context, and of course, the particular assignment. These factors interact in ways that make you feel like you have ownership over your research process and also the final product. We hope that you will feel connected to these as you

begin (and continue) to read more authors and develop your own opinions throughout your educational careers, and that even though citing sources may not be fun, as Mueller mentions in the title of this chapter, the process of doing research can still be fun.

NOTE

1. Mueller, and all student names mentioned in this chapter, are self-selected pseudonyms by the students in Rachel’s class.

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TEACHER RESOURCES FOR “DOING RESEARCH IS FUN; CITING SOURCES IS NOT”: UNDERSTANDING THE FUZZY DEFINITION OF PLAGIARISM

OVERVIEW AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

As composition teachers, we find that students are not aware of the complex nature of plagiarism, and because of the stigma associated with it, are not willing to discuss this topic or ask their teachers questions because of a fear of being “caught” plagiarizing. To remedy these situations, writing instructors can use this chapter to help students understand the complexity of what plagiarism entails, to start having open discussions of plagiarism with students in and outside the classroom, and ultimately to help students take ownership of their own research process.

The chapter describes three activities (the similar quotes activity, the two speeches activity, and the research log activity) which we believe are apt to classroom discussions and are eye-openers for many students. In terms of process, we find it interesting to start by asking what students believe plagiarism is and if they believe they own the language and ideas that they write. This can begin with asking students what it means to “write in your own words.” Once we have answers to these questions, we build on their understanding by assigning the three activities mentioned above. We also like to include a newspaper article about paper-mills as a first assignment (Farooqui), as this is a clear-cut example of plagiarism, and then move on to the similar quotes activity followed by the speech activity. We then ask students to use a research log while conducting research on their writing topic and discuss some examples of student writings in class.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you define plagiarism? Do you think you own the ideas and language you write?
2. How did the activities about plagiarism challenge or change your definition of plagiarism?

3. How might your own revised definition of plagiarism influence the way you can integrate the ideas and language of your scholarly sources into your own research paper?
4. Plagiarism is often discussed in terms of ownership. One helpful activity after you've written your final research paper is to identify areas that you feel are “yours” and sections that “belong” to others. Why might this be a difficult activity?
5. In what ways do you think you “own” your final research paper?