

THE RESEARCH PAPER VS. PLAGIARISM

PLAGIARISM: what it is and how to avoid it.

Plagiarism is the act of passing off another's words and ideas as one's own. The question of when one has plagiarized and when one has simply asserted a general truth from an unknown source, can be sometimes puzzling. In a cosmic sense, the process of learning is made up of countless tiny crimes of plagiarism, since we all borrow freely from one another. No generation speaks a language of its own invention; few people are creators of the proverbs and sayings that they utter daily. The mother who tells her child, "A thing of beauty is a joy forever," is plagiarizing from the poet John Keats; the father who warns his son, "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned," has plagiarized from the playwright William Congreve. Innumerable other examples can be given to show how we freely and wantonly borrow ideas and expressions from one another.

Blatant plagiarism, however, involves the conscious and deliberate stealing of another's words and ideas, generally with the motive of earning undeserved rewards. The student who copies the paper of a friend is guilty of blatant plagiarism. Likewise, the student who steals an idea from a book, expresses it in his or her own words, and then passes it off as original, has committed an act of plagiarism.

The conventions of writing research papers dictate that students must acknowledge the source of any idea or statement not truly their own. This acknowledgement is made in a note specifying the source and author of the borrowed material. All summaries, paraphrases, or quotations must be documented; only personal comments may remain undocumented. In sum, to avoid plagiarism students must:

1. Provide a note for any idea borrowed from another.
2. Place quoted material within quotation marks.
3. Provide a bibliography entry at the end of the book for every source used in the text or in a note.

Not every assertion is documentable, nor is it necessary for students to document matters of general and common knowledge. For instance, it is commonly known that the early settlers of America fought wars with the Indians—an assertion a student could safely make without documentation. Similarly, a student could write, "Russia was in turmoil during the years preceding the Bolshevik Revolution," without documenting this statement, since the turmoil of pre-Revolutionary Russia is common knowledge. As a rule of thumb, a piece of information that occurs in five or more sources may be considered general knowledge. Proverbs, and sayings of unknown origins, are also considered general knowledge and do not have to be documented.

The following, however, must be accompanied by a citation specifying author and source:

1. Any idea derived that any known source.
2. Any fact or data borrowed from the work of another.
3. Any especially clever or apt expression, whether or not it says something new, that is taken from the work of another.
4. Any material lifted verbatim from the work of another.
5. Any information that is paraphrased or summarized and used in the paper.

In writing research papers, students are expected to borrow heavily from the works of experts and authorities—indeed, this is partly the purpose of the research; but they are also expected to acknowledge the sources of this borrowed material.

To illustrate plagiarism in different degrees, we have reproduced a passage from a book, followed by three student samples, two of which are plagiarism.

Original passage Alexander III died on 20 October, 1894, and was succeeded by his son Nicholas. The new emperor was more intelligent and more sensitive than his father. Both those who know him well, and those who had brief and superficial contact with him, testify to his exceptional personal charm. The charm was, however, apparently associated with weakness and irresolution. Nicholas appeared to agree with the last person he had talked to, and no one could tell what he would do next.

Student Version A (plagiarized) When Alexander III died on October 20, 1894, he was followed by his son Nicholas, who was more intelligent and more sensitive than his father. People who knew him well and also some who knew him only superficially testify that he was exceptionally charming as a person. This charm, however, was associated with weakness and an inability to make decisions. Nicholas always seemed to agree with the last person he had talked to, and no one could predict what he would do next.

This is an example of outright plagiarism. No documentation of any sort is given. The student simply repeats the passage almost verbatim, as though he or she had written it.

Student Version B (plagiarized) When Alexander III died on October 20, 1894, he was followed by his son Nicholas, who was more intelligent and more sensitive than his father. People who knew him well, and also some who knew him only superficially testify that he was exceptionally charming as a person. This charm, however, was associated with weakness and an inability to make decisions. Nicholas always seemed to agree with the last person he had talked to, and no one could predict what he would do next.³

³Hugh Seton-Watson. The Russian Empire. 1801-1917. vol. 3 of The Oxford History of Modern Europe (Oxford: Oxford UP. 1967) 547.

Though documented with footnote, the passage is still a plagiarism because the student has merely changed a word or two of the original, without doing a proper paraphrase.

Student Version C (acceptable) Emperor Nicholas II, who came to the throne of Russia following the death of his father, Alexander III, was apparently a man of exceptional personal charm and deep sensitivity. Ample testimony has come to us from both intimate as well as casual acquaintances, indicating that indeed he possessed a magnetic personality. However, the general consensus is also that he was a man who lacked the ability to make hard decisions, preferring to agree with the last person he had seen, and thus making it impossible to predict what he would do next.³

³Hugh Seton-Watson. The Russian Empire. 1801-1917. vol. 3 of The Oxford History of Modern Europe (Oxford: Oxford UP. 1967) 547.

This is an acceptable use of the material. The original is properly paraphrased and its source documented with a footnote.