

Avoiding Plagiarism

Writing Centre Learning Guide

You have probably heard the terms ‘plagiarism’ or ‘academic dishonesty’ in your lectures or course materials. In your previous studies you may not have had experience with these concepts. However, when studying at the tertiary level, this is an important issue. “Academic honesty is an essential component of teaching, learning and research and is fundamental to the very nature of universities ... All academic dishonesty is unacceptable ... including ... plagiarism” (University of Adelaide 2010).

What is plagiarism?

Plagiarism is a concept that is important in referencing within academic writing. At the University of Adelaide it has been defined as “presenting work that is not your own in any format, without appropriate attribution or reference to the original source” (University of Adelaide 2010, § 2.1 a i). Sometimes this is done deliberately where the student intentionally copies another’s work without acknowledgement. This is called academic dishonesty.

Many times, however, plagiarism can be the result of genuine misunderstanding when new students are still learning “the scholarly academic conventions for evidence-based, academic writing associated with the disciplines [they] are studying, including appropriate citing and referencing” (University of Adelaide 2010, § 1 d).

Lecturers realise that learning how to reference appropriately is a developmental process where you will improve through experience and feedback. However, they do expect you to begin referencing from the first assignment and to consciously work on avoiding plagiarism in your writing. If you plagiarise in an assignment because of a misunderstanding, the university will direct you to resources that will help you learn about plagiarism and referencing, but it will also make a record of what has happened and you can lose marks for the assignment or be required to resubmit it (University of Adelaide 2010, § 2.3.1 a).

Types of plagiarism

Specific examples of plagiarism from the University of Adelaide’s Academic Honesty policy include:

- a) paraphrasing or copying work that is not your own, without due acknowledgement by way of reference to the original work
- b) adopting the ideas of others, or the structure of an existing analysis, without due acknowledgement by way of reference to the original source.

Other forms of academic dishonesty that are related to plagiarism are collusion and cheating, which include:

- a) submitting work which is the same, or substantially similar, as another student’s piece of work for the same assessment task

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- b) submitting a piece of work written or answered for you by another person or which you have copied from another person
- c) submitting the same or substantially similar or substantially the same piece of work for assessment in two different courses, except in accordance with approved study and assessment schemes.

(University of Adelaide 2010, § 2.1 a ii & iii, b iii, c iii & iv)

Avoiding plagiarism

The first step to avoiding plagiarism is to understand the essential characteristics of tertiary study and academic writing. When you are writing at tertiary level, you place yourself into a research tradition. This means you acknowledge that at least some aspects of what you are writing about have been dealt with before (McGowan 2005).

In the case of essays, you must analyse the question or topic that has been set, and respond to it. Your response is usually expected to be an 'argument' or personal point of view, using information from the literature (sources) to support that point of view; or you may want to contradict certain points of view found in the literature (again, supporting your critique by reference to authors whose views are similar to your own).

As an academic writer you should analyse not only *what* is said in the literature, but also *how* it is said. If you find certain phrases and sentence structures that are used often by different authors, you can assume that you can use them too, but make sure you use them to express your own point of view.

Another way to avoid plagiarism is by consistently and accurately using some form of referencing system. There are many types of referencing systems including the author-date or Harvard system; APA (American Psychological Association); the number system (as used in Engineering); and the footnoting system. Schools and disciplines have preferred options regarding which referencing system to use. It is best to ask your school and check for specific guidelines.

Regardless of which referencing system you use, you will need to acknowledge the source of all your material in assignments, including direct quotes, paraphrased and summarised material. Various tools are available to university lecturers to detect plagiarism by electronic means. One available through the University is *Turnitin*, which can be used to identify any text that has been taken from electronic sources, including the Internet, making it possible to detect cheating. With the permission of lecturers, students can use this tool. Instructions on using this tool are available at <http://www.adelaide.edu.au/myuni/student/tutorials/content/Turnitin-Submitting-a-Turnitin-Assignment-as-a-Student.html>.

Paraphrasing and summarising

Paraphrasing is when you take the essence of what another writer has said and write this by using some of the commonly used language 'chunks' that make it clear you are re-telling someone else's ideas. You must, of course, still acknowledge where the original ideas came from by adding a reference. It is not sufficient to simply change one or two words.

When summarising, you pick out the main points of a passage, section or chapter. Again, you should aim to write these by using the language of the discipline in which you are studying, clearly indicating by the use of inverted commas (quotation marks) where there is a direct quote. Make sure that every quotation is copied exactly from the original. Having a clear and careful note making system will also help you to avoid plagiarism.

When do I not have to acknowledge my sources?

Students often worry that they will be expected to reference or acknowledge absolutely everything they write in their assignments. They are concerned that this indicates they have no original thoughts or views on the material.

As mentioned above, academic writing at a tertiary level involves constantly working with material written by experts in the field, synthesising their ideas and analysing the arguments being presented. These all require careful referencing. Your originality lies in the choices you make and the way you analyse and present them.

In each discipline area, however, there are examples of common knowledge material that do not need to be referenced. Examples include various mathematical and scientific formulae, medical terms, and general concepts in law that are used regularly without reference to the original author. As you become more familiar with your discipline area and read more widely you will begin to notice what is considered common knowledge in your discipline and what needs to be referenced.

Examples of writing to avoid plagiarism

Original text

The box below contains a passage with information that a student wants to incorporate into his or her own writing:

The chunk of text known as the paragraph is a series of sentences, all of which relate to a particular point you want to make. This means that some paragraphs are very long and others are very short. Paragraphs are usually more than one sentence although a one-sentence paragraph can be electrifying. It is more common to have four or five sentences bunched together around one idea, and it is considered courteous for the writer to try and vary the length of those five sentences to assist understanding and prevent reader fatigue (Fox & Wilkinson 1993, p.8).

Paraphrasing example 1

This box contains one example of the student attempting to incorporate the above ideas:

A paragraph is a series of sentences that relate to a certain point you wish to make. Some paragraphs will be long and others are short. They are usually more than one sentence long and more commonly have four or five sentences in them. To be a courteous writer it is important to vary the length of the sentence to assist the reader to understand and to prevent reader fatigue.

This writing is an example of plagiarism, because there is no indication where the material has come from. The wording is also very similar to the original with only a few words changed. A lot of phrases and words have been directly copied from the original with no acknowledgement.

Paraphrasing example 2

This box contains another attempt to incorporate information from the original passage:

According to Fox and Wilkinson (1993) a paragraph is a series of sentences that relate to a certain point you wish to make. Some paragraphs will be long and others are short. They are usually more than one sentence long and more commonly have four or five sentences in them. To be a courteous writer it is important to vary the length of the sentence to assist the reader to understand and to prevent reader fatigue (Fox & Wilkinson 1993).

Although the writer has attempted to reference here, there is still a considerable amount of plagiarism. The words used are very similar to the original. It is not sufficient to simply change a word here or there. When paraphrasing or summarising a passage you must ensure that you are writing the material in your own combination of words and indicate clearly any sentences or parts of sentences you are copying.

Paraphrasing example 3

This box contains a more successful attempt to incorporate the ideas without plagiarising:

According to Fox and Wilkinson (1993), paragraphs are developed around a central concept, incorporating a number of linked sentences. They suggest that the number of sentences in each paragraph can differ from one to many, and that sentences should be of varying lengths “to assist understanding and prevent reader fatigue” (Fox & Wilkinson 1993, p.8).

This writing acknowledges where the ideas came from and the student has used their own word combinations. The student has clearly indicated where there is a direct quote from the original text by using inverted commas and including the page number of the original text.

Reference list or bibliography

The final step for avoiding plagiarism is to include a reference list or bibliography at the end of each piece of assessment, listing all of the sources you have referred to in your assignment. In order to do this you will need to have all of the bibliographic details (author, date, title of book/article/journal/website, publisher etc.) of each source you have used. The exact format for this list will vary from course to course, so you will need to check what is expected for each course.

University Policies

- Academic Honesty Policy and Academic Dishonesty Procedures - <http://www.adelaide.edu.au/policies/230/>
- Assessment for Coursework Programs Policy - <http://www.adelaide.edu.au/policies/700/>
- Responsible Conduct of Research Policy - <http://www.adelaide.edu.au/policies/96/>

References

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