Avoiding Plagiarism

Definition of Plagiarism

According to Professor Charles Lipson (2008), plagiarism is “misrepresenting someone else’s work as your own” (p. 42).¹ The NVCC Student Handbook (2009) lists “possible disciplinary actions ranging from admonition to dismissal, including any grade penalty the instructor might … impose” (p. 72).² Real learning occurs through doing one’s own work, not copying another’s. Plagiarism is frowned upon for this reason and because of respect for the original author.

Common Causes of Plagiarism

Confusion of Common Knowledge and Special Knowledge

- Most people already know “common knowledge.” Special knowledge requires some unusual training, research, or expertise; thus, special knowledge should be cited.
- For example, almost everyone knows the U.S. Constitution protects the right to free speech. This is common knowledge. But few people know which Supreme Court case established the “clear and present danger” exception to free speech. This is special knowledge and should be cited.

Misunderstanding of Citation Standards

- If you use someone else’s ideas, then you should cite that person.
- If you use someone’s exact words, then use quotation marks both before and after them.
- If you change someone’s words, expressing the same idea in your words, then you should still cite the person, but you don’t have to use quotation marks.
  - Changing only a couple words is not a paraphrase.

Cultural Attitudes toward Intellectual Property

- Individualistic cultures, such as the U.S., highly value intellectual property. Communal cultures value sharing and thus have a very different view of using another person’s work or ideas. If you are writing in a U.S. classroom, then you should cite another person’s work or ideas anytime you use them in your paper.

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Unfamiliarity with Academic Culture
- In American culture, you may freely share ideas in conversations, over the phone, or even on the internet. However, in American Academic culture, you should cite other people’s ideas when you share them. This establishes your credibility as a writer and avoids plagiarism.

Desperation
- Writer’s block is entrenched. The deadline is approaching. Failing is a real possibility. Rather than “copy-and-paste” in desperation, visit the Writing Center, speak to your professor, or talk to a friend to get help with your writer’s block.
- Rather than struggle with a paper until plagiarism becomes the easy way out, get help!

Lack of Ethics
- If you think cheating will help you, think again. Plagiarism is very easy to detect, and it results in severe penalties.

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Plagiarism-Detection Technology
- Blackboard 9 has a feature called “Safe Assign” that checks students’ papers against a database of previously submitted papers. It then determines what percentage of the paper has been quoted or paraphrased without citation. You can submit your paper to Safe Assign and get a report on how much of it was incorrectly cited.

Follow the Style Guide
- If you follow the style guide (MLA or APA), then you will correctly cite your sources and avoid plagiarism.
- A good MLA style guide is Easy Writer or Rules for Writers.
- A good APA style guide is the APA Manual.

Conclusion
Avoiding plagiarism comes down to this simple rule: if you use someone else’s ideas in your essay, then always tell the reader who originally expressed those ideas, whether you are directly quoting or paraphrasing.