



# The Writing Center at Bristol Community College

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## Plagiarism: What It Is and How to Avoid It

### The Problem

Plagiarism is everyone's business. As cases in point, consider these recent events:

New York Times reporter Jayson Blair was found to have plagiarized copy over several articles under his own byline. Bestselling historians Stephen Ambrose and Doris Kearns Goodwin were found to be guilty of using colleagues' sources without proper attribution. Popular artists have not been immune from the charge of plagiarism, as the case of Dr Dre (a rapper who has been accused of lifting a bass line from a competitor's song) has shown. In all these cases, serious consequences have followed. Jayson Blair, for example, lost his job, as did a supervisor at the Times. Dr Dre has been ordered to pay \$1.5 million in damages.

### What is Plagiarism?

It is important that we all be clear about the meaning of plagiarism. Because of the need to be precise, we are here quoting verbatim from the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers:

Using another person's ideas, information, or expressions without acknowledging that person's work constitutes intellectual theft. (Gibaldi, Joseph. MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers. Sixth Ed. New York: Modern Language Association, 2003: 66)

You may be tempted to believe that plagiarism amounts to the theft of words alone; in fact, the offense involves appropriating as our own "the product of another person's mind" (As quoted in Gibaldi 66). In other words, when you use someone's words, ideas or patterns of thought without acknowledging your source, you are engaging in plagiarism.

Two additional points need to be emphasized:

- Plagiarism occurs whether intended or not
- Plagiarism can be seen as both a legal issue (copyright infringement) and an ethical one (fraud)

### Examples of Plagiarism

Take a look at the passages below for examples of plagiarism. The source material (as quoted in Gibaldi 72) is followed by two plagiarized versions: one in which phrases are taken directly from the source without quotation or citation and one in which ideas and "patterns of thought" from the original are reproduced without citation.

<i>The Original:</i>	<i>Plagiarized Version A:</i> <b>Taking phrases without quotation or citation</b>	<i>Plagiarized Version B:</i> <b>Appropriating ideas and patterns of thought without citation</b>
Until now, the human race has undergone two great waves of change, each one largely obliterating earlier cultures of civilizations and replacing them with the ways of life inconceivable to those who came before. The First Wave of Change—the agricultural revolution—took thousands of years to play itself out. The Second Wave—the rise of industrial civilization—took a mere hundred years.	Up until recent years, humanity has witnessed two great waves of change, each doing away with earlier cultures. The first wave, or the agricultural, took thousands of years. The second, or industrial, only took a hundred years.	There have been two revolutionary periods of change in history: the agricultural revolution and the industrial revolution. The agricultural revolution determined the course of history for thousands of years; the industrial civilization lasted about a century. We are now on the threshold of a new period of revolutionary change, but this one may last for only a few decades.

## **Acknowledging Sources**

Although formats vary according to the conventions of particular disciplines and subject areas, we acknowledge our sources in two ways: through what is called “in-text citation” and a complete bibliographical list at the end of our paper (called in the Modern Languages Association format the “Works Cited” list). The Writing Lab has handouts available on this format and the style used by the American Psychological Association. A word of definition is necessary: to “cite” a source refers to the practice of mentioning your source within the body of the sentence in which the borrowing occurs, as well as listing the source, with complete bibliographical information, at the end of your essay.

## **Common Knowledge**

Students often ask how we know when to quote, if, practically speaking, everything we know—what is called “common knowledge”—logically comes from sources of some kind. It is a good but complex question. Put another way: when does privately owned knowledge (or intellectual property) become part of the “public domain”? The gray area that sometime stands between attributable knowledge and common knowledge may be difficult to navigate. The rule that we follow is this: **if any of us can trace a particular line of thought or particular words to an ascertainable source then acknowledge the source. Finally, when in doubt as to what is common knowledge and what needs to be acknowledged, cite your source.**

## **Ways to Avoid Plagiarism**

Our experience has shown that for the most part students plagiarize because they are unaccustomed to using sources productively. Moreover, they find it difficult to present themselves as “experts” when quoting published authorities. So often, as a result, students yield to those sources and virtually disappear from sections of their essays.

Knowing the causes, we offer this list of ways to avoid plagiarism:

- Before you search for sources when doing research, write down a clean and productive question that can drive your search
- Write down, early on, an inventory of what you know and believe about your topic
- When reading sources, employ a reliable system of note taking, taking care to separate quotations from summaries and paraphrases, citing your source in all cases
- When quoting, paraphrasing, or summarizing your source, use “signal phrases” to indicate that you are borrowing words or thoughts (“According to one study...”)
- Always cite your sources