

# Plagiarism Guidelines

## *What is plagiarism?*

*MLA Handbook* defines plagiarism as, “the false assumption of authorship; the wrongful act of taking the product of another person’s mind, and presenting it as one’s own.” (Gibaldi 66)<sup>1</sup> The next edition of *MLA Handbook* even more pointedly says that plagiarism means, “to commit literary theft,’ and to ‘present as new and original an idea or product from an existing source.” (Modern Language Association of America 52) However, how does this general definition apply to the specific situations likely to arise in a high school English class? Many assignments, particularly research papers, will involve synthesizing information from various sources. Some uses of outside material are legitimate; others are plagiarism. How can you distinguish between the two situations?

The basic difference involves whether or not you properly acknowledge the outside material. You are not committing plagiarism if you identify a source and accurately report the extent to which you have borrowed from that source. Below is a list of borrowed material that you must cite to avoid plagiarism issues:

1. direct quotations from a source (Duke University Libraries);
2. paraphrases from a source (in other words, even if you change the wording, you still have to acknowledge the source) (Gibaldi 70);
3. “especially apt phrases” borrowed from a source (Gibaldi 71)
4. Ideas (iParadigms “FAQs”, Gibaldi 72-73)

You do not need to cite proverbs or similar expressions, and you do not need to cite common knowledge, which can be defined in this way: “Facts that are readily available from numerous sources and generally known to the public are considered ‘common knowledge’...” (iParadigms “FAQs”). For instance, items 1-4 might be regarded as common knowledge in an academic context, though I chose to cite sources for purposes of illustration.<sup>2</sup> However, this definition is sometimes a bit tricky to apply. How “common” does a piece of information have to be to qualify? If you are not sure whether something you are using constitutes common knowledge, cite it. This is particularly true if you did not know the fact yourself before seeing it in the source—then by definition the fact isn’t common knowledge, is it?

To the list above, we should also add other kinds of “non-textual” borrowed materials:

5. graphics (drawings, graphs, charts, tables, computer-generated graphics, photographs, and other visual elements);
6. sounds (sound effects, recorded speeches and other forms of oral communication, music, and other auditory elements);
7. video.

Sometimes people ask if they really need to cite elements like that. Many times students sit down at a computer to create a PowerPoint presentation and grab all kinds of material off the Internet without giving the borrowing a second thought. However, such unacknowledged borrowing is still wrong. “Copying visual information or graphics from a WWW site (or from a printed source) is very similar to quoting information, and the source of the visual information or graphic must be cited.” (Writing Tutorial Services) The same can really be said for any borrowed element. As I have indicated in “Standards for Written Work,” sometimes you can use a more informal method of citation (Hobbs 76)—it’s hard to incorporate parenthetical notes in a PowerPoint, and videos don’t lend themselves to a Works Cited Page—but you still need to acknowledge the material that you borrowed in some way.

---

<sup>1</sup> See the second section in the *MLA Handbook* for a thorough discussion of issues related to plagiarism. Generally, the ideas in this handout are derived from *MLA*, and for purposes of illustration, I have tried to cite the source of each piece of information, just as you would do in a research paper. Please note, however, that, since classroom handouts are a less formal kind of writing than your graded essays, I won’t necessarily always do such detailed source citations.

<sup>2</sup> I would have needed to cite the quotation from *MLA Handbook* regardless.

There are two other forms of plagiarism that also need to be addressed:

1. turning in someone else's work as your own
2. turning in your own work from another class without revealing that you are "recycling" the material (this practice is called self-plagiarism unless the assignment directions specifically permit this kind of submission) ("Beverly Hills High School Cheating Policy", Gibaldi 74, Roig).

The first item constitutes plagiarism whether the work is entirely written by someone else or partly written by someone else. It is all right to get someone's help in writing an essay if the person involved provides the kind of feedback that a teacher would provide. Any more extensive "assistance," such as rewriting part of the paper for you, becomes plagiarism if you subsequently turn in the paper. Good tests of the difference between getting help and plagiarizing include whether or not you thoroughly understand the information and ideas in your essay, and whether or not the essay is in your own authentic voice. Obviously, if you wrote the essay yourself, you would understand the content of the essay,<sup>3</sup> and the essay would reflect your particular style. By the way, it does not matter whether the person whose material you turn in is aware of what you are doing. Borrowing from an old sibling paper (or current classmate's paper) is plagiarism either way. Nor does it matter what the person's relationship to you is (tutor, sibling, or parent). Plagiarism is equally wrong, regardless of the source.

With regard to #1 above, you also need to be aware that treating an assignment as a group project when it is not a group project also constitutes plagiarism ("Beverly Hills High School Cheating Policy"). When an assignment specifically allows collaboration, submission of work that includes contributions from more than one person does not constitute plagiarism as long as all students involved in the collaboration are listed (Gibaldi 74).

### ***How can I avoid plagiarism?***

1. Remember that work you submit for a grade should always be entirely yours unless the assignment directions allow for collaboration, and then you must name all collaborators.<sup>4</sup>
2. When you are using material from sources, be sure to keep careful track of which material comes from which sources so that you can cite all of it correctly. To avoid any potential problems, it is not enough to acknowledge a source; you also need to be able to indicate very specifically which parts of your essay come from a particular source, either as direct quotes or as paraphrases<sup>5</sup> (iParadigms "Types"). It is also important to distinguish between direct quotes and paraphrases through the use of quotation marks where appropriate (iParadigms "Types").
3. Though students sometimes look at another essay on the same topic (like big brother's, for example), this practice can be dangerous, because you can sometimes be influenced by the other more than you may realize—and you can also be tempted to take the obvious shortcut and use the earlier essay as the basis of your own. Either way, it is all too easy to borrow from such a source without acknowledgement. True, someone else's essay is not normally an acceptable source in most academic contexts, but if you do borrow from it, you have to cite it. Think carefully about whether or not you are willing to cite the essay as a source before you ever look at it.
4. Use turnitin.com as a tool to help you refine your understanding of plagiarism. Remember that if turnitin identifies situations in which you accidentally omitted a citation or cited an insufficient amount of material, you can resubmit to resolve this problem for a certain period after the assignment deadline (normally a

---

<sup>3</sup> In fact, if a student cannot explain the content of his or her own essay, such an inability to explain constitutes *prima facie* evidence of plagiarism.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to emphasize the difference between work you submit for a grade and teacher-generated materials (handouts, tests, etc.) Your work has an "expectation of originality": in an academic context, what you turn in is always supposed to be your own work. Teacher documents for classroom use have no "expectation of originality." In essence, they are always considered to be group projects on the part of all of the teachers for a particular class, and it is accepted practice for teachers to borrow freely from each other in handouts and tests without citing their colleagues as sources. However, if a teacher were to publish such materials outside the classroom, it would be necessary for the teacher to cite all of the colleagues who contributed.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, indicating that a small part of your essay comes from a particular source when actually a much larger chunk comes from that source can often still be considered plagiarism.

week). [To use turnitin intelligently, remember that it identifies similarities between your essay and other texts; it does not identify plagiarism. For instance, if you include a direct quotation and cite it appropriately, turnitin will still show that it is identical to some other document. This kind of resemblance is not a problem. In the same way, some common phrases may show up as similarities if they are long enough, as will certain subject-specific phrases that may be widely used. For example, something like, “In the novel *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger,” would probably show up in someone else’s essay just by coincidence. Such coincidental resemblances are not a problem, either. (See “How it Interpret Turnitin Data” for additional illustrations.) Similarities become problematic when they are uncommon (such as unusual word choice or the presence of a particular grammatical error in an identical word group) or when they are extensive enough to make it unlikely or impossible that they are the product of coincidence.] By the way, turnitin is also good at identifying at least one non-plagiarism related problem: the overuse of direct quotations. If your essay has too many direct quotations, you will end up with an unusually high percentage of resemblances to other sources. If all the sources are cited correctly, you are not plagiarizing, but you are violating the general principle that direct quotations should be used sparingly and should not in any case be the bulk of your essay (“Paraphrase”).

5. Remember that, while colleges often note the existence of accidental plagiarism, they don’t always distinguish between accidental and deliberate plagiarism in assigning penalties<sup>6</sup>—and neither do I. The enforcement of rules regarding plagiarism cannot ultimately be dependent upon my ability to read your mind. I can’t know whether you made a mistake or whether you plagiarized deliberately. I can tell whether or not you plagiarized, however, and that is the basis upon which I enforce the policy. Like most high school teachers, I am more liberal than college professors in giving students a certain amount of leeway in situations in which they are clearly trying to cite a source but just not doing it correctly. For example, if a student cites a source four times but forgets the parenthetical note on the fifth one, I won’t call that plagiarism. Nor is it plagiarism if a student omits a work cited in a parenthetical note from the list of works cited. However, such problems are formatting issues and would affect the format grade. Also, college professors will tend to call at least some of those situations plagiarism, so it is desirable to avoid them if at all possible.<sup>7</sup>



*“We’re happy because we have this whole plagiarism thing figured out, and it’s a big relief, but if you haven’t quite gotten it yet, check out the video at*

*<http://www.screencast.com/t/YjYwNzVkOWMt>*

*. (Not to brag or anything, but it’s good because we’re in it!)”*

*(licensed from Shutterstock,  
56831842 by Auremar)*

---

<sup>6</sup> See for example <http://www.tilburguniversity.nl/faculties/feb/education/studyinfo/fraud/> and <http://www.kellybutterbaugh.com/plagiarism.html>.

<sup>7</sup> The more observant among you will wonder why the graphic in this document isn’t listed on the works cited page. The answer is that it and similar graphics in other handouts are used to make the handouts more interesting and are not being used for informational content. Graphics that contribute directly to the content of a handout will be cited in accordance with *MLA* guidelines.

## Works Cited

- "Beverly Hills High School Cheating Policy." Beverly Hills: Beverly Hills Unified School District, 2010. Print.
- Duke University Libraries. "Citing Direct Quotations." *Research and Reference. Duke Libraries.* Duke University. n.d. Web. 20 August 2010. <<http://library.duke.edu/research/plagiarism/cite/directquote.html>>.
- Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 6th ed. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2003. Print.
- Hobbs, Renee. *Copyright Clarity: How Fair Use Supports Digital Learning*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin; National Council of Teachers of English, 2010. Print.
- iParadigms. "Plagiarism FAQs." *Learning Center. Plagiarism.org.* iParadigms. 2010. Web. 20 August 2010. <[http://www.plagiarism.org/plag\\_article\\_plagiarism\\_faq.html](http://www.plagiarism.org/plag_article_plagiarism_faq.html)>.
- iParadigms. "Types of Plagiarism." *Learning Center. Plagiarism.org.* iParadigms. 2010. Web. 20 August 2010..<[http://www.plagiarism.org/plag\\_article\\_types\\_of\\_plagiarism.html](http://www.plagiarism.org/plag_article_types_of_plagiarism.html)>.
- Modern Language Association of America. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 7th ed. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2009. Print.
- "Paraphrase: Write It in Your Own Words." *Purdue Online Writing Lab.* Purdue University. 21 April 2010. Web. 20 August 2010. <<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/619/1/>>.
- Roig, Michael. *Avoiding Plagiarism, Self-plagiarism, and Other Questionable Writing Practices: A Guide to Ethical Writing*. Office of Research Integrity. August 2006. Web. 20 August 2010. <<http://facpub.stjohns.edu/~roigm/plagiarism/>>.
- Writing Tutorial Services "Plagiarism: What It Is and How to Recognize and Avoid It." *Writing Tutorial Services.* University of Indiana. 27 April 2004. Web. 20 August 2010.