

# Understanding Plagiarism

What it is and how to avoid it

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# Contents

|          |  |           |
|----------|--|-----------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>Introduction</b>                                      | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>2</b> | <b>Forms of Plagiarism</b>                               | <b>3</b>  |
| 2.1      | Directly Copying . . . . .                               | 3         |
| 2.2      | Using Ideas Without Proper Citation . . . . .            | 5         |
| 2.3      | Paraphrasing Incorrectly . . . . .                       | 6         |
| <b>3</b> | <b>Avoiding Plagiarism</b>                               | <b>7</b>  |
| 3.1      | In-Text Citations and Bibliographies . . . . .           | 8         |
| 3.2      | Direct Quotes . . . . .                                  | 11        |
| 3.3      | Paraphrasing and Summarizing In Your Own Words . . . . . | 13        |
| <b>4</b> | <b>Additional Resources</b>                              | <b>16</b> |
| 4.1      | At the University of Texas . . . . .                     | 16        |
| 4.2      | Other Institutions/Websites . . . . .                    | 16        |
| <b>5</b> | <b>References</b>  | <b>17</b> |

# 1 Introduction

Plagiarism occurs when you knowingly or unknowingly present someone else's ideas or words as your own. While there are further details of plagiarism that will be expanded upon later in this guide, this is the general definition. Notice that you can unknowingly plagiarize, yet still face the consequences of plagiarism. At this point in your academic career, and moving forward, not understanding plagiarism is not an excuse for plagiarizing!

While it may seem very easy to copy and paste, or only change a single word in someone else's sentence, these actions can have very serious consequences. On the University of Texas Academic Integrity website, plagiarism is called a "serious violation of academic integrity" [1]. Because this is viewed as such a severe offense, the punishment for plagiarism could be lowering your grade in a class, suspension, or even as final as expulsion from the university [2]. From this, it is easy to see that stealing the work of others and claiming it to be your own is not worth it. It is always better to turn in work that is your own and gives proper credit to other sources, receive constructive criticism from your instructors, and improve upon your own abilities, rather than risking these serious consequences.

The goal of this guide is to introduce you to the different forms of plagiarism through multiple examples, and to provide you with the tools to avoid plagiarism in your work. Much of the information contained in this guide comes from writing classes that I have taken, trends I have seen in papers that I graded, and advice from teachers I have had over the years. This is in no way a comprehensive guide to properly using citations in your writing to avoid plagiarism. The aim is to alert you to the common mistakes and give you a strong foundation to help you correct these mistakes in your writing.

## 2 Forms of Plagiarism

Although this guide will focus primarily on plagiarism in writing, plagiarism can also occur in “oral presentations, illustrations, computer code, scientific data or analyses, music, art, and other forms of expression” [1]. Because each of these forms of plagiarism are best shown through the use of examples, in each of the following sections, there is a brief description of a particular form of plagiarism and then examples with further explanations. In these examples, a mock essay about ice cream will be used.

### 2.1 Directly Copying

Copying verbatim from a source is one of the most common forms of plagiarism, and often the most obvious. With the ease of copy and paste on computers, it is certainly one of the easiest ways to steal words. Directly copying is a violation whether you copy just a single phrase or a whole paragraph. In the example shown in Figure 1, three full sentences are directly copied and placed between two sentences that are completely original.

At first glance, this paragraph (if the underlining were removed) would appear to be a perfectly normal paragraph. It is coherently arranged and succinctly introduces ice cream to the reader. The largest problem with this paragraph lies in the fact that words were presented as those of the author, and not the original article that they were taken from. It is impossible for the reader to differentiate between the words of the author and the words of the original source. See Section 3.2 for information about properly using phrases taken directly from other sources.

One of my favorite desserts and summer treats is ice cream. Ice cream is a frozen food, typically eaten as a snack or dessert, usually made from dairy products, such as milk and cream, and often combined with fruits or other ingredients and flavours. It is typically sweetened with sucrose, corn syrup, cane sugar, beet sugar, and/or other sweeteners. Typically, flavourings and colourings are added in addition to stabilizers. When I was growing up, my family always had at least one half-gallon of ice cream in the freezer.

Figure 1: Underlined text is copied directly from Wikipedia’s article titled “Ice Cream” [3].

Simply copying full sentences is not the only way to plagiarize by directly copying. Even a short phrase that is taken from a source and inserted into a somewhat original sentence without proper attribution is considered plagiarism. The following is an example of this.

Ice cream is a frozen food that is one of the most popular American desserts and summer treats. It is widely manufactured and usually made from dairy products, such as milk and cream.

Figure 2: Underlined text is copied directly from Wikipedia’s article titled “Ice Cream” [3].

Once again, the problem with this is that words that are not those of author were presented as such. This is a common mistake in many papers that I have graded or peer reviewed.

Another similar mistake is when a student copies and pastes, places quotes around the copied and pasted text, but does not provide an in-text citation (see Section 3.1

for more information). Even though you have made it clear that those words were not yours, you still need to provide a proper citation so that the reader knows exactly where you found those words.

## 2.2 Using Ideas Without Proper Citation

Plagiarism does not just apply to words, but also ideas. Even if a direct quote is properly paraphrased (summarized in your own words), but the reference where you got that information is not credited, it is still plagiarism. Be careful of this when writing papers, since this is one of the easiest ways to accidentally plagiarize. Using someone else's ideas and presenting them as your own may not seem like an offense as serious as directly copying words from a source, but both are plagiarism and are equally serious offenses. An example of using an idea without proper citation is shown below.

|  |
|--|
| <p><b>Original Text:</b><br/>Confectioners sold ice cream at their shops in New York and other cities during the colonial era. Ben Franklin, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson were known to have regularly eaten and served ice cream.</p> <p><b>Properly Paraphrased Text:</b><br/>In the early days of the thirteen original colonies, ice cream was sold in major cities, such as New York City. It was common for the founding fathers of the United States to enjoy an ice cream cone and perhaps serve ice cream to their constituents.</p> |
|--|

Figure 3: The original text is copied directly from Wikipedia's article titled "Ice Cream" [3].

In this example, even though the text has been properly paraphrased, since it has not been cited, it is still plagiarism. Without citing ideas, it is impossible for the reader to distinguish between your thoughts and the ideas you got from others. See Section 3.1 for more information about using in-text citations.

## 2.3 Paraphrasing Incorrectly

This third form of plagiarism is also a very common form of accidental plagiarism. A sentence or paragraph is improperly paraphrased when the paraphrasing contains the same words as the original text, maintains similar sentence structure, or has similar word order to the original text.

One way that this happens is when a lot of technical jargon is used in the text that is being paraphrased, particularly in a list of terms. While it is certainly alright to use technical jargon in your writing, it is important that you properly paraphrase the sentence in which the technical term appears. An example of this is shown below in Figure 4.

Notice how the text changes (“usually” becomes “generally,” “frozen” becomes “cold”) except for technical terms like “ice cream” and “sucrose.” The problem with this paraphrasing is that the sentence structure remains the same as the structure from the original text. While the words are changed to synonyms of the original words, they still appear in roughly the same order. In the last sentence, the items in the list are re-arranged, but the technical terms stay the same. As was said before, it is fine to keep the technical terms, but since the original text presents them in a list, the paraphrased text cannot have these items (or any subset of these items) in a list. See Section 3.3 for more information about avoiding issues with improper paraphrasing.

**Original Text:**

Ice cream is a frozen food, typically eaten as a snack or dessert, usually made from dairy products, such as milk and cream, and often combined with fruits or other ingredients and flavours. It is typically sweetened with sucrose, corn syrup, cane sugar, beet sugar, and/or other sweeteners.

**Improperly Paraphrased Text:**

Ice cream is a cold food, usually consumed as a dessert. It is generally created from milk and cream and usually has other ingredients and flavoring mixed in. Ice cream is normally sweetened with corn syrup, beet sugar, sucrose, and cane sugar.

Figure 4: The original text is copied directly from Wikipedia’s article titled “Ice Cream” [3].

### 3 Avoiding Plagiarism

As was mentioned in the introduction, plagiarism has serious consequences regardless of whether the plagiarism was done knowingly or unknowingly. While it may seem scary that you can be held accountable for a violation you didn’t know you committed, there are simple steps you can take to avoid plagiarism. In Section 2, you were introduced to the three major forms of plagiarism in writing and given examples of each. This section will provide you with the tools you need to avoid making those mistakes in your own writing.

### 3.1 In-Text Citations and Bibliographies

The primary goal of in-text citations and the bibliography is to make it extremely clear to your reader where you got each piece of information that you include in your writing. Your reader should never have to guess if an idea is your's or someone else's, and they should never be left wondering where you got your information. In-text citations can be in any style that you want (MLA, APA, Chicago, footnotes, a numbering system, etc.) but whichever method you choose, you must remain consistent. That means that if you have one in-text citation that is in the style “(name, year)” then all of your in-text citations need to have that format. This format must also be carried over to your bibliography. If all of your in-text citations are “(name, year)” style then your bibliography page should have the citations listed alphabetically. It should not have the entries arranged as a numbered list.

**In-Text Citations** A common mistake is not citing enough. Whenever you use an idea taken from somebody else, it must be cited. This gets tricky when you have a paragraph of information/ideas taken from a single source. In my experience, the biggest mistake that students make is that they only put a citation on the last sentence in the paragraph. Unfortunately, this leaves the reader guessing where the information comes from for the entire paragraph, until they get to the last sentence. To avoid this, place a citation at the end of the first sentence of information from a particular source. Then use identifying language throughout the paragraph to remind the reader that the information all comes from one place. An example of this is shown in Figure 5.

Notice how there isn't a citation for the last sentence, but it has the identifying name “IDFA” in the sentence. This alerts the reader that the information is from

According to the International Dairy Foods Association (IDFA), when ice cream was first produced in the late 1700s, it was primarily consumed as a novelty item [4]. Eventually, with the development of superior refrigeration techniques, the mass production of ice cream began, and the “addition [of] motorized delivery vehicles dramatically changed the industry” [4]. In fact, the IDFA even has records of an ice cream parlor ship built for the Navy during WWII.

Figure 5: The citation “[4]” corresponds to a bibliography entry in Section 5 of this guide.

the same IDFA source that was used before. Also note that the quote has a citation even though it is from the same source as the sentence before it. A source is never implied for a direct quote, so you must always have a citation following a quote. Unlike in the example in Figure 5, if there is information from more than one source in a single paragraph, then your citations should look like those in Figure 6.

According to the International Dairy Foods Association (IDFA), when ice cream was first produced in the late 1700s, it was primarily consumed as a novelty item [4]. Eventually, with the development of superior refrigeration techniques, the mass production of ice cream began, and the “addition [of] motorized delivery vehicles dramatically changed the industry” [4]. Today, we are all too familiar with the ice cream truck making appearances at the beach and summer block parties [3]. In the early days of ice cream transportation, however, the delivery of ice cream was a treat. In fact, the IDFA even has records of an ice cream parlor ship built for the Navy during WWII [4].

Figure 6: The citations “[3]” and “[4]” correspond to bibliography entries in Section 5 of this guide.

It can sometimes be very confusing when you are trying to determine if you need an in-text citation for a particular sentence or phrase. If you aren't sure, you can always look at the style manual for MLA, APA, or Chicago styles. Links to these can be found in Section 4. They not only have information about citations, but also general formatting information for papers. If you are having trouble keeping track of the many rules and exceptions, the general rule to remember is that if you are in doubt, you should cite it.

**Bibliography/Works Cited** At the end of your paper you should almost always have a bibliography. Footnotes have slightly different rules than MLA, APA, and Chicago in terms of using bibliographies, and will not be discussed in detail in this guide. Additional resources about footnotes can be found in Section 4.2.

While the in-text citations serve the primary purpose of telling the reader that the information you are presenting is not your original work, it serves the secondary purpose of pointing the reader to an entry in your bibliography. That implies that your bibliography and in-text citations should follow some sort of organizational scheme that makes them easy to connect. Subsequently, any in-text citation should have an entry in the bibliography, and any bibliography entry should be cited at some point in the text.

There are several formats for bibliography entries depending on the style (MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.) that you are using, but there are a few general rules that you should keep in mind. Every bibliography entry should have at least the following:

1. An author should be listed. If none is available (which is common when citing websites), use a publisher or the organization that hosts the source.
2. The title of the source. If this is a website, then use the title of the particular

page you are citing on that website. If you use multiple pages on one website, each page should have its own entry in your bibliography.

3. The date of publication. For books, this will be on one of the first few pages before the title page. For websites, this is usually a “last modified” date or a copyright date at the bottom of the webpage.
4. The date you first accessed the source.
5. The type of source. This could be a website, book, journal article, lecture, interview, etc.

I have found that the easiest way to generate bibliography citations for different types of sources without forgetting any of this information is to use an online bibliography tool. While there are plenty available, my personal favorite is [easybib.com](http://easybib.com) because you can choose the type of source and it will give you a page to fill in about that source, or you can give it a web address and it will extract most of the information you need. Then it will tell you what you are missing, you can fill it into their website, and it creates a bibliography entry that you can put in your bibliography page.

## **3.2 Direct Quotes**

A direct quote should be used when you copy the original author’s words exactly as they appear in the original text. When doing this, you must have quotes around the original text as well as a proper in-text citation (see Section 3.1). Direct quotes are a powerful tool when used properly. There are two common instances where you should use a direct quote in your writing.

1. If the author said it best, and there is simply no way you can paraphrase properly without losing the meaning of the original text.
2. To show credibility for your arguments. If you are presenting an argument that an expert supports, you can show that your argument is valid by backing it up with a quote from that expert.

Of course, there are plenty of other times when a direct quote would be appropriate in your writing, but these are the most common uses. It should be noted here that quotes are not meant to be “filler” in your paper. They should not be there to take up space, but rather to serve a purpose. Because of this, quotes should be no longer than 1-2 sentences, and should flow seamlessly in your writing. If you do need to have a quote that is longer than 1-2 sentences, you can use a block quote (see Section 4.2 for additional resources).

To make your writing flow, it is bad practice to write “this quote shows” after a quote or to have a single sentence quote be an entire sentence in your paper. For the latter, you should lead into a quote in your sentence, instead of simply starting the sentence with a quote. See the example in Figure 7 for more information.

Notice how the sentences in the “bad practice” example are very choppy and are difficult to read, while the sentences in the “good practice” example are much easier to read and flow together nicely. By leading into a quote with your own writing, you show the reader that you have thought about the quote and have a purpose in using it. There is also no need to write “this quote shows” after a quote. It is expected that you will explain the significance of the quoted material directly following the quote. It does not need to be explicitly stated that you will be talking about the quote.

**Bad Practice:**

Unlike when ice cream was first invented, today access to refrigeration is very common. “Ice cream can be mass-produced and thus is widely available in developed parts of the world” [3]. This quote shows that only those with refrigeration can have ice cream, and it is not sold in under-developed countries.

**Good Practice:**

Unlike when ice cream was first invented, today access to refrigeration is so common that “ice cream can be mass-produced and thus is widely available in developed parts of the world” [3]. Unfortunately, under-developed countries lacking adequate access to refrigeration do not have the ability to store and sell large quantities of ice cream.

Figure 7: Keep this in mind when you are writing to improve your writing style.

### 3.3 Paraphrasing and Summarizing In Your Own Words

The term “paraphrasing” simply refers to summarizing a small portion of a source in your own words. This may be a sentence or a whole paragraph of an article, or even a chapter of a book. To properly paraphrase, you must change the sentence structure, word choice, and word order of the original source. In Sections 2.2 and 2.3, you saw examples of proper and improper paraphrasing. In this section, you will learn an easy method to help you to summarize in your own words. This method can be applied when you are paraphrasing, or when you want to summarize the ideas in an entire source.

**Summarizing Ideas** Successfully summarizing someone else’s ideas in your own words can be extraordinarily difficult, especially when you are first learning about a

topic. Often times, when you try to rephrase what an expert has said, you can get caught using the same sentence structure or wording that the expert used.

In this section, I will outline a method that I like to use when I am writing that helps me to summarize what I am learning and collect my thoughts into a coherent and well organized paper. This method begins when you first start researching a topic for your paper. By starting this early, you will avoid accidentally taking notes verbatim from a source and using them later thinking that they are your own words. Use the following steps to easily paraphrase any source:

1. Read through the source you are using without taking any notes. While you read, highlight any phrases that you think might be useful as a quote in your paper. I like to download the sources that I use to my computer so that I can highlight them and save what I have done. You could also print out the sources that you use.
2. Remove yourself from the source. I like to close my laptop and put it on the other side of the room. Whatever you choose to do, just make sure that you cannot continue to read the source, and no peeking! You will get a chance to look at the source again in a few steps.
3. On a new, blank piece of paper, write out the main ideas that you understood from the source. This could be in full sentences or bullet points. You are looking to write down the general idea, don't worry about specifics. The most important thing to remember while you write your notes is that you should NOT try to remember how the author of the original source wrote these ideas. After all, this is meant to be a summary in your words!
4. At this stage, you may begin to connect the ideas you are currently summarizing

to ideas from other sources that you have previously summarized. You should make notes connecting these ideas, and write down your own opinions about how these ideas relate. The opinions that you write here will eventually help you form your analysis in your paper.

5. Once you have written down general summaries of the ideas in the source, you can open up the source again and give it another read through, but don't take any notes while the source is open. This time, you should pay attention to the things that you have highlighted. Which of the highlighted things provide the best evidence/support for the ideas that you summarized in your notes? You should put a star or some other marking by these highlights. When you write your paper, these should be the supporting quotes for the arguments that you make.
6. If you find that you missed an important piece of information in your summary notes during your second read through of the source, you can repeat steps 2 and 3.

This method will not only help you to properly summarize without plagiarizing, but it will also help to improve your paper. While following this method you will identify supporting quotes, and you will start to form your analysis. When you write your paper, you will simply need to combine your summaries, supporting quotes, and analysis into paper format. Remember that when you use your summaries in your paper, you will still need to provide in-text citations for the ideas that you have summarized from the original sources.

## 4 Additional Resources

As was mentioned earlier, this guide provides a brief introduction to plagiarism and how to avoid it, but it does not present every intricate detail. Below are resources that I have found useful when writing.

### 4.1 At the University of Texas

**Academic Integrity Policy:** [http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/acint\\_student.php](http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/acint_student.php)

**Plagiarism:** [http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/acadint\\_plagiarism.php](http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/acadint_plagiarism.php)

**Plagiarism tutorial:** <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/services/instruction/learningmodules/plagiarism/>

**Undergraduate writing center:** <http://uwc.utexas.edu>

### 4.2 Other Institutions/Websites

**Purdue Owl:** Resources on citations in MLA, APA, and Chicago, as well as formatting information. I have found this to be one of the most complete resources available online, and my go-to source for style questions.

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>

**Bibliography tool:** Use this to generate bibliography entries. [easybib.com](http://easybib.com)

**Block quotes:** One of the best resources I have found comes from Purdue Owl.

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/03/>

**Style Guides:** These are good sites if you want to purchase one of the style guide books, or if you need help finding a credible reference regarding a specific style. You can most likely find the style books in some UT libraries, and the majority of information from the style guides can be found on the Purdue Owl website.

**MLA** [http://www.mlahandbook.org/fragment/public\\_index](http://www.mlahandbook.org/fragment/public_index)

**APA** <http://www.apastyle.org>

**Chicago** <http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home.html>

**Footnotes:** None of the style guides recommend using footnotes in lieu of a bibliography page. If you choose to do this, however, this resource from Tufts University will help you determine what each of your footnotes should contain.

<http://www.library.tufts.edu/ginn/pdf/FootnoteandReference-1.pdf>

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