**Everything College Students Need to Know About Plagiarism**

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plagiarism

**It’s a big deal to get caught plagiarizing**. Some students see copy-paste as a time-saving shortcut for writing lengthy papers, but it’s more likely a shortcut to:

-Failing the assignment

-Failing a class

-Suspension or expulsion from college

-Receiving a formal reprimand on your college transcripts

-Academic probation

-Destroying your academic reputation

-Fighting a lawsuit

Almost all schools have their own policies about what constitutes plagiarism, and how it should be dealt with.

**What is plagiarism?**

Plagiarism is taking someone else’s work and presenting it as your own. That last part—presenting it as your own—is what makes plagiarism inherently wrong and sets it apart from a quote or reference. In academic writing, you’ll often refer to the work of scholars and quote experts, but if you try to pass their work off as yours, it’s stealing.

And it’s not just a matter of changing the words you use. Plagiarism covers both words *and ideas*. Which means if you got an idea from someone else, you can’t present it as your own, even if you use your own words. At the same time, Turnitin—a plagiarism software company—says that the Internet “has created an environment that encourages information sharing and values the remixing and remaking of original content. In this environment, plagiarism is easier to commit and originality more difficult to define.” **Most students who plagiarize do it on purpose.**

**How students commit plagiarism**

According to Turnitin, the most egregious form of plagiarism is also the most popular method: copy-pasting an entire paper. As ridiculous as it seems, many students “write” papers without writing a word. **There’s simply no excuse for this.** There’s no way to accidentally copy an entire paper word-for-word. Students do this because they don’t think they’ll get caught, not because they think it’s OK. If a student gets caught blatantly plagiarizing like that, there’s not a lot of room for leniency. It’s a textbook case of academic dishonesty.

The next most common methods aren’t much better. The second most popular way students plagiarize is what Turnitin calls a “mashup”: copying passages from several sources and splicing them together without citations.

The types of plagiarism professors typically encounter are derivatives of this kind of copying. On the most innocent side of the plagiarism spectrum, you have students who properly cite works but rely so heavily on cited material that there was pretty much nothing original in the paper. Whether the actual words are different or not, all forms of plagiarism usually have one thing in common: **little or no original thought.**

**Can you plagiarize something by accident?**

Nobody accidentally walks into your house and takes your wallet. And nobody accidentally copy-pastes an entire paper, puts her/his name on it, and turns it in. Still, it *is* possible to accidentally plagiarize. Not all plagiarism is as obvious to colleges as copy-pasting (according to Turnitin). Some people plagiarize because they thought what they were doing was OK, not because they thought they were getting away with something. It’s not an excuse, but colleges may be a little more merciful towards accidental plagiarism.Assuming, of course, that this is your first time, you own up to it, and you never, ever do it again.

Possible ways to accidentally plagiarize basically come down to someone thinking they’ve “changed enough” of the source to make it an original thought or properly citing the source but contributing too little original material. But putting something into your own words isn’t enough. If most of your paper is the words of other people, you haven’t really “written” it, have you? **This is** **still plagiarism.**

**You can also plagiarize *yourself*** if you borrow from previous papers without citing them. Even if you give yourself permission to use your work, it’s academic dishonesty. You had a source, and you didn’t cite it. I know that sounds silly, but in Turnitin’s list of the top 10 most common types of plagiarism, “recycling” old papers was #5. It’s not as concerning as stealing someone else’s work, but schools take this seriously.

So how do you avoid this situation altogether? It comes down to two things: citing your sources and producing original ideas.

**How do you avoid plagiarism?**

In anything you write, copied words should only ever take one form: quotes. Copied ideas should only ever take one form: references. If someone said something amazing that proves a point you’re making, quote them. If someone inspired your line of thinking, say so. There’s a right way to use someone else’s work, if it is permissible in an assignment, and a wrong way.

The “right way” varies depending on the style guide your school uses, such as [MLA](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/02/), [APA](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/02/), or [CMOS](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/717/2/). The difference between plagiarism and a quote or a reference generally comes down to this: are you in any way, shape, or form trying to suggest that someone else’s work is yours? Or for the accidental plagiarizers: does it *appear* that you’re trying to suggest that someone else’s work is yours?

It’s easy to get stressed out about how to follow a style guide (especially if different classes require different style guides). Some professors will seriously lower your grade for what seems like a trivial formatting mistake. But your fear of complicated style guide conventions isn’t an excuse for plagiarism. If you need to, use more informal references in your first draft, and figure out the exact formatting when you’re revising. The point is just to make sure you’re giving credit where credit is due.

A good quote either functions as support for your own ideas. It helps you pivot from one thought to the next. Your paper has to balance quoted or referenced material with original content. You can’t just Frankenstein a bunch of quotes together and call it good. *Your thoughts* and *your ideas* have to be the driving force behind the paper. Otherwise even with proper citations, you’re still just putting your name on other people’s work.

If you’re still worried about plagiarizing, run your essay through a plagiarism detection software such as [Viper](https://www.scanmyessay.com/) or [Grammarly](https://www.grammarly.com/plagiarism-checker). It may cost you a couple bucks, but it’ll tell you how much (if any) of your essay appears in other published works, and it’s the same way your professors check for plagiarism.

**What if someone else wrote my paper for me?**

This is still plagiarism. This is obviously cheating. *You* were asked to write the essay, and *you* didn’t write it, but *you* put your name on it. A ghostwriter isn’t a loophole. But this isn’t just a problem for the student who submits the plagiarized paper. Now there’s an accomplice. Many schools will punish the ghostwriter as well. This ultimately comes down to a school’s academic dishonesty or plagiarism policy, which probably, your professors have talked to your class about at some point. They don’t like to leave wiggle room for the “I didn’t know” card.

**What do I do if I’ve committed plagiarism?**

It’s totally possible that you weren’t sure you committed plagiarism until just now. But even if you already knew you plagiarized, and you did it on purpose, the next step is the same: own it before you get caught. Especially if you plagiarized on purpose, you’re probably hoping this will all go unnoticed. But the consequences for plagiarizing are too steep and the rewards are too small for that gamble to be worth it.

Plagiarism used to be pretty hard to spot. If a paper looked suspicious—the writing didn’t sound like the student or had an inconsistent voice—professors had to identify plagiarized passages manually or ask the student enough questions to prove it wasn’t their work. **Today there’s an entire industry of plagiarism detection software.** Professors have multiple brands to choose from when they want to automatically check students’ work for plagiarism. But even without software, professors can get pretty good at recognizing the most obvious forms of plagiarism. Class discussions and assignments allow them to learn how individual students think. And especially in small classes, they learn to recognize the way those students write. Plus, it’s safe to assume professors are very familiar with the most common sources.

If you plagiarize, odds are your professors will find out. Get ahead of the problem and tell them you made a mistake. Don’t lie about this or wait to see what happens. If it was a small instance of plagiarism, pointing out an uncited reference may be all it takes to prevent backlash. But at the very least, telling the truth will start the conversation about consequences on the right foot. It can’t undo the damage of your academic dishonesty, but being upfront about it will help rebuild trust for your future work. **And do not try to justify or minimize the importance of your plagiarism**.

**When it comes down to it, avoiding plagiarism takes two things:**

**-Cite your sources.**

**-Produce original work.**

If you do that, you shouldn’t have anything to worry about.