

PLAGIARISM VERSUS CITATION: WHEN DO I GET TO USE MY WORDS?

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Plagiarism can sometimes be seen as an issue of intent. The term comes from the Greeks and means “kidnapping.” Mistakes in citation, on the other hand, are just that: mistakes, not theft. The difference between “it followed me home” and “I took it” is easy to see.

For something to be stolen or misappropriated, it must first belong to someone. Here is what Bakhtin says about words: “The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes one’s own only when the [writer] populates it with his own intentions, his own accent...adapting. ... Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the [writer’s] intentions’” He is saying language was there before we personally started using it and this means that ideas in language that we use have a history and that that history is a kind of conversation, even a kind of negotiation...originality exists, but we need to remember that it is transmitted in, and based on, words that already have their own histories, usages.

Exercise 1: Two people have dogs. Each in turn stands up and says: “My dog is very smart.” These two claims are identical grammatically and lexically (that is, in terms of the words in them). Who is right? Who should we believe? What is the authority for the claim they make?

Exercise 2: I do not have a dog. If I stand up and say: “My dog is very smart” -- and you all have already heard me say before now that I have a cat, not a dog, what do you make of my use of these words? Am I quoting these other people? Am I impersonating these people? Does what I say diminish the truth of what the two real dog owners say? Am I lying? And why might I be lying? What does happen? What does one get, this way, from using other people’s words?

Exercise 3: Consider the following statements: What happens when you hear them?

Jones says Senegal has 513 miles of coastline. A large river cuts the country almost in two. Gambia occupies the banks of this river, a country confined within the boundaries of Senegal, a country contained within another country. Historical forces have perpetrated this unusual situation.

Why is she telling us this, you might ask. Or you might ask simply, “so what?” Or you might ask, “how do you know this?” Here’s my point: in this statement I am using someone else’s words, right enough, but, attributed correctly or not attributed to some other speaker, such a statement is not useful to you as readers until you know how to locate my speaking intention; you need to know what to connect this with, what greater conversation, in class or in the academic community or indeed in any community the statement is meant to take part in.

In *Academic Writing* (2002), Janet Giltrow says that correct citation/quotation, is a benefit to writers. This benefit isn't because writers sound more impressive or more authoritative, or are more likely to be believed or that writers who cite feel more "backed up," but because writers who write academically are taking part in a bigger project. Academic writers are connecting with, relating to, others who are talking about the same kinds of things. This relating might be agreeing or disagreeing or both. So, Giltrow notes, quoting, citing, paraphrasing, lets writers:

- Take a position, agree, and disagree with other writers
- Show what point of view, what group or ideology they are coming from or opposing
- Make new knowledge
- Take a turn in this knowledge-making, respond to the knowledge-making of others

Plagiarism on the other hand, could have all the right grammatical and punctuation features of correct citation, but if the writer's intent is to actually misappropriate someone else's work, that doesn't matter – it would still be plagiarism. So plagiarism to qualify as plagiarism, needs to have an intent to deceive and get credit for work not done, for example by purchasing a paper outright, or getting someone to write it and claiming it as one's own. Any other citation problems are not plagiarism, but mistakes that an understanding of the purpose of citation can correct.

You may say, "That's all very well, but where does my voice come in, when do I get to speak?" First, I invite you to look at academic articles in academic journals: do their authors get to speak? Is it them? If not, what ARE those words doing?

We use the words of others for many reasons. They are useful when there are things we don't know about. If, for example, I need to talk about Senegal, I need to go to other's words, knowledge others have put together about it, because I don't know about it, haven't been there, have nothing to draw on personally. But I can also use the words of others to put together complex ideas...and this putting together is my own idea, my own project. What knowledge others have made is useful to me. There's a lot I don't know, that any one human does not know. It is also useful to cite this knowledge properly so the readers I am addressing know which sources of that kind of thinking I am putting together. It shows them where I am coming from by showing the choice of knowledge makers that I find important; even the ones I do not agree with I need to show, so readers can see how my view, my contribution is unique.

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