

Plagiarism

versus Citation

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The term “plagiarism” comes from a Greek word that means “kidnapping.” It is the term used to identify the intentional appropriation or stealing of ideas from others. Citation, on the other hand, is the term we give to the act of attributing ideas that are not our own to their sources. Mistakes in citation, unlike plagiarism, are just that: they are mistakes, and not intentional theft. The difference between “it followed me home” and “I took it” is easy to see.

In regards to how we use language and how language accrues meaning, we might keep in mind that language was always there before we personally started using it, and therefore ideas in language have a history. Originality exists, but we need to remember that it is transmitted in, and based on, words that already have their own histories, usages, authorships, contexts and so on. Here is what noted language scholar Mikhail Bakhtin says:

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, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions; it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own. (*Discourse in the Novel*, p.294)

Given this and also what we know about creative processes, there is a degree to which we are always using the words of others. In fact, in some areas of public life, such as in art or in song lyrics, the line between plagiarism and derivation—or *homage*— can be quite blurry, and scholars and students alike would be unwise to consider the issue in black and white terms. In academic institutions, however, the line is more clear-cut: here plagiarism is a form of academic dishonesty and is punishable.

We often hear from student writers questions like “How can I say anything new when professional scholars have said so much already?” In answer we say back that academic readers are impressed by your ability to weave together contributions of other scholars you have read, paraphrasing and citing as you go, constructing a conversation between them in your own writing. This is in itself an original contribution, but it also prepares you for other original insights and claims. In academic writing these original insights, as tied to the particular wordings you use to express them, are the currency of academic life: they are the fruits of our academic labour, and a measure of our (yours and mine) value as scholars. In order to distinguish our own original ideas from those of others, we use citation practices developed to meet this need. It allows us to take credit for our own ideas, and give credit to

those whose ideas we find useful in their development. A useful model for thinking about this is to think of academic writing as a kind of conversation, a conversation in which ideas are negotiated.

In *Academic Writing* (2002), Janet Giltrow says that correct citation 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 (the "conversation"). Academic writers are connecting with and relating to others who are talking about the same kinds of things. Giltrow notes that quoting, paraphrasing, and citing let 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
- Take a turn in this knowledge-making; respond to the knowledge-making of others
- Make new knowledge

Plagiarism, it is important to note, 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, it would still be plagiarism. Many citation problems are not plagiarism, but are instead mistakes that an understanding of the purpose of citation can correct.

Understanding plagiarism comes from understanding the nature of scholarship and knowledge, and the associated culture of the university. (Please see our handout on "Principles of Citation" for more information.)

Here are some examples of plagiarizing:

- Using ideas or arguments that you have read without citing the source
- Using a substantial amount of a paper written for one course in another course
- Using an author's sentences or clauses without quotation marks (even though you include the reference).
- Citing sources that you didn't actually read
- Copying another's bibliography or works cited page and representing it as your own.

It is important to cite knowledge you gain from other sources properly so the readers you are addressing can see and give you credit for the roots of your own thinking. This citation shows readers where you are coming from by showing the choice of knowledge makers that you find important, even the ones you do not agree with. Your readers can then see how your view, your contribution to the scholarly conversation, is unique.

The Academic Success Centre has online and tutoring resources available to help you with writing in a variety of disciplines, understanding and producing MLA, APA, and Chicago styles of citing sources, and documenting your academic work. Check our website for links and more information.