

[For SOBAM Students]

## **How to Avoid Plagiarism in Academic Papers**

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Plagiarism (using someone else's words and/or ideas without giving appropriate credit) is a serious violation of academic honor and personal integrity. A single instance of plagiarism can result in failing an assignment, being removed from the course, or even being asked to leave the School or University. If you publish plagiarized work, you may be liable for significant copyright infringement damages and other penalties. Some internet sites such as turnitin.com allow professors to check for possible plagiarism in student papers. But "getting caught" is not the point. Doing the right thing is the point.

Many students plagiarize through ignorance or accident, not by intent. This guide sheet shows exactly what plagiarism is and how you can avoid it.

### **Situation One: Stating Matters of Common Knowledge**

Not everything in your paper must be quoted from sources. You have every right to state matters of common knowledge such as the following:

The events of September 11, 2001, have impacted all Americans.

You don't have to cite statistics or quote an authority for this statement of common knowledge (although you may want to go on to give examples of the impact of 9/11).

But let's say that you find the following words in a *Newsweek* article: "The events of September 11, 2001, have changed the American way of life forever." If you want to use those words or a paraphrase of those words, you must give credit to the source, as follows:

According to *Newsweek* writer Tom Owens, "The events of September 11, 2001, have changed the American way of life forever." (Then, using the MLA or APA documentation systems, you will specify where that quotation can be found.) Don't drop quotations into your paper without introducing their source.

### **Situation Two: Using Someone Else's Ideas**

Let's say, in the situation above, that *Newsweek* writer Tom Owens goes on to specify six areas of American life that have been impacted by 9/11 events. You decide (wisely) that you do not want to quote the entire article, but you do want to use some or all of his six areas to help develop and support your main points in the paper.

You are plagiarizing if you use Owens' ideas (even in paraphrased form) without crediting him as your source. Re-ordering his six areas or using only three or four of them does not exempt you from plagiarism.

Here's how to use Owens' six areas without plagiarizing:

Owens points to six areas of American life that have changed dramatically since 9/11. First, the airline industry has been decimated by the unwillingness of the American public to fly, except under urgent business or personal circumstances. (here you would cite an industry source). My own family, for example, now drives or takes the train for travel involving a day or less. Second, ... (and so forth)

[Notice here that you are working your way through Owens' list of six areas with full credit to him. You are saying his ideas in your own words, not his, and (in the third sentence above) are including your own ideas and examples.

### **Situation Three: Using the Words and Ideas of Others to Support Your Argument**

In your best academic papers, the main structure of ideas (your argument) comes from your own thinking and analysis (as informed by your reading, discussions with others, and personal experience). Let's say that your main ideas for a paper on Business Ethics are as follows:

Idea 1: Few business people receive ethical training as part of their business education.

Idea 2: Once employed, these business people get little or no ethical guidance from their companies.

Idea 3: When ethical violations occur, business people often claim that they didn't know better.

Note that you do not footnote your main ideas in your argument--they are yours, after all, in your own words. You will, however, provide source citations for all the proof you must supply to support each of your main ideas. For Idea 1, for example, you will have to demonstrate (by statistics, authorities, examples, or other means) that few business people receive ethical training in their business education. You can assert this fact to be true only if you are able to back up your assertion with well-documented sources.

Your paragraph for Idea 1, therefore, might proceed as follows:

Few business people receive ethical training as part of their business education. For the period 2004-2007, only one out of nine graduates receiving undergraduate business degrees in the United States took a course in business ethics, according to the United States Chamber of Commerce (your footnote or endnote will appear

here). Wharton Business School Dean Alex Morton calls this omission of ethical training "the hidden tragedy of American business education." (again, your citation will appear here)

Notice that you have used your own thinking (in your major ideas and arrangement of argument) as the heart of your paper or report. The words, ideas, research, and opinions of others (properly identified and cited) act as supporting material to convince the reader that your main ideas have merit.

### **A Useful Exercise**

The website [www.plagiarism.com](http://www.plagiarism.com) includes a free on-line test to let you know if you have inadvertently plagiarized. The test asks you to key in a 100-word section of your own writing (not quotations from others) from your paper. The website program then inserts a blank line in place of every sixth word--and asks you, without looking back to your original paper, to supply the missing words correctly.

If you are not able to fill in the blanks, there's a good chance that your writing is not truly your own. Perhaps you found long passages of prose in a book, article, or website that seemed to say just what you wanted. If so, use quotation marks and source citations to weave that useful material into your own structure of ideas, not to replace your argument.

### **Talking to Your Professor**

Every SOBAM professor is eager to help you avoid plagiarism. When you are in doubt about how to handle source materials correctly within a paper, describe your problem to your professor and ask his or her advice. Counselors at the Writing Center (227 Cowell) are also highly skilled in helping you recognize and avoid plagiarism. You are also invited to stop by my office, (Art Bell) MH 212 during office hours (W 1-5) or by appointment (bell@usfca.edu or 415-422-6264) to discuss any writing problems you are facing.

No one wants to catch you in the act of plagiarism. At the same time, we all want to teach and learn in an academic environment that places high value on the ethical use of the words and ideas of others.