

Make Sure You Avoid Plagiarizing!

Purpose of this document

- ◆ To provide examples of what to do AND what not to do in terms of properly and ethically using material that you did not yourself create/compose/write/publish.
- ◆ To encourage students to demonstrate pride in themselves as ethically sound members of a learning community.
- ◆ To guide students in making decisions for how to best give credit to people whose ideas they borrow or adapt for their own use in schoolwork.

It's not rocket science: to insert into an essay, term paper, or other written product, material that you didn't yourself create or originate, just copy the material out of a book, or copy-paste it from a website. It's not like you didn't do research, after all; you did have to look the stuff up. Right?

WRONG! Very wrong!

Organizations have rules for how they will relate to each other in those groups. And every organization has some differences in their rules. For example, in the huge organization we know as "the U.S. Army," members follow the rule that lower ranks must salute officers. In Procter and Gamble, the large consumer products organization, it is said that there is a rule that memos can't be more than one or two pages at most. In many organizations, there is a rule that you can't smoke in the office buildings owned by that organization.

In this organization--UNCW--there is a rule prohibiting plagiarism. In the 1999-2000 Student Handbook and Code of Student Life (1999) distributed at this university, plagiarism is defined as "the appropriation [or], buying, receiving as a gift, or obtaining by any means another person's work and the unacknowledged submission or incorporation of it into one's own work" (p. 90). Every university in the U.S. has a similar rule in force.

Members or outsiders may certainly question whether a rule ought to be in force or not. For example, some soldiers as well as some civilians may think that saluting is a waste of time. Some members of P&G may wonder why they have to keep memos so short. After all, what if they have some great ideas that require more space to convey? As for smoking at work, if you can't smoke in your organization's facilities, you may feel angry that something you enjoy is taken from you several hours a day.

Similarly, many students wonder what the big deal is about plagiarism. The big deal is, first of all, your school is a kind of community. Ideally, the members of that particular community are committed to one thing above all else: learning. To plagiarize enables you to learn only how to plagiarize, which is not knowledge that can make you better at what you do or a better human being. Second, plagiarism is often thought of as a kind of stealing. While it is true that if you plagiarize, you are a thief, to plagiarize is to also be a liar and a lazy slug. The lie is "I came up with this great idea myself." The lazy part is: you couldn't rouse yourself to spend an extra minute or two writing down where you got some great information that someone else came up with.

You may say, "Outside of school, people plagiarize all the time." That is an overstatement, to be sure, but let's assume for a moment it's a true statement. The response is: "So? Right now, you're IN SCHOOL! Therefore, you do what you are supposed to do when you're in school." After you leave school, if you plagiarize, you're still a thief, a liar, and a lazy slug, but you're on your own. (I do hope you get caught and punished--which can easily happen because plagiarism is technically illegal.) For now, however, you must adhere to the rules of this learning community, and the rule against plagiarism is one of the oldest, most sacred rules in any university.

Let's look at the definition again: Plagiarism is

1. "the appropriation [of]..." i.e., taking;
2. "buying, receiving as a gift..." i.e., purchasing information for uncredited use, or having someone give it to you for free;
3. "or obtaining by any means..." i.e., getting hold of in any ways not specifically named;
4. "another person's work,,," i.e., anything that someone ELSE wrote, created, composed, designed, built, recorded, or developed...etc.;
5. "and the unacknowledged submission or incorporation of it into one's own work," i.e., inserting it into, adding it to, putting it in, making it part of, placing it within, etc., something that you are trying to compose or create.

So plagiarism is a two-step process: the appropriation and the incorporation...the taking of something and the use of it without credit. Items 1-4 are about the taking, and Item 5 is about the use of what you take.

Fortunately, there is a way to use material that you yourself didn't come up with. Except in a few circumstances, it's free. That way is properly citing material you take.