

Avoiding Plagiarism:

How to Keep From Losing Credit for an Entire Paper or Getting Kicked Out of Class for Dishonesty

pla·gia·rize (plā'jə·rīz') *v.* —*tr.* **1.** To use and pass off as one's own (the ideas or writings of another). —*American Heritage College Dictionary*

Five bad mistakes

1. "I'm not sure how to start writing this paper. I'll just take a quick look on the Internet."
2. "Wow, that's a good way of explaining it. I'll just copy and paste that into my notes."
3. "I'll just change some of the words so I won't have to put it in quotation marks."
4. "I'll completely re-word it so I don't have to document it."
5. "I'll worry about documentation later, after I've finished my paper."

Cheating versus sloppiness

Plagiarism is *academic dishonesty*. It is not the same thing as being a sloppy scholar. If you fail to tell me where you got your information, but at least you admit you got it somewhere else, that's only bad documentation. But if you pretend you wrote something you didn't, it is dishonest—even if you only borrowed one idea and everything else in the paper is completely original.

If I find such dishonesty, even if you did it accidentally, I will hand your paper back to you marked with a zero (0) and a message to this effect: "This paper contains plagiarism. See my Academic Integrity policy in the first-day handout. You can't make up this score. If it happens again you'll be removed from class. Please come to my office. I want to discuss this with you."

This happens more than you think. In Spring 2009, for example, 18 out of my 89 students plagiarized part of a paper—that's 20%. Each one was documented and turned in to the office.

No double standard

I use a single standard for everyone. Whether I know the student well or not, I cannot read the student's mind, so I judge only by what I see on the page.

Here is the standard: When you borrow an idea or phrase, make it clear that you borrowed it. There are many ways to do this. If it looks like you meant to say where you got an idea, but forgot to document it, all you lose is a few points until you fix it. But if I don't find a disclaimer, it is plagiarism.

What's a disclaimer? I give examples below, under "Disclaimers."

Proper source documentation

Of course, the best disclaimer is to properly document your source. Show where you got the information. Here is an example of plagiarism:

Márquez uses magic realism to draw the reader into a world unlike one in which most people dwell.

This is not the student's own definition. If she had worded the sentence this way, she would have been pretending it was, so she would have gotten a zero (0) for the paper. Fortunately, she added a disclaimer, so she got a second chance (see below, under "disclaimers"*). But to do it right, she should have documented her source.

(continued)

There are many styles of proper source documentation. Science classes usually ask students to use the APA format. English and Humanities classes usually use MLA format, like this:

Márquez uses magic realism to “draw the reader into a world unlike one in which most people dwell” (Korb par. 3).

===== [then, at end of paper...] =====

Works Cited

Korb, Rena. “An overview of ‘The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World’.” *Short Stories for Students*. Detroit: Gale, 2002. Galegroup.com. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2014.

As you can see, proper source documentation involves three steps:

1. “...” If you use someone’s exact words, put quotation marks around them. If you paraphrase or summarize the idea, skip the quotation marks, but you still have to do the next two steps.
2. **(Korb par. 3)** Whether it was a quotation or just an idea you borrowed, cite its source in your paper where the information was used, and the page or paragraph number so others can find it.
3. **Works Cited** List the source at the end of the paper.

“But what if I forget some of this stuff?”

Then you’re a sloppy scholar—clean up your act. But you’re not necessarily dishonest. For the purposes of “Academic Integrity” I consider doing *even one* of those three steps as an indication that you meant to credit your source. Not doing even one of them is irresponsible.

Disclaimers

However, even if you are irresponsible and forget all three of those documentation steps, I still look for an indication that you didn’t expect me to think the idea was your own:

Márquez uses magic realism, which critics describe as drawing the reader into a world unlike one in which most people dwell.

Márquez uses what is known as magic realism, which draws the reader into a world unlike one in which most people dwell.

The phrases “**which critics describe as**” in the first, and “**what is known as**” in the second, hint at an outside authority, so you were not hiding the fact that you read it somewhere. You forgot the quote marks, citation, and listing, but at least you disclaimed it. Poor scholarship! But not dishonest.

Principles to live by

- Copying and pasting is not writing.
- Browsing is not thinking.
- You are responsible for everything that goes into your paper. If you don’t disclaim something, you are claiming it is your own.
- Integrity doesn’t come from rules, it comes from you. You define who you are by choosing every day to live by values you choose.
- Sometimes it’s not enough just to be honest. You have to be *obviously* honest.



Works Cited

Korb, Rena. “An overview of ‘The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World’.” *Short Stories for Students*. Detroit: Gale, 2002. Galegroup.com. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2014.
“Plagiarism.” *American Heritage College Dictionary*. 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993. Print.