

WHAT IS PLAGIARISM? (PODCAST 9 TRANSCRIPT)

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Greetings everyone. This is Kurtis Clements with another Effective Writing Podcast. In this episode, I am going to explore the sometimes murky waters of plagiarism [play creepy music here]. When it comes to determining what constitutes plagiarism, misconceptions abound: Students often think that changing a word or two or including a references or works cited page at the end means they have done what they need to do to not be guilty of plagiarism. Overzealous instructors think that clumsy attempts at integrating content and/or poorly cited work constitutes plagiarism. In both cases, the parties are misinformed.

So what exactly is plagiarism? Let me borrow a definition from the University: Plagiarism refers to academic dishonesty that can be intentional or unintentional. This can be the result of attempting to recycle your own work from another course or semester, inaccurately citing the work of someone else, failing to give credit to someone else for his or her ideas or writing, failing to summarize or paraphrase a quote in your own words, or anything else that falsely represents any part of your work. In short, be honest with your reader and yourself.

My colleague Diane Martinez explains plagiarism like this: Ideas, words, videos, blogs, music, graphics... anything that others create is their property, and while most of us learned how to share on the playground, and we continue those habits into our adult life, we also learned that you don't just walk up to Tommy and grab his toy because it was meant to be shared. Grabbing quotes or graphics off the Internet or from any print source and inserting them into a paper you are writing without giving credit to whomever created that content is the same thing as taking Tommy's toy from him. And just because the chances of getting caught are somewhat lessened by the glut of information we all have to slog through every day doesn't make it any more right. Most authors and artists are willing to share if you simply acknowledge what's yours and what's theirs.

Please take note of what I have just done in my remarks above: I've given credit where credit is due. I've attributed the information to the proper sources. In academic papers, this kind of giving credit where credit is due is apparent by the in-text citations provided in the paper. Would it be fair to Diane if I tried to pass off her definition of plagiarism as my own? How do you think Diane would feel if she listened to this podcast and heard me use her definition but didn't give her credit? How would you feel if you were Diane?

Clearly, then, giving credit for information that does not belong to you—that you borrowed from a source—is key to not committing plagiarism. Be honest. Don't steal. Don't pull a Milli Vanilli.

If you need to define the word "integrity," let's say, in a paper and consult a web site that says integrity is a concept of consistency of actions, values, methods, measures, principles, expectations and outcomes, and in your paper you write that integrity is a concept of consistency of actions, values,



methods, measures, principles, expectations and outcomes, and you do not include an in-text citation or any language that attempts to identify the source, then you have committed plagiarism. This should be obvious enough, right?

What if you had written without using quotation marks that Integrity is a concept of consistency of actions, values, methods, measures, principles, expectations and outcomes, and included an in-text citation that named the author? Let's even presume that a complete citation with more specific bibliographic information is included on a page of references at the end. Is that plagiarism?

The answer: Well, yes and no. I know what you're thinking: huh? Let me explain. Some well-intentioned, good-hearted instructors might call this example plagiarism because the content matches the original word-for-word yet is without quotation marks. These instructors may even say the plagiarism is unintentional, but it is still plagiarism because the content was not cited properly. Ok, maybe so.

HOWEVER, other instructors (and I would be in this camp) would say this is not plagiarism at all. Sure, there are no quotations around the content, BUT there IS a citation and even if the citation is not correct, there is a citation. What this means is that a clear attempt is apparent to give credit where credit is due—and thus, plagiarism has not occurred.

Let's consider another example. Let's say you've written a short paper that has seven citations, some for direct quotes and some for paraphrases. The citations are basically correct and a list of all sources used is included on a page at the end. Let's say that the paper has a paragraph with a sentence that contains some specific, perhaps even statistical information, followed by another sentence that includes a partial quote and includes an appropriate citation. Is the sentence with the specific information and no citation plagiarism?

The answer: Well, this example is a little trickier, but I think most would agree this is an example of unintentional plagiarism. The paper contains ample citations for both direct quotes and paraphrases, so it's clear the writer is trying to give credit where credit is due. At least for the most part. It's a situation where an in-text citation was not included, though it should have been.

How serious is this example of plagiarism? That depends who you ask, but since this is my podcast, I'll let you know my thoughts. If in the larger context of the paper there may be another paraphrased idea that lacked a citation, but the rest of the paper does a reasonably good job correctly citing and/or attributing content to a source and thus giving credit where credit is due, then I would say the issue needs to be brought to the student's attention (obviously), but beyond that it seems to me a situation where someone either needs to be more careful when citing or is still learning.

Let's talk about five common misconceptions.

1. Content from the web doesn't have to be cited. Wrong. All content that comes from a source whether that source is a web site or a discussion board post needs to be cited. This is especially true of images, graphics, and tables found on the web—unless you are the creator, the content is not yours to use carte blanche. In order to be honest, you need to cite where that image, graphic, or table came from.
2. Plagiarism has not occurred if a list of sources used is included on a page at the end. Sorry. A



list of sources at the end is not enough and certainly does little to let readers know where the content in the body of the paper originated.

3. Only direct quotes need to be cited. Not true. All content that comes from another source whether that information is quoted, summarized, or paraphrased needs to include a proper in-text citation. About the only content that doesn't have to be cited is what's called common knowledge—information most people know simply because they are alive. The earth has one moon. California has a lot of earthquakes. John Wilkes Booth assassinated Abraham Lincoln. That kind of common knowledge does not need to be cited, but everything else should be.
4. I didn't know what constitutes plagiarism. This excuse won't wash. Schools, departments, and instructors often go to lengths to make sure plagiarism is defined so there are no misconceptions. At the very least, everyone should know that plagiarism is stealing—it's taking what does not belong to you and claiming it or presenting it as your own. Whether you steal a little or a lot, it's all the same, and pleading ignorance is probably one of the all-time lamest excuses ever offered. If you went into a candy store and stole a package of gum and then, after getting caught with the goods in your hand, claimed, oh, was it wrong to take the gum? I didn't know. Come on!
5. It's only plagiarism if I get caught. Not exactly. While it's true, you won't get any trouble unless you get caught, plagiarism is stealing what's not yours and whether you get caught or not is immaterial—stealing is stealing, plain and simple. Plus, it's so much easier to detect plagiarism now. In fact, detecting plagiarism is as easy as doing a Google search. If you take content that resides on the web—whether that content is a short phrase, entire paragraph, or more—Google will find it. And so will your professor.

Plagiarism is a serious academic issue, but if you are honest and give credit where credit is due, then you have no need to worry.

Thanks, everyone. Happy writing.

