



W. L. Adams Center for Writing

AVOIDING PLAGIARISM

The Council of Writing Program Administrators defines *plagiarism* as follows: “In an instructional setting, plagiarism occurs when a writer deliberately uses someone else’s language, ideas, or other original (not common-knowledge) material without acknowledging its source.”¹

Types of Plagiarism

Blatant. Buying, borrowing, or stealing another person’s paper and claiming it as your own is the most offensive type. Such plagiarism is an intentional act of fraud. Consequences range from failure in the class to expulsion from the university. This is the easiest type of plagiarism to understand and avoid, simply by practicing honesty and ethics.

Failure to Cite Sources. Another type of plagiarism involves using someone else’s words or ideas without giving proper credit through an accepted citation style (such as MLA, APA, or Chicago style). You can avoid this offense by practicing good writing ethics: keep careful track of and citing material you gather from outside sources, using rules of the chosen documentation.

Patch-writing. In writing an essay, you should not rely too heavily on other writers’ words, sentence structures, or ideas. Patch-writing consists of piecing together multiple sources of information into a “quilt” consisting almost entirely of other authors’ words and ideas. An ethical writer uses others’ words and ideas as support for his or her own ideas. The ethical writer reflects upon, summarizes, and analyzes others’ ideas rather than simply repeating them.

Blurring the Line. This type involves “attempting to blur the line between one’s own ideas or words and those borrowed from another source.”² When this blurring results from a deliberate attempt to conceal the true source of ideas or information, it is an act of intentional plagiarism. When this blurring results from a student’s inability to effectively summarize others’ ideas in his or her own words, it is an act of unintentional plagiarism. To avoid plagiarizing in this way, learn how to summarize other authors’ ideas in your own words and carefully cite the sources. Ethical writers summarize effectively, they simply do not need to plagiarize.

Examples of Plagiarism

Below are some examples of ethical ways to use other people’s words and ideas. Many disciplines frown upon the extensive quotation of sources. So whether the examples of ethical quoting apply to a given student’s project will depend on the discipline. The original passage comes from J.C. Gregory’s *The Nature of Laughter* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1924).

Original Passage:

Anger and all aggressive emotions appear in the human being tense for action and remain till the final stroke is made; they perish naturally in the relief of laughter when

¹ “Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism: The WPA Statement on Best Practices,” Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2014, accessed July 21, 2014, <http://wpacouncil.org/files/wpaplagiarism-statement.pdf> ² Ibid.

there is no need to strike and aggression is at an end. The ending of aggression, which is a necessary consequence of laughter, does not necessarily purge the laugher of all hostility nor result in prompt sympathy. But it obviously provides an opportunity for sympathy to enter. (Gregory 33)

One way to avoid plagiarism is to carefully introduce and cite the quotation (or a portion of it) in your own text. For example, depending on the purpose, you might quote and cite the entire passage, summarize it, or summarize a portion of the quotation and quote the rest, as in the following:

Philosopher J.C. Gregory (1924) argues that a bout of laughter reduces tension and hostility in people and “provides an opportunity for sympathy to enter” (p. 33).

A longer summary that retains much of the original meaning, while citing the source using APA style, follows:

As philosopher J.C. Gregory (1924) contends, laughter relieves anger and aggression that build up in people under stress. Although the laughter may not entirely eliminate these negative emotions, Gregory says, it may help reduce hostility and open the way to more positive emotions, such as sympathy.

Note the difference in diction and sentence structure between the original and the summary. Also, note that by introducing and correctly citing the author’s name and date of publication, the summary writer gives Gregory credit for the ideas in the passage.

An unethical/plagiarized paraphrase of the second and third sentences in the passage might read as follows:

Anger shows up in a person who tenses for action, and stays until the person finally lashes out. But anger dies in the relief of laughter. The end of aggression, a natural consequence of laughter, does not always purge the one who laughs of all hostility or result in sympathy. But it does give sympathy a chance to enter (Gregory, 1928).

In this passage, the writer replaces only a few key words with synonyms and fails to vary sufficiently from the original in terms of sentence structure or diction. The writer has not worked hard enough to understand the essence of what Gregory has said to write a suitable summary. Even though the writer has correctly cited Gregory’s name and the publication date of his book, the paraphrase reflects no contribution in terms of original thinking or writing and therefore constitutes plagiarism.