

What Is “Plagiarism”?

Americans believe that ideas and written expressions of ideas can be owned. Thus, to use words and ideas without giving the author credit is to steal them. Americans also believe that writing is a visible, concrete demonstration of a writer’s knowledge, insight, and academic skill, and that to represent another person’s writing as your own is to misrepresent your own accomplishments. This is a type of fraud or deception. For these reasons, most universities have very specific policies about plagiarism. Cal Poly Pomona’s policy is typical:

Plagiarism is intentionally or knowingly presenting words, ideas or work of others as one’s own work. Plagiarism includes copying homework, copying lab reports, copying computer programs using a work or portion of a work written or created by another but not crediting the source, using one’s own work completed in a previous class for credit in another class without permission, paraphrasing another’s work without giving credit, and borrowing or using ideas without giving credit. (*Catalog*, Cal Poly Pomona, 2008-2009, p. 58).

Instances of suspected plagiarism are reported to the Office of Judicial Affairs. Generally, in the first instance, the student is put on probation for one year. In the second instance the student is suspended for at least two quarters, not just from Cal Poly Pomona, but from all CSU campuses, and his or her name is placed in a permanent file for Academic Dishonesty. The third instance ends the student’s career at Cal Poly Pomona (and any other campus in the CSU system). However, there are a number of different types and degrees of plagiarism.

Type I Plagiarism: Fraudulently Taking Credit for Someone Else’s Work

Action: A student puts his or her name on a paper that was written by someone else, and turns it in to the professor.

- Some students download a paper from the internet. Others buy a paper from a “research service.” Some get a paper from a friend who took the course before.
- These students are committing fraud.
- Academic fraud hurts everyone involved, including the other students in the course who didn’t plagiarize.
- It is easy for professors to catch internet plagiarism through search engines and anti-plagiarism services such as Turnitin.com.

Possible Result: If a student does this and gets caught, he or she will probably get an “F” for the paper or the course and will be reported to the Office of Judicial Affairs for investigation and disciplinary proceedings.

Type II Plagiarism: The “Pastiche”

Action: A student copies paragraphs from different sources and puts them together in one paper, creating a “pastiche.”

- A “pastiche” is a written composition made up of selections of other works.

- The internet makes it easy to assemble a pastiche by grabbing an electronic paragraph here and another paragraph there and pasting the whole collection of paragraphs together in a word processor.
- In many cases the styles clash and it is easy for a reader to detect that different writers wrote different paragraphs.
- Although the “writer” has done some searches, read some articles, and selected some material, such a paper is more like research notes than a research paper.
- Although quotation marks, block quotes, and accurate documentation will prevent accusations of plagiarism, to produce a good paper the writer needs to take the research process a step farther by synthesizing the material and paraphrasing much of it in his or her own words.
- It is easy for the professor to find the real sources of the different passages by using internet search engines.

Possible Result: If the sources are documented, the instructor may ask the student to rewrite the paper and resubmit it. Otherwise, the student may be sent to the Office of Judicial Affairs.

Type III Plagiarism: Insufficient Paraphrasing

Action: A student submits a paper that does not copy the original sources, but is very close to the sources in style and word choice.

- Some students copy the passage and then try to substitute new words in the same sentence structure. The result has the same grammatical structure as the original, with some of the words changed.
- Others will keep the same words, but reorganize the sentence structure, perhaps re-ordering the sentences at the same time.
- Neither of these approaches, same structure but different words, or same words but different structure, is sufficient to avoid plagiarism, but each is a step in the right direction.
- The best way to paraphrase material is to read it carefully, put it aside so you can't look at it, and try to write down the ideas in your own words. If you can't do that, you probably don't really understand the ideas.

Possible Result: If the writer is trying to make these sorts of transformations and documents the sources, it is unlikely that the instructor will accuse him or her of plagiarism, although the instructor may suggest that the writer is too dependent on the sources for language and sentence structure.

Avoiding All Types of Plagiarism

Here are some key points for avoiding plagiarism:

- Start early so you have plenty of time to do the research and write the paper.
- Find out what documentation system your instructor wants and use it to inform your reader of the sources of all of your information. MLA and APA are the most common documentation styles. Documentation is the key to avoiding accusations of plagiarism.
- If an idea or fact is not common knowledge, it must be documented.
- Keep accurate notes on all sources of information, including internet sources.
- Use quotation marks around any passages that are in the exact words of the source.
- When you paraphrase a source, change both the sentence structure and the words.

If you follow these guidelines, you won't have to worry about plagiarism.