

Because of the rising incidence of plagiarism, which is a form of both theft and deceit, we wish to remind students about what plagiarism is and how it can be avoided. Students and authors who are accused of plagiarism usually tell us "I didn't mean to plagiarize." That's not really how it works. You have to "mean not to plagiarize." It takes effort.

Fortunately, the ideals are few and simple:

1. If you use somebody else's words in your own writing, even a few words, quote your source properly.
2. If you use somebody else's idea in your writing, cite that source.

[There is an emergent, third ideal observed at the end of this note.]

If you are in doubt about whether a particular phrase or sentence requires a quote or citation, our advise is to err on the side of caution and respect.

All research (and teaching) stands on the shoulders of prior contributions, and it is helpful for audiences to be informed about the source(s) of particular notions. That helps people do additional discovery should they wish to pursue a greater depth of understanding, and it helps to delineate your contributions relative to the contributions that were already in place. These are good things. Quoting and citing exhibit good form, and demonstrate maturity and integrity. Doing this builds respect with your readers because you have shown your respect for the scientific process. You are also helping readers by identifying the contributions of those who came before you.

Citing prior work is more than just good form; it is an imperative of the academic enterprise. Plagiarism is an infringement upon intellectual property. It is similar to stealing someone's property and selling it.

Because of its relationship to property, which is often an evolving institution, there is a relatively new form of plagiarism that requires attention: self-plagiarism. This is partially because journals and publishers may acquire some degree of ownership over our words as a consequence of accepting or distributing our work. It is also because journals, publishers, and, in some cases, professors expect your work to be original and not previously used in another publication or course. Thus, there is a relatively new ideal to be followed:

3. You should treat your personal, prior words and contributions exactly as you would others as you quote and cite previous work.

If you are concerned about whether you can modify a prior term paper (of yours!) and use it for a paper in another class, it is a good idea to discuss this with your professor.

That's it.

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