Academic Integrity and Ethical Writing Practices

Inquire: Integrity and Ethical Writing Practices

Overview

You’ve probably heard horror stories about students who were issued zeroes for plagiarism — no questions asked. Or maybe you have a friend who bought all their essays online and got away with it without being questioned at all. Either way, you might find yourself asking, what’s the big deal about plagiarism? Why are universities so worried about it, and how can I make sure I don’t ever accidentally commit plagiarism and find myself in hot water? Academic integrity is a big deal at all learning institutions, and it’s important that you are familiar with the concept to be sure to demonstrate academic integrity throughout your educational career.

Big Question: How can I be sure that I display academic integrity?

Watch: Academic Integrity and You

When Melania Trump spoke at the Republican National Convention in 2016, she delivered a carefully practiced and inspiring speech to an enormous crowd who watched in person and at home. Before she took the stage, she told reporters that she had written the speech herself, which was surprising, considering that most public figures would use a speechwriter for a speech of that magnitude.

In today’s age of social media, however, it only took a few hours for someone to notice that the speech sounded surprisingly… familiar. Two paragraphs from the speech bore a striking resemblance to a speech delivered by Michelle Obama to the Democratic National Convention (DNC) in 2008. In fact, several phrases matched word-for-word. Since Trump had claimed that she wrote her own speech, the immediate conclusion was that she plagiarized word for word from Obama’s DNC speech.

Quickly, however, it was revealed that Trump had, indeed, used a speech writer. In a phone conversation, Trump shared her inspirations. Confusion ensued, and large swaths of Obama’s speech were included in the Republican National Convention speech delivered by Trump. Two mistakes happened here that damaged Melania Trump’s credibility and the credibility of her speech writer:

1. Melania Trump took credit for words she did not write, which meant she also had to take credit for the plagiarism.
2. Melania Trump and her speech writer did not take good enough notes to prevent accidental plagiarism.

It’s safe to assume that Melania Trump’s speech writer did not intentionally lift passages from Michelle Obama’s speech, as a speech delivered to that much publicity would surely be found out as an uncited
source. However, Meredith McIver, speech writer for the Trump campaign later admitted to unintentional plagiarism to The New Yorker.*

This story is, of course, far from being the only example of plagiarism committed by major media figures in the past few years. As you begin to write essays that pull in information from outside sources, you need to be sure to familiarize yourself with the practices of academic integrity, so you can uphold your work to an ethical standard worthy of the university education you are paying for.

Do you have any friends who have committed plagiarism, whether intentionally or unintentionally? What consequences did they face? Do you think those consequences were fair?


Read: Academic Integrity and Plagiarism

Overview

You have probably heard horror stories from teachers, instructors, and professors about university punishments for plagiarism. Likely, you’ve heard — even if you’ve never seen it happen — that you can lose course credit or perhaps even be expelled from school for committing academic dishonesty. But, what exactly is academic dishonesty? And how can you avoid plagiarism?

Academic Integrity

To demonstrate academic integrity is to complete your coursework in an earnest and honest way. Ultimately, academic integrity upholds the integrity of the university by ensuring that no students graduate in an unethical or undeserved way. Academic integrity means not only avoiding plagiarism, but it also means you complete all exams and assessments in an honest way and that you will not falsify or misrepresent any sort of research or data you complete for a course.

Avoiding Academic Dishonesty

Academic dishonesty is any act that compromises your academic integrity. These are actions which devalue the education you and your peers receive, and they are considered a violation of your ethics. Generally speaking, academic dishonesty can fall into any of the following categories:

- Cheating, either by distributing or receiving exam information. During, before, or after an exam, you should keep all information about the exam to yourself, unless your instructor has given you explicit permission to share materials with others.
- Misrepresentation or falsification of data or research. You should never misrepresent data or research. It has permanent consequences should the research or data be used in the future.
- Improper collaboration, such as working with a classmate when an assignment is to be completed independently. Students often have a difficult time with this one. If an assignment is used to evaluate your individual competency or capability on a task or assignment, you should not collaborate with classmates. Improper collaboration means you may not be getting credit for your own work and thoughts.
- Plagiarism. Plagiarism is discussed in greater detail below. It has more gray areas than some of the ones listed above.
- Self-plagiarism, or submitting your own work for multiple courses without instructor permission. Self-plagiarism is often a sticking point for students who argue that you can’t plagiarize your own work. It can be helpful, instead, to think of it as “double-dipping.” If your teacher wants you to
learn a process or complete a task to prove that you have met the requirements for the course, you should learn that process or complete that task. If you have done it before, that’s fine. You should always talk to your teacher if you feel like you are already competent in a task. They may give you permission to submit the previously completed work, or they may give you a different task that more adequately evaluates your skills and abilities in a new way.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is probably the most commonly discussed form of academic dishonesty.

Plagiarism is using someone else’s work without giving him or her credit. “Work” includes text, ideas, images, videos, and audio. In the academic world, you must follow these rules:

- When you use the exact words, you must use quotation marks and provide a citation.
- When you put the information into your own words (or paraphrase), you must provide a citation.
- When you use an image, audio, or video created by someone else, you must provide a citation.

You might plagiarise a sentence, a paragraph, or even just a word! For example, Stephen Colbert, of the television show *The Colbert Report*, made up the word “truthiness,” meaning something that sounds like it should be true. If you say in a paper something has a ring of “truthiness,” you should cite Colbert. If someone else’s words catch your interest, you should cite them.

Avoiding Plagiarism

- Don’t procrastinate. Students who rush their work can make careless mistakes, such as forgetting to include a particular citation, or not having all the information needed for documentation. Students under pressure may also make poor choices, such as not documenting sources and hoping the professor won’t notice. Your professor will notice, and you won’t like the long-term consequences.
- Take careful notes. You need to be very clear in your notes whether you are writing down word-for-word what you found somewhere else, or if you are jotting down your own idea. You should take down all the information you will need to create your citations.
- Cite your sources. Whenever you quote, paraphrase, summarize, or share an unusual fact, tell your reader where the information came from.
- Document at the same time you draft. As you begin drafting, prepare a correctly formatted References page that captures the information also needed for in-text citations. Insert these citations into your paper as you are writing it. If you cite-as-you-go, you won’t consume time looking up information all over again, and you make it less likely that you will misidentify or omit necessary documentation.
- Get comfortable with the required citation style. The most commonly used citation styles are APA, MLA, and Chicago/Turabian. While they share many similarities, they also have differing requirements regarding what and when to cite.
- Ask your professor. If you’re not sure about citing something, check with your instructor. Ultimately, she will be the one grading your assignment, or bringing you up on plagiarism charges.
Reflect Poll: Avoiding Plagiarism

Which method of avoiding plagiarism do you think will be the most difficult for you to put into practice?

- Don't procrastinate.
- Take careful notes.
- Cite your sources.
- Get comfortable with the required citation style.
- Ask your professor.

Expand: Citing Sources

Overview

One of the most important skills you can develop as a student is the ability to use outside sources correctly and smoothly. Academic knowledge builds on the knowledge of others. When we use quotations and paraphrases, we start with ideas that have been established by others in order to build on them to develop our own ideas. Proper citations not only give credit to those whose ideas we're using, but they also provide an address for others to follow, so that they can use those ideas as well.

Learning to cite correctly will allow you to avoid plagiarism, as many plagiarism cases arise from sloppy note-taking and a misunderstanding of when you need to cite your sources.

Citing Your Sources

Whenever you use sources, it is important that you document them completely and accurately. You make your work more useful to your reader through complete and careful documentation, so you should think of documentation as essential rather than as an “add on” tacked on at the last minute.

When asked why they should cite your sources, many students reply, “So you don’t get accused of plagiarizing.” It is true that you must provide citations crediting others’ work so as to avoid plagiarism, but scholars use citations for many reasons:

- To make your arguments more credible. You want to use the very best evidence to support your claims. For example, if you are citing a statistic about a disease, you should use a reputable source like the World Health Organization (WHO) or Centers for Disease Control (CDC). When you tell your reader the statistic comes from such a source, she will know to trust it, and thereby trust your argument more.
- To show you’ve done your homework. You want to make it clear to your audience that you’ve researched your subject and know what you are talking about. As you dive deeper into your research, you will probably find certain authors are experts on the topic and are mentioned in most of the articles and books. You should read these experts’ works and incorporate them into your paper.
- To build a foundation for your paper. Great breakthroughs in scholarship are accomplished by building on the earlier, groundbreaking work of others. For example, Isaac Newton’s law of universal gravitation would not have been possible without Johannes Kepler’s law of planetary motion. What articles, books, texts, etc. inspired you to create your argument? You want to provide references to the works which led to your thesis.
• To allow your readers to find the sources for themselves. Someone interested in your topic may be inspired to read some of the articles and other sources you used to write your paper. The citation within the paper tells them what part of your argument is best addressed by a particular source, and the full citation in the bibliography provides them with the information needed to locate the original work.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

An article examining the similarities between Trump and Obama’s speeches
• Link to resource: https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2016/07/19/melania-trump-republican-convention-speech-plagiarism/87278088/

A site devoted to the ins and outs of plagiarism
• Link to resource: https://www.plagiarism.org/

A real-life story of the consequences of plagiarism

Lesson Glossary

plagiarism: using someone else’s work without giving him or her credit
academic integrity: refers to the code of ethics that upholds the integrity of a university education
academic dishonesty: any action that compromises your academic integrity

Check Your Knowledge

1. Taking careful notes is a strategy for avoiding plagiarism.
   a. True
   b. False
2. Citation allows your readers to find the original sources for themselves.
   a. True
   b. False
3. Plagiarism can happen with just a word.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:
1. A  2. A  3. A
Citations

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