

What is plagiarism?

Plagiarism occurs where one person presents the words or ideas of another as his own, or where others are allowed or encouraged to form this impression. Plagiarism typically but not necessarily takes a written form. Plagiarism is a form of deception or cheating. At its worst it amounts to intellectual property theft. One who plagiarizes is living, immorally, off the intellectual earnings of others.

There are, however, significantly different 'grades' of plagiarism, as identified below. Even so, while clear enough in respect of the intentions of the plagiarizer, the different grades of plagiarism are not necessarily easy to distinguish objectively, from the reader's or examiner's point of view. Faced with a case of plagiarism, an institution may not find it easy, or consider itself obliged, to differentiate between one grade of plagiarism and another when penalizing students.

Three grades of plagiarism

Grade A plagiarism occurs where an individual makes a premeditated and systematic attempt to pass off the work of one or more others as his own, the plagiarizer taking care to disguise the fact by suppressing all revealing references, by changing words here and there in order to deflect suspicion, and so on. Paradoxically, this worst form of plagiarism can prove the most difficult to detect.

Grade B plagiarism occurs where an individual in the course of writing an essay or dissertation knowingly refrains from making clear, through the erratic or inconsistent use of recognized conventions, the normal distinctions between such elements as paraphrase, quotation, reference and commentary. This kind of plagiarism tends to be naive, clumsy and transparent, with the plagiarized elements often coming from the same sources which are in the same essay properly referenced or quoted from, all of which makes it relatively easy for the plagiarizer to be identified. Whereas the Grade A plagiarizer is trying deviously to get ahead, the Grade B plagiarizer is usually just hoping naively to get by.

Grade C plagiarism is plagiarism that is unintended or accidental. It occurs where through laziness, disorganization or indifference an individual neglects to acknowledge the source of an idea or quotation, or sticks too closely to the original wording when paraphrasing a source, or innocently reproduces, as his own material, ideas or quotations which have been noted down or copied out

without their sources being recorded.

One variation on this form of plagiarism occurs where an individual makes excessive or exclusive use of ideas or words from one particular source, even while fully acknowledging this source in the notes and bibliography. Technically, journalism frequently involves elements of grade B or grade C plagiarism, in so far as reporters and feature writers regularly copy or summarize ideas and documents without bothering to make due acknowledgement.

Plagiarism and unpublished work

Plagiarism does not cease to be plagiarism if the words or ideas plagiarized are not actually in published or permanent form; nor does the gravity of plagiarism vary with the quality of the work plagiarized. Thus copying someone else's essay is still plagiarism, and it is still plagiarism even if the essay is a bad essay. Getting someone else to write an essay which one then presents as one's own is also plagiarism.

Plagiarism and permission

Nor is plagiarism mitigated by the fact that a person may for some reason give you permission to reproduce or quote from his work (e.g. an essay) without acknowledgement, since the intention remains that of passing off someone else's work as your own. It is even possible to plagiarize oneself, for example by presenting as a fresh piece of work (whether or not under a new title) the whole or part of a piece of work already submitted to and marked by another teacher.

Penalties for plagiarism

Theoretically one might propose that different grades of plagiarism deserve different grades of penalty. Thus Grade A plagiarism should presumably be deemed serious enough (at least in the case of pieces of written work constituting examinations) to warrant instant dismissal or disqualification. Grade B plagiarism would require the disqualification or heavy penalizing of the particular piece or pieces of work in question, perhaps with the threat of a tougher penalty for any further plagiarism. Grade C plagiarism should probably remain a 'domestic' matter, with individual teachers or tutors counselling students about their studying and writing techniques.

It must be remembered, however, that an educational institution is perfectly

within its rights to treat plagiarism as an either/or phenomenon. The onus therefore must be on students making sure that they avoid all grades of plagiarism, by keeping a proper record of their sources for notes and quotations, and by acknowledging either within the text or in footnotes the authorship of the ideas, quotations and paraphrasing used in the essay or dissertation itself.

The key factor here is acknowledgement. Acknowledge your sources and you have nothing to fear.

This document copyrighted by Peter Moore 2000

This document may be freely quoted from, reproduced and distributed, in either printed or electronic format, provided due attribution of authorship is clearly visible on all copies.