

**PLAGIARISM: WHAT IT IS, WHY IT'S WRONG,
AND HOW TO AVOID IT**



**Chowan College Center for Ethics
Chowan College Department of Language & Literature
2002**

PLAGIARISM: WHAT IT IS, WHY IT'S WRONG, AND HOW TO AVOID IT

“Professor _____ has forwarded to me evidence that seems to indicate that you have violated the college policy on academic cheating, specifically with reference to a paper that you submitted for credit in your _____ class. After reviewing the evidence, it appears that you are indeed in violation of the college policy on academic cheating. In accordance with policy, I am offering you the following penalty: a semester grade of F in the course and preliminary suspension...”

—*excerpt of a letter from the office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs to a student accused of plagiarism, Spring 2004.*

Plagiarism is presenting someone else's writing or ideas as if they are your own. It is a form of academic misconduct that can result in your being humiliated and punished.

Why it's so serious. It's really very simple: Plagiarism is a combination of both stealing and lying. It also short circuits your learning process. Relying upon plagiarism delays your mastering the skills of properly handling others' written materials. It also rewards laziness and procrastination. This defeats the goal of your graduating from Chowan with strong skills and good work habits. Plagiarism also prevents you from developing your own ideas.

Yes, we do take it seriously. Every semester several students are prosecuted for this form of misconduct. This brochure is designed to help you avoid plagiarizing, with its unpleasant consequences.

Four Kinds of Plagiarism

There are at least four ways to commit plagiarism, from the intentional and most serious plagiarizing (flagrant) to forms of plagiarism that are unintentional (lazy, forgetful). All of them will cause you problems.

1. Flagrant—stealing someone's exact words and not giving credit
2. Stupid—using another's writing but neglecting to use quotation marks
3. Lazy—making lame and inadequate efforts at paraphrasing
4. Forgetful—using your own words to express someone else's specific ideas without citing the source of those ideas

An Illustration of the Four Kinds of Plagiarism:

Paper topic: Plato's Cave story

This is an excerpt from *The Encarta Encyclopedia* article on "Plato":

The myth of the cave describes individuals chained deep within the recesses of a cave. Bound so that vision is restricted, they cannot see one another. The only thing visible is the wall of the cave upon which appear shadows cast by models or statues of animals and objects that are passed before a brightly burning fire. Breaking free, one of the individuals escapes from the cave into the light of day. With the aid of the sun, that person sees for the first time the real world and returns to the cave with the message that the only things they have seen heretofore are shadows and appearances and that the real world awaits them if they are willing to struggle free of their bonds.

Article written by:
Robert M. Baird, M.A., Ph.D.

"Plato," Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2002
<http://encarta.msn.com> © 1997-2002 Microsoft Corporation. All Rights Reserved.

<http://encarta.msn.com/find/concise.asp?ti=761568769&sid=1#s1>

1. Here's an example of **flagrant** plagiarizing:

Here is the story that Plato tells us about the cave. The myth of the cave describes individuals chained deep within the recesses of a cave. Bound so that vision is restricted, they cannot see one another. The only thing visible is the wall of the cave upon which appear shadows cast by models or statues of animals and objects that are passed before a brightly burning fire. Breaking free, one of the individuals escapes from the cave into the light of day. With the aid of the sun, that person sees for the first time the real world and returns to the cave with the message that the only things they have seen heretofore are shadows and appearances. Plato suggests that the person who goes back is killed for doing so.

Problem: Compare this with the paragraph in the box above. You'll notice that only the first and last sentences are the student's. All the rest is copied word for word (duh!) from Encarta with no quotation marks, citation, or effort to paraphrase. This is outright stealing.

2. Here's an example of **stupid** plagiarizing:

Here is the story that Plato tells us about the cave. The myth of the cave describes individuals chained deep within the recesses of a cave. Bound so that vision is restricted, they cannot see one another. The only thing visible is the wall of the cave upon which appear shadows cast by models or statues of animals and objects that are passed before a brightly burning fire. Breaking free, one of the individuals escapes from the cave into the light of day. With the aid of the sun, that person sees for the first time the real world and returns to the cave with the message that the only things they have seen heretofore are shadows and appearances. Plato suggests that the person who goes back is killed for doing so (*Encarta Encyclopedia*).

Problem: *The only difference between this and the first illustration is that a citation has been supplied. This shows some effort to acknowledge that an outside source was used. But just slapping an (incomplete!) citation on the end doesn't cut it. Why is that?*

The paragraph does not provide any indicator that the exact words were taken from the source. A teacher reading this paragraph would not be able to determine what was your work and what came from Encarta. And the fact is, virtually none of it was your own work. Sorry, but it's not supposed to be that easy!

There are two solutions:

(1) Place quotation marks around all material that is extracted word for word from an outside source. You must do this if you are going to copy and paste material directly into your paper.

But there's a problem: You won't be accused of plagiarism, but you will probably receive a low grade. Why? Because copying and pasting is something even idiots can do—it doesn't show that you understood the material or took the time to express the facts in your own way.

(2) A better solution is to paraphrase the source, rewording it in a way that is uniquely yours. See the discussion of the next example for more details about paraphrasing.

This will probably earn you a higher grade. Paraphrasing shows that you took time to think about and translate the material into your own words. It shows originality and effort.

3. Here is an example of **lazy** plagiarism:

Here is the story that Plato tells us about the cave. The myth of the cave describes individuals *who are* chained deep within the recesses of a cave. *Tied up* so that vision is restricted, they cannot see one another. The only thing visible is the wall of the cave upon which appear shadows cast by models or statues of animals and objects that are passed before a *bright* burning fire. Breaking free, one of the individuals escapes from the cave into the light of day. With the aid of the sun, that person sees for the first time the real world and returns to the cave *to tell the prisoners* that the only things they have seen heretofore are shadows and appearances and that the real world awaits them if they are *will* struggle free of their bonds. Plato suggests that the person who goes back is killed for doing so (*"Plato," Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia 2002* <http://encarta.msn.com> © 1997-2002 Microsoft Corporation).

Problem: *This is better for two reasons, but it still misses the mark:*

First, it provides a complete citation. That's good! Encarta makes this easy by providing a link called "How to Cite This Article." You can then just copy and paste the citation from the link into your essay. ☺

Second, the paragraph makes some (weak) effort to express the source in its own words. The words in italics are the ones changed. ☺

The continuing problem, however, is that only minor word changes are made. The sentences are still substantially the ones Encarta supplied. It's not really your own work. Even with the citation supplied, this is still plagiarism. Why? Because you made what someone else wrote (or at least, 90% of it!) look like it was your work. That's just not cool.

4. Here's an example of **forgetful** plagiarism:

The myth of the cave is about some individuals who are tied up deep inside a cave. They are chained so that they can't see each other. All they can see is the cave wall. There are shadows being cast on the cave by models, statues, animals and other objects as they are carried in front of a fire. One day, one of the prisoners breaks free and escapes from the cave. When he comes outside, he experiences the real world in all its beauty. He returns into the cave and tells everyone what he saw. He tries to communicate to them that all they are seeing is just shadows, not reality.

Problem: *This is the least flagrant plagiarism out of the four examples we have examined. But it's still plagiarism. Here's the reason:*

Yes, a serious effort has been made to rewrite the paragraph in the student's own words. But the sentences still follow along, idea after idea, in exactly the same sequence as the Encarta article.

In other words, even though words have been rewritten, no credit has been offered for where the ideas came from. The Encarta article didn't just supply a broad inspiration for the paragraph—it supplied pretty much every idea contained in it.

There is an easy solution: Add a citation! As noted above, Encarta makes it simple for you; just click on "How to Cite This Article" and copy/paste the citation to your paper. You'll also notice that Encarta supplies you with the author's name. It's also a good idea to provide the web site address. You can do that by going up to the address box at the top of the screen and right clicking on the URL (web address). You can then choose "copy" and paste it into your document. This is not hard to do. If you need help learning to do it, your instructor will be happy to assist you.

Note: If you provide a citation for #4, you won't be guilty of plagiarism. That's good! But you are still not doing work that is very original. Here's a general principle: Wherever possible, try to come up with *your own* ideas and words, rather than just lamely pulling it all from what somebody else has written. In the illustration above, a much stronger paper would be one where you go to the original text (Plato's *Republic*) and read the story yourself, cite it, then summarize it in your own words. That would make for an excellent paper, and probably a higher grade.

Warning signs that you are committing plagiarism:

- ⊗ You find yourself copying and pasting whole paragraphs or extended sections from an outside source (a journal, book, the Internet).
- ⊗ You are using somebody else's words and even whole sentences but you didn't put them into quotation marks ("...").
- ⊗ You haven't done *any* rewording of material you found in a book or on the Internet.
- ⊗ You haven't provided a citation for a source that was really useful.

Checklist to make sure you aren't plagiarizing:

- ❑ Did I place all borrowed sentences or phrases in quotation marks?
- ❑ Did I make an effort to reword (paraphrase) fully?
- ❑ Where I relied heavily on ideas that somebody else researched or summarized, did I provide a full citation?

Your professor will be glad to assist you in learning how to reformulate material and provide citations. **It is better to receive a low grade for admitting that your work is unoriginal than to fail the course because you were caught plagiarizing.** Even better: Believe in yourself, take the time to do your own, original work and receive a higher grade!

How to Do It Right

Here are some examples of the right way to quote, paraphrase and summarize, which, if followed, will amaze teachers, win friends, shock your family, and may make the difference between flunking a class for plagiarism or receiving a high grade on a properly cited paper.

Suppose that the following is the first part of an article you wish to use. It comes from the collection of essays in a textbook called *Essays from Contemporary Culture* (p. 249):

Is God Really Dead in Beverly Hills?
Religion and the Movies
Stanley Rothman

In recent years at least two films have treated the Christian religion and those who practice it with reasonable respect. *Black Robe* (1991), a film about Jesuit missionaries to the Indians in what is now Canada, treats a Jesuit priest, one of the major characters in the film, as a person of sincere humility and deep belief. On the other hand, the Hurons, the recipients of his mission, are all but destroyed as the result of his efforts to convert them. *Shadowlands* (1993), a fictional biography of C.S. Lewis, takes Lewis and his Christian beliefs seriously, though he is something of a maverick, and the Christian message he delivers periodically to audiences of middle-aged women is presented as thin and contrived. Theoretically, it will be less so in the future (as the picture ends) because, after a tragic loss, he, the Lewis of the movie, finally opens himself to life.

1. A good quote. Here are some student-written sentences about the article that include within them a good quote, properly handled:

One might believe that Hollywood is entirely corrupt and doesn't care about religion at all, one way or another. Possibly, we may assume Hollywood always portrays Christians as either fools or lunatics. Yet, as Stanley Rothman asserts, in "Is God Really Dead in Beverly Hills," lately "at least two films have treated the Christian religion and those who practice it with reasonable respect" (249). If so, perhaps Hollywood deserves a closer look.

Fine, perfect, you won't flunk the class. You're on your way to a respectable grade! It's that easy!

2. A Good Summary. These sentences summarize rather than directly quoting. Note how the language is changed from the text in the box.

One critic in particular argues that two relatively recent movies have at least not presented Christians as fanatics or morons, but have shown them to be devout and earnest. He refers to a film about Canadian missionary work, *Black Robe* (1991) and the account of C.S. Lewis's life in *Shadowlands* (1993). But one senses, even in this acknowledgement of semi-decent representations of Christianity on film, a serious reservation about Hollywood's ability to understand issues of faith (Rothman 249).

Good, wonderful, great! Guess what? Instead of preparing to give you an "F" for the class and report you as a plagiarist to the dean, your teacher is very impressed with your work so far. You didn't use the wording of the passage, but you explained its general intent and message as accurately as you could and made sure to cite the author and page at the end. Way to go!

One way to accomplish this and a basic tip to follow in writing good summaries is to always close the book or cover the passage and write a brief explanation from memory. Then briefly glance back at the text you are using and what you have said. If your explanation seems accurate and faithful to the text's meaning but is in your own words rather than the author's, all you now need to do is cite the page and author's last name. You're on your way to a successful college writing career!

- 3. A good paraphrase.** Compare this to the original passage in the box and notice how it has been altered by the student.

I think that Hollywood generally does a very poor job of representing Christians in film. If they ever do appear in movies, religiously devout individuals are usually shown as wacky zealots or hypocritical liars. As Stanley Rothman notes, there may be a few exceptions; he lists two movies in the last decade that he believes were at least somewhat fair to Christians, by treating them as honest and devout people (249).

Again, you have succeeded! Your paraphrase works because it is faithful to the original source, but relies on your own wording, and makes sure to provide the author's name and the page number of exact material used. A paraphrase is usually very similar to summary, but often more clearly focused on representing or getting across an exact point made by the author in your own words. This is different from a summary, as in number 2, that takes on a larger block of information and attempts to relay it all as a whole.

A Final Note:

The key to all of these examples is that whether you use quotes or don't, if you are using ideas or referring to ideas you have seen somewhere else, YOU MUST IDENTIFY THE SOURCE. Otherwise, you will have been academically dishonest and will have exposed yourself to the likelihood of some ugly repercussions.

This booklet was written as a cooperative project of the Chowan College Center for Ethics and the Department of Language and Literature, 2002, by Dr. Douglas Chismar and Dr. Danny Campbell.