

Plagiarism and How to Avoid It

At university, you are continually engaged with other people's ideas: You read them in texts, hear them in lectures and seminars, discuss them in class, and incorporate them into your own writing. Not least, you build on other people's ideas in developing your own ideas. As a consequence, it is very important that you give credit where it is due. If you do not do that, you plagiarize. Plagiarism is using others' ideas and words without clearly acknowledging these sources.

In academia, plagiarism is one of the most serious offences. Even though you may think plagiarizing is just about immaterial words and ideas, it is a theft of intellectual property much in the same way as the theft of physical property.

Legally, plagiarizing is a violation of copyright laws and potentially subject to criminal prosecution.

Intellectually, plagiarizing is a violation of the intellectual property of those whose work you pass off as your own.

Ethically, plagiarizing is a violation of one of the key standards of the academic community, namely, intellectual integrity.

Socially, plagiarizing is dishonest and unfair to your fellow students who put in real independent work instead of submitting work that has been stolen from other people.

Finally, plagiarizing is plain stupid, because – by stealing somebody else's ideas and words – you fail to learn how to do academic research and how to write term papers properly.

The English department does not tolerate plagiarism of any kind. We are very strict in dealing with cases of plagiarism: If a student is found to submit plagiarized work, s/he will not receive credit (a 'Schein') for the course, his or her 'Studentenregister' will be marked with a P for an attempt at plagiarism for all lecturers and professor to see, and s/he will not be eligible for Abschlussprüfungen at the Lehrstuhl Tracy.

For these measures to be effected, it is irrelevant whether you submit plagiarized work as a result of intentional dishonesty or as a consequence of accidental oversight. This is why it is essential you avoid plagiarism when writing term papers or submitting other coursework.

This hand-out provides you with some real-life examples of plagiarism from Mannheim students at our department. It is supposed (a) to help you identify what plagiarism is, and (b) to show you how to avoid plagiarism.

1) Literal copying

The most obvious form of plagiarism is the verbatim copy of a sentence or a text passage from a source, e.g. a book or some internet site. For instance, a student writes in an assignment:

In linguistics, an adjunct is a sentence element that establishes the circumstances in which the action or state expressed by the verb take place.

This sentence is a literal copy of the definition of 'adjunct' on Wikipedia (accessed on 29/08/2007), but the source is not referenced. Note that copying information from the internet is plagiarism, too, even though such information may seem to be in the public domain. Of course, you can include material from other sources in your work, but you must do so as a quotation. For instance, in the example above, the sentence could be embedded in your text as follows:

Sentence can contain optional information. These are often realized in adjuncts. The on-line encyclopedia Wikipedia defines adjunct as follows: "[A]n adjunct is a sentence element that establishes the circumstances in which the action or state expressed by the verb take place" (Wikipedia 2007).

2) Changing a few words

Rather than copying verbatim, some students plagiarize by changing a few words of a sentence or passage written by someone else. In the following authentic case, the original passage from a textbook (White 2003) reads:

Although functional categories are not realized in the initial grammar, the full UG inventory of functional categories remains available. L2 learners gradually add functional categories to the interlanguage grammar, on the basis of L2 input [...] (White 2003: 69).

The following passage is from a student's term paper. Words in boldface are literal copies from White (2003):

Although the functional categories are not realized in the initial grammar, the full UG inventory of functional categories remains available for the language learner. Thus, **L2 learners gradually add functional categories to the interlanguage grammar** according to the **L2 input**.

Even though the student made some effort to change a few words and add some text, the passage is a plagiarized version of the passage in White (2003).

Especially with technical explanations, it is sometimes hard to paraphrase them in your own words. Nevertheless, you should try to phrase them in your own words, not least because this shows whether you have understood them correctly. Where this is not possible or seems

unsuitable to you, you may reference the source to credit that the explanation you are reporting is due to someone else. Here is how this could be done:

Interlanguage grammars comprise the complete UG set of functional categories, even though they are not all realized initially. Rather, the L2 learners add them successively in the course of interlanguage development, guided by the target-language input (White 2003: 69).

Alternatively, you could start the passage like this:

According to White (2003: 69), interlanguage grammars comprise

Or you quote some part of the original passage:

According to White (2003), interlanguage grammars comprise the complete UG set of functional categories, even though they are not all realized initially. Rather, the L2 learners “gradually add functional categories to the interlanguage grammar, on the basis of L2 input” (White 2003: 69).

This way, you avoid plagiarism by paraphrasing the passage in your own words and giving credit to White (2003) for her idea.

3) Non-credited ideas or facts

Plagiarizing does not just involve copying words and sentences from other text but also taking over ideas or facts without crediting the source. In general, unless you develop your own ideas or you report facts that are universally known, you need to give credit to the source from which you obtained these ideas. The following passage reports historical facts and an interpretation of how Southern American speech came about.

The origins of English Southern American speech can be related to two populations: First, a mixed coastal population of servants and a smaller population of middle-class people, and, second, a Scottish-Irish population. However, Southern American English was not entirely influenced by these British colonists, since there was considerable impact from the African slave population. This population had been forcibly taken to America by Dutch slave traders since 1619. When the slave trade was abolished in 1807, around 400.000 Africans had been shipped to America, with the slave trade being strongest in the 18th century when slaves were needed in huge numbers for tobacco, rice and cotton plantations. Yet, the precise extent of African influences on the development of Southern English is controversial.

It is obvious that this passage does not result from students' original research and thinking about the issue, but, instead, has been borrowed from one or several sources. In this case, you need to reference these sources, as done below by giving the references in the text (shown in boldface).

Algeo (2003: 11) states that the origins of English Southern American speech can be related to two populations: First, a mixed coastal population of servants and a smaller population of middle-class people, and, second, a Scottish-Irish population. However, Southern American English was not entirely influenced by these British colonists, since there was considerable impact from the African slave population. This population had been forcibly taken to America by Dutch slave traders since 1619. When the slave trade was abolished in 1807, around 400.000 Africans had been shipped to America, with the slave trade being strongest in the 18th century when slaves were needed in huge numbers for tobacco, rice and cotton plantations (**Tottie 2002: Chapter 2**). Yet, the precise extent of African influences on the development of Southern English is controversial (**Algeo 2003: 12-13**).

Often it is not clear-cut whether an idea or fact is universally known or to be attributed to some source. If you are in doubt, play it safe and reference the source.

4) Plagiarized paraphrases

Finally, plagiarism also includes taking over the logic of a passage or a train of thought without crediting the source. In these cases, you must cite the sources and indicate which parts of the argument you are developing is due to other sources. Consider the following passage, in which students interpret the results from their own study.

In our study, the second-language learners do not acquire the target grammar. However, since acquisition is not guaranteed when the TL input is rare, ambiguous or not transparent, their failure to reach native-like levels of performance cannot be directly interpreted as reflecting any kind of grammatical deficit. Rather, the necessary input data might just have been missing. This seems plausible for the complex kind of construction we investigated in our study, which is likely to be very rare in the input. Therefore, we conclude that the results are compatible with our hypothesis.

Although the overall argument is particular to their study, the central premiss on which the logic of the argument hinges, is not; rather, it is taken from the literature. Here is how you could acknowledge this:

In our study, the second-language learners do not acquire the target grammar. However, **as Schwartz & Sprouse (1996: 42) argue**, acquisition is not guaranteed when the TL input is rare, ambiguous or not transparent, so that failure to reach native-like levels of performance cannot be directly interpreted as reflecting any kind of grammatical deficit. Rather, the necessary input data might just have been missing.

This seems plausible for the complex kind of construction we investigated in our study, which is likely to be very rare in the input. Therefore, we conclude that the results are compatible with our hypothesis.

By acknowledging that (parts of) an argument stem from others (as shown in boldface above), you separate the ideas of others, on which you build, from your own conclusions.

Final words of advice

Many cases of plagiarism occur because students copy from their notes. Sloppy note-taking where you take verbatim passages from the texts you read and then put them in your coursework is no excuse for plagiarism, though. Make sure that you do not accidentally plagiarize when using your notes.

Before submitting your coursework and term paper, read through them with an explicit view to identifying passages that may have been plagiarized. Make sure you have no such passages in the final version.

Finally, go to the website www.plagiarism.org where you will find many further examples and advice on how to avoid plagiarism. Other useful websites with plenty of examples of (how to avoid) plagiarism at university are, for instance:

<http://www.northwestern.edu/uacc/plagiar.html>
<http://gervaseprograms.georgetown.edu/hc/plagiarism.html>
<http://www.indiana.edu/~istd/>

If you have any further questions, feel free to talk to the course instructor or your StudienberaterIn.

References:

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