Plagiarism and Credit

DEFINITION AND POLICY

Plagiarism is the use and presentation of the work of another person as your own. Concerning the person who actually did the work, it is simply stealing. Concerning anyone to whom the work is presented, be it a teacher, employer, client, or the general public, it is simply lying.

At this point you should check the website and read the plagiarism policy of any university.

Plagiarism charges have been raised against experienced and distinguished professional authors whose works have won major awards. The cases of Doris Kearns Goodwin and Stephen Ambrose come to mind. Both of their reputations were seriously damaged when instances of plagiarism cropped up in some of their works. Goodwin attributed it to incomplete note-taking; Ambrose to the poorly supervised work of assistants. It is difficult to imagine such people committing plagiarism intentionally, so their protestations to that effect ring true. Unintentional plagiarism is still plagiarism.

Unintentional plagiarism is still plagiarism.

Strikingly, there is never a reason to commit plagiarism. Quotation marks suffice. Also, you can indicate, where you follow another person’s work closely, what you have done. When others have helped, use an “Acknowledgements” section. Professional courtesy suggests erring on the side of generosity in acknowledging assistance.

Part of the prevention for plagiarism is to keep careful notes indicating sources, down to page numbers. Whether you use old
fashioned “3 x 5” cards or enter information into a computer database, keep track of where it all comes from, including interviews. This will save time later, believe me.

There is nothing complicated about plagiarism: it’s just plain lying.

One practice to learn early is always to fully cite the source in all tables and charts. The source may be your own computer file – include the filename. You won’t believe how easy it is in a complex report to lose track of where things come from. You may need to check data later, or may want more details. If you can’t find it yourself, how will your reader?

LIES, DAMNED LIES, AND PURCHASED TERM PAPERS

The purchased term paper, presented as a student’s own work, is an extreme case. It is a symptom of the state of our society that some students buy term papers and pass them off as their own. Apparently it’s a booming business. There are websites professors use to detect outright plagiarism. Many instructors, even in high schools, require submission electronically to enable them to audit against plagiarism websites. The good term-paper ghost-writers tweak papers to foil these systems. While doing research for this book, I encountered several websites offering term papers for cash. You’ll love this – the subject of one of them was business ethics!

It is a symptom of the state of our society that some students buy term papers and pass them off as their own.

One wonders what will become of someone who has cruised through college on purchased term papers if they ever have to do any actual work of their own. Could this trend be one reason why so many college graduates, who seem to get good grades, actually can’t write???

You will find, if you ask around, that many people think there is nothing wrong with either selling term papers to students (arguably
being an accessory to plagiarism) or submitting a hired term paper (lying to an instructor).

Arguably, a transcript containing grades that were “earned” by using purchased term papers compounds the offense—it amounts to lying to potential employers as well. It also amounts to lying to whomever financed the college training. It arguably amounts to students lying to themselves— but self deception is, they would argue, harmless, after all . . .

Routine use of purchased term papers, and other forms of cheating occur in an atmosphere where the risk of being caught is vanishingly small. I wonder if the corporate looters now facing jail time for fraud and deception learned their ethics while cheating in college . . .

If you discovered someone turning in purchased term papers in college, would you turn them in? Would it depend on who it was? How would you explain to them why you turned them in? For more, see the David Callahan book, *The Cheating Culture* (Callahan, 2004).

**COPYRIGHT LAWS**

Many kinds of published material as well as recorded music and computer software are protected by copyright laws. These laws protect the intellectual property rights of their creators, and of those who have invested money, often in large amounts, to produce the products and make them available.

Use of excerpts for specific purposes may be authorized under doctrines of “fair use”, which are not always crystal clear. Oftentimes it is sound practice under copyright laws, and also good professional courtesy as well, to seek permission for reasonable uses of copyrighted items.

If you have occasion to copy substantial amounts of copyrighted material beyond “fair use” you should obtain permission.

**ALLOCATION OF CREDIT**

This will not be a major problem in your early career; much of your work will be in the field. You will not be principal author of major documents involving numbers of people carrying out different parts of a complex project. Someone else will worry about allocation of credit. The first time you do a lot of work, and someone else uses it in a big report or article, or gives a PowerPoint presentation to an
important audience, without bothering to mention your name, you will understand clearly what the credit issue is all about. In the literature on ethics in scientific research, you can find further detail on this topic. As you do begin to work on larger and more complex projects, take care to see that the acknowledgments sections fully represent contributions by others.