

Plagiarism

and how to avoid it



What is this booklet about?

Respecting authorship through good academic practice is one of the key values of higher education in the UK.

Plagiarism is the term used to describe the misuse of authorship. It is a serious academic offence and is treated as such by the University of Essex.

This booklet and the accompanying website (URL opposite) have been designed to develop your understanding of authorship and plagiarism so that you can adopt good academic practice and avoid committing plagiarism and related academic offences.

Whether intentional or accidental, plagiarism is your responsibility as a student. Ignorance is no excuse.

Please read this booklet carefully.

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Foreword by Professor Andy Downton, Pro-Vice Chancellor Learning and Teaching

Every degree programme in every UK university requires students to submit and be assessed on written coursework of some sort, whether it is essays, reports, dissertations, or laboratory assignments.

Such coursework is necessarily based on critical analysis of a body of previous written work, and in recent years internet resources have increasingly become the source of the reference material on which the critical analysis is based. But at what point does reference to a source become plagiarism rather than legitimate summary or critique?

Central to the development of good academic practice are the related notions of plagiarism and authorship, which this booklet will help you to understand. In particular, the professional ethics and values expected of academic authors are the cornerstone of academic practice and the key to understanding the rules of academic work in general.

Please read this booklet carefully and speak to your lecturer or supervisor about any areas of confusion or uncertainty you may have.

In simplest terms, plagiarism is cheating. In UK higher education, directly copying someone else's words and ideas is not simply 'borrowing', it is stealing, and the penalties can be extremely severe. A full understanding of how to avoid plagiarism and other forms of academic cheating is something you will need from your first piece of coursework onwards. Start now.

I hope you enjoy your time at Essex. Remember that the skills, values and practices that you develop during your time here will provide a high quality and lasting foundation for your professional life.



Supporting resources online:

www.essex.ac.uk/plagiarism

www.essex.ac.uk/myskills

Introduction

Many cases of plagiarism are committed each year as a result of misunderstanding.

But even though confusion and uncertainty are quite natural, especially at the beginning of a new course of study, misunderstanding is not accepted as an excuse or as a defence against an accusation of plagiarism. It is therefore important that you understand what the University considers to be **good academic practice** so that you can avoid all risk of committing plagiarism.

You need to understand now, right from the beginning of the first term.

What is authorship?

In order to fully understand plagiarism, it is important to first understand the concept of 'authorship'. But what is it?

Authorship refers to the production and ownership of ideas and intellectual material, such as books, articles, images, etc.

The higher education system in the UK places great importance on recognising the producer and owner of material. Whereas in some cultures knowledge is thought of as **communal property**, in the United Kingdom it is considered to be **individual property**. Therefore, improper or incomplete acknowledgement of a source of information is

treated as **intellectual theft**. The proper name for this is 'plagiarism'.

The issue of ownership is complicated by the fact that some knowledge is said to be 'common knowledge'. Do not be alarmed by this: 'common knowledge' is dealt with on page 9, in the section called 'what needs referencing', which will help you to identify what needs to be referenced and what does not.

The concept of authorship has an impact on all of your academic work, not just the way you are expected to apply referencing conventions. At University, you will be encouraged to develop your own ideas and construct your own knowledge, using established knowledge as a foundation. You will be encouraged to 'find your voice', which means developing your own unique academic writing style – your 'authorial voice'. The importance of understanding the concept of authorship goes beyond avoiding plagiarism.

What is plagiarism?

The University applies the following definition of plagiarism:

‘Using or copying the work of others (whether written, printed or in any other form) without proper acknowledgement in any coursework’.

The phrase ‘proper acknowledgement’ is explained in the following pages of this booklet, but, in brief, if you use the work of others, you must either quote it **using quotation marks** or paraphrase it – a practice which is explained on page 11. Whichever method you choose, you must always include a citation (i.e. a short in-text reference, e.g. Andrews, 2008: 22) and a bibliographic reference. *Make sure you speak to your department about the preferred way of*

applying this principle, as referencing systems differ across the University. Check your departmental handbook and website.

The meaning of some of these terms – ‘quote’, ‘paraphrase’, ‘citation’ and ‘reference’ – may not be completely clear to you. While some are defined more fully in the proceeding pages, a full glossary of reference-related terms is available on the University’s plagiarism webpages:

www.essex.ac.uk/plagiarism

If you feel that these terms lack sufficient meaning to you and are hindering your understanding of this booklet, we advise you to go online and read this booklet in conjunction with the website, which also features an interactive test.

Resources you may like to try

mySkills

The University’s academic skills website is a growing source of interactive guidance and exercises for all students on a range of academic skills areas, including referencing.

www.essex.ac.uk/myskills/skills/referencing/referencingSkills.asp

Plagiarism website

The plagiarism website includes much of the information in this booklet and more. It also includes a quiz so you can test your understanding of plagiarism, and a short film in which students around campus talk about plagiarism.

www.essex.ac.uk/plagiarism



Types of plagiarism

You will be plagiarising if you:

■ Copy someone else's work and present it as if it were your own

If you use a source when you write your assignment, whatever that source might be, you must not simply copy whole sentences or paragraphs as though they are your own.

Regardless of your intentions, it is plagiarism: even if you think the sentences are excellent and express the point better than you could; even if you have taken so many notes on a topic that you have forgotten to note the reference to some of the sources. Whatever your reason, the rules are very clear: if you copy someone else's words and use them as your own you will be plagiarising and penalised accordingly.

■ Copy sections of someone else's work but change the odd word or phrase

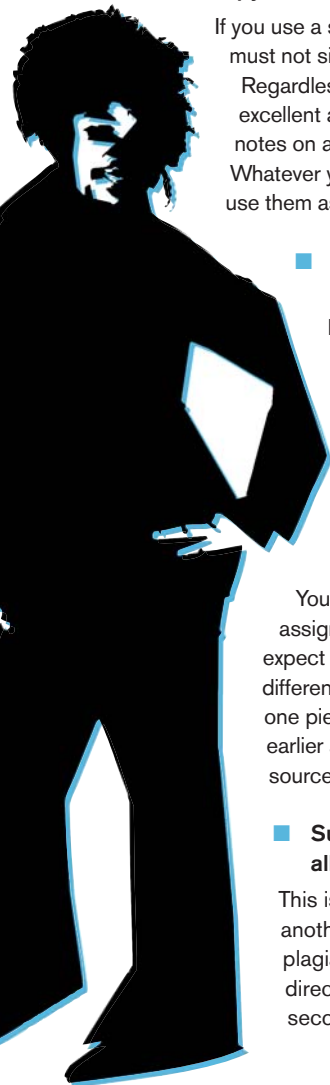
If you use someone else's work in anything you submit for assessment then you must make sure that you give the author full and proper credit according to the conventions of your discipline. You cannot escape this by simply changing some of the words and phrases. You must always acknowledge and give full credit to all of your sources. If you would prefer not to quote because of the context, then paraphrase instead.

■ Submit the same piece of work for two different assignments, even if they are to different departments

You must not submit exactly the same piece of work for two different assignments. If you have been rewarded for a piece of work once then you cannot expect to be rewarded again for the same piece, even if it was submitted in a different year of study. You will be cheating if you try to get two sets of marks for one piece of work. However, it is perfectly acceptable to use material from your earlier assignments, so long as you make sure that you acknowledge the original source, even if that source is yourself.

■ Submit written work produced collaboratively, unless this is specifically allowed

This is known as 'collusion'. Alternatively, if you are required to work with another person, it is simply 'collaboration'. Whereas in most cases of plagiarism, the second party (the person being plagiarised) is not involved directly with the first party (the plagiariser), in cases of collusion, the first and second party work together to deceive a third party (the marker).



Common reasons for plagiarising

Reasons for committing plagiarism vary from fairly innocent and accidental mistakes to the deliberate intention to deceive.

Unfortunately, no allowance is made for whether the act was intended, as we saw from the University definition of plagiarism on page 5.

Some reasons that are commonly given but are unacceptable include:

- Being unclear about what plagiarism is
- Having insufficient time management skills or being idle – e.g. being too disorganised with deadlines to undertake and submit original work
- Having an ineffective method of note-taking – e.g. not always recording the source of information
- Feeling under extreme pressure to pass or succeed – whether it be financial, parental, cultural, etc.
- Having different cultural values / practising different academic conventions
- Mistakenly believing that it will be easy to get away with (see the section ‘How will it be detected?’ on page 12)
- Knowing that the syllabus has stayed the same each year – e.g. having access to work from previous students
- Having unclear instructions for an assessment task (if in doubt, always clarify with your tutor)
- Having a lack of academic confidence (again, speak to your tutor or a study skills advisor)
- Being conditioned from secondary schooling – e.g. not being familiar with the requirement to acknowledge sources (sorry, no excuse)



Common mistakes

There are many reasons why acts of plagiarism occur, some of which are due to genuine mistakes that relate to referencing and note-taking practices. Some students make the mistake of thinking that plagiarism does not apply to every type of source material or to every type of assignment, but it does. Unfortunately, no allowance is made for whether the act was intended or unintended.



Examples of some common mistakes include:

- “I thought it would be OK if I included the source in my bibliography only.”
- “I made lots of notes for my essay and couldn’t remember where I found the information.”
- “I adhere to other academic conventions”
- “In school I was taught that copying from textbooks and the internet showed that I had done my research properly.”
- “I thought it would be OK to use material that I had purchased online.”
- “I thought it would be OK to copy the text if I changed some of the words into my own.”
- “I thought that plagiarism only applied to essays, I didn’t know that it can also apply to oral presentations/group projects, etc.”
- “I didn’t think I had to reference my tutor’s notes.”
- “I didn’t think that I needed to reference material found on the web.”
- “I left it too late and just didn’t have time to reference my sources.”

Please make sure that you do not make these mistakes. If you require any further guidance, you should contact your department.

Benefits of referencing

Avoiding plagiarism is not the only reason for referencing. There are many others.

Benefits of referencing include:

- Receiving credit for your own hard work and research
- Demonstrating your intellectual integrity by conforming to agreed academic standards of good practice
- Receiving meaningful feedback from your tutor that is targeted to the level you are really at (not pretending to be)
- Contextualising your work to show how it relates to current research and debates
- Directing your reader to sources of information and enabling them to 'pick up the thread'



What needs referencing?

Before considering what needs to be referenced, it may be helpful to first consider what does not.

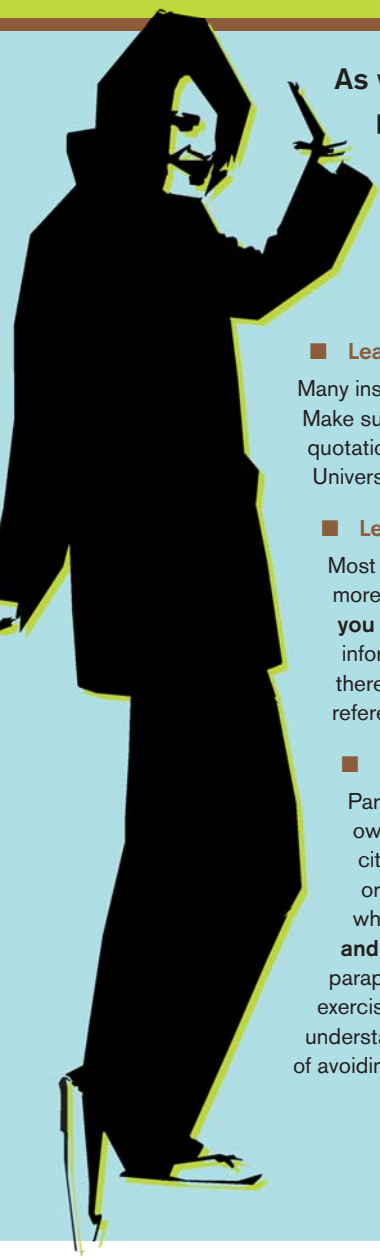
'Common knowledge' is the term used to describe established facts that are not attributable to a particular person or authority. For example, it is known that John Lennon was assassinated in 1980, in New York, by Mark Chapman. However, what is less likely to be classed as common knowledge and therefore taken for granted is the reason why Chapman

killed him. This is because there have been numerous theories, each one claiming to hold the answer.

The following **do** need to be referenced:

- Ideas and quotations taken from journal articles, books, etc.
- Information taken from the web
- Images from the web and elsewhere
- Newspaper articles

How to avoid plagiarism



As well as having an understanding of what plagiarism is, you will also need to develop certain skills to fully protect yourself.

Some of the key academic skills you will need to develop are:

■ Learning how to take notes effectively

Many instances of plagiarism can be traced back to the note-taking stage. Make sure you always record the reference details of your sources for ideas, quotations, and general information. Read the guide to note-taking on the University's mySkills website.

■ Learning how to reference correctly

Most departments provide their own guidance on referencing; there is more than one system used around the University, so **it is important that you follow your department's guidelines, where available**. Usually, this information features in the departmental Undergraduate Handbook. If there is no guidance available from your department, read the guide to referencing on mySkills.

■ Learning how to paraphrase correctly

Paraphrasing is the practice of putting someone else's ideas into your own words. It is an alternative practice to quoting, but still requires a citation and reference, though not quotation marks. Only changing one or two words is **NOT** paraphrasing: you must rephrase the idea entirely, whilst still capturing its **essence and meaning**. And remember, paraphrasing is an extremely helpful exercise in clarifying your own understanding – it is not just a means of avoiding plagiarism.

Remember, when you are paraphrasing you need to include a citation (i.e. Yates, 2009). The reader should be left in no doubt about why the citation is there. One method of doing this is to isolate the paraphrased idea in a single sentence to indicate to the reader exactly what the citation refers to.

Summarising, paraphrasing and quoting

Summarising and paraphrasing are two ways of reporting ideas from your sources. The third is quotation (see below). Both paraphrase and summary require you to provide your own report of ideas that you have heard or read about.

Both should represent careful re-working of an author's ideas or arguments. Summary and paraphrase can also help considerably in clarifying your own understanding. For your tutor or supervisor, this important feature of your writing provides evidence that you have understood what you have read or have heard about in lectures or seminars. Remember, changing a word or two is NOT paraphrasing: such mechanical re-wording does not give any indication of your own understanding. Remember also that it is vital to provide full citation of your source material, typically both before and after you give a paraphrase or summary e.g. (see brown box below):

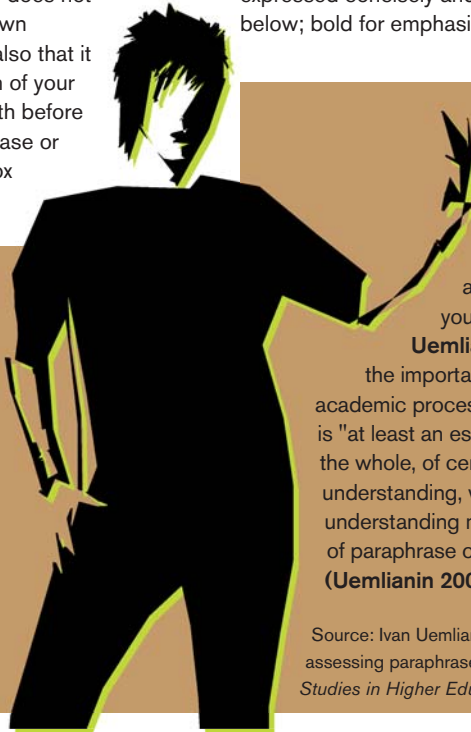
'In his recent study of student paraphrasing skills, **Ivan Uemlianin** compares the process of paraphrase to that of 'translating a foreign language'; he also refers to theories of learning within the field of cognitive psychology which characterise all new understanding as achieved through existing (prior) knowledge (**Uemlianin 2000, p.347**).'

There are two main reasons for quoting the exact words of the original. Firstly you may wish to reflect on and discuss someone's ideas. In this case your quote can be fairly long. The quoted text is then typically indented. The second reason to quote will be to support your own argument. Such quotes are likely to be shorter, no more than a few sentences, and will generally be chosen because the ideas are expressed concisely and vividly e.g. (see box below; bold for emphasis):

'Paraphrase is not simply a way of indicating your understanding of key concepts, the process of paraphrasing can actually help you to clarify your thinking. **Ivan**

Uemlianin states the case for the importance of paraphrase in the academic process **when he says that it is** "at least an essential part, and perhaps the whole, of certain kinds of conceptual understanding, with the quality of one's understanding manifested in the quality of paraphrase one can produce" (**Uemlianin 2000, p.348**).'

Source: Ivan Uemlianin. 2000. 'Engaging Text: assessing paraphrase and understanding' in *Studies in Higher Education*. Vol 25. No. 3



How will it be detected?

There are a number of ways that plagiarism can be detected.

Remember that your tutors are experienced and have read widely on the topic you are studying. They will know if you have copied sections from texts on the recommended course reading list, or from their lecture notes or handouts.

Remember that everybody has their own style of writing. It is very easy for your tutor to spot changes in style, which inevitably occur when you copy somebody else's work – even if you try to disguise this by changing the odd word or phrase.

Remember that your tutor will be marking the coursework for classes and/or year groups. They will be able to recognise similarities between submitted work. They will also be able to tell if you have copied another student's work.

Remember that your tutor is aware of the many cheat-sites which sell essays. It is very likely that your tutors will have searched these sites for essays which might be available on your particular topic. If you do decide to risk failing your assignment by copying/buying an essay from a cheat-site, you should also remember that other students in your group may very well have bought the same essay.

Remember that with recent advances in technology (see below), it is now very easy for lecturers to ascertain when and where a document has been authored, who has contributed to it, and which information has been cut and pasted from the internet.

TurnitinUK

The University subscribes to TurnitinUK, an online plagiarism detection service. TurnitinUK is UK-based and is accessed via a web browser. It enables staff to conduct electronic comparisons of students' work against a range of electronic sources. These sources include a database of previously submitted material (student essays and assignments), over 12 billion websites, essays from cheat-sites, databases and journals. Running alongside this detection service, is the Plagiarism Advisory Service, which contains a range of guidance, advice and information for students on how to avoid plagiarism. Please make use of this service: www.jiscpas.ac.uk